

September 19, 2017

Ms. Hilary Malawer
US Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave SW Room 6E231
Washington DC 20202

RE: Docket ID: ED-2017-OS-0074 (Evaluation of Existing Regulations)

Dear Ms. Malawer:

The Accreditation Council on Optometric Education (ACOE) is submitting these comments in response to a June 22, 2017 US Department of Education ("Department") request for comments on Department "regulations that may be appropriate for repeal, replacement, or modification." The ACOE is an accrediting agency that is recognized by the Secretary under 34 CFR §602. The mission of the ACOE is to serve the public and the profession of optometry by establishing, maintaining and applying standards to ensure the academic quality and continuous improvement of optometric education that reflect the contemporary practice of optometry. The scope of the ACOE encompasses professional optometric degree programs, optometric residency programs, and optometric technician programs.

The ACOE is very concerned about the proposed United States Department of Education (USDE) staff change of interpretation of Sections 602.15(a)(3-6) of the Secretary's Criteria for Recognition that would require accrediting agencies ("Agencies") to use the date of the Agency's decision as the effective date of the Agency's decision in all circumstances. Currently, the procedures for the ACOE and most other programmatic accreditors allow the Agencies to pre- or post-date decision to coincide with program calendars. This is done, when circumstances warrant, to avoid unfairly impacting students by withdrawing accreditation from a program during the middle of a semester, for example. Alternatively, a new program's accreditation might be dated effective as of the date of the site visit that confirmed the program's compliance with its self-study and with accreditation standards, rather than the date of the Agency's meeting at which the accreditation decision is made, if that meeting takes place after a program's semester has ended. This is done so that a program which meets accreditation standards can be considered accredited as of the date the students complete the program.

This type of procedure is very common. Taking away the ability of Agencies to use this procedure will be unbelievably burdensome on the ACOE and other Agencies that rely on volunteers to review applications and self-studies, conduct site visits, and make accrediting decisions. The Agencies will be required to work on much tighter time schedules. This will in turn lead to a need for more volunteers, while making it harder to recruit volunteers due to the greater time commitment. Without a much greater commitment of resources from Agencies – which is financially unrealistic – future students will be unfairly impacted by the timing of accreditation decisions that leave them little time to formulate plans in response. Accredited programs and institutions will also suffer.

To our knowledge, there is no evidence that the former interpretation of 602.15(a)(3-6) of the Secretary's Criteria for Recognition was causing a risk to the public. Absent a pressing need for this change, and in light of the burdens the change will cause, we respectfully urge the USDE to change its interpretation or modify this regulation as needed to return to the prior interpretation that worked so well for so many years.

Sincerely,



J. Bart Campbell, O.D.,
Chair