

Policy on Substantive Change

January 2024

Background

The U.S. Department of Education regulations require that accrediting agencies have adequate policies and procedures to ensure that certain substantive changes maintain the capacity of the institution to continue to meet Accreditation Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies. These regulations mandate that accrediting agencies require institutions to obtain accreditor approval of such substantive changes before the change is included in the scope of the accreditation granted to the institution. The scope of an institution's accreditation covers all activities conducted in its name.

The Commission's Substantive Change Committee is the decision-making body of the Commission for substantive change requests. Unless the Substantive Change Committee decides to refer a matter to the Commission for review and action, the Committee's action on a substantive change request serves as the final decision.

Membership of the Substantive Change Committee is set forth in the ACCJC Bylaws and represents the composition of academic and administrative personnel, and of public representatives, required of decision-making bodies by the U.S. Department of Education.¹ In addition, educators with specialized expertise may be invited to serve as expert advisors to the Committee to facilitate consideration of substantive change applications involving programs or single-purpose institutions that prepare students for a specific profession. These expert advisors are not members of the Substantive Change Committee and do not vote on substantive change requests.

Policy

The Commission, through its Substantive Change Committee and processes, ensures that changes institutions implement continue to meet the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies.

The Commission publishes on its website a *Substantive Change Manual* that provides a comprehensive explanation of the various types of substantive changes and indicates those which require notification to ACCJC, those that can be approved administratively, or those which require the institution to submit an application for approval by the Substantive Change Committee. In addition, the *Substantive Change Manual* includes detailed procedures for submitting substantive change inquiries to ACCJC.

The Commission designates ACCJC senior staff to review substantive change inquiries from institutions to determine whether changes require a substantive change application and Substantive Change Committee's review and approval, or if changes can be approved

¹ 34 C.F.R. § 602.15(a)(3).

administratively by the designated ACCJC senior staff in accordance with its policies and procedures described in the Substantive Change Manual.

Substantive changes requiring an application and Substantive Change Committee review and approval are subject to review on the basis of specific evaluation criteria and definitions noted in the Substantive Change Manual, including the impact of the change on the institution's ability to sustain compliance with Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies.

It is the institution's responsibility to demonstrate the effect of a substantive change on the quality, integrity, capacity and effectiveness of the total institution. The substantive change process requires evidence of institutional planning, resource commitment to the proposed change, and evidence that following the change, the institution continues to meet the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards and Commission policies.

Substantive changes must be approved prior to implementation, unless the specific changes qualify for notification as described in the *Substantive Change Manual*.² Approval of a substantive change cannot be effective on a date prior to the date action is taken on the substantive change. The approval of a substantive change is on the date of the action letter approving the change.

Policy Elements

I. Timing Considerations

Substantive change approval is needed before an applicable change can be implemented and before affected students can qualify for federal financial aid. Thus, prior to approval, the change may not be represented or advertised as a part of the institutional accreditation.

Substantive change applications are not approved in concept or at planning phase. Applications should be submitted when the institution is able to demonstrate and provide evidence that the change does not impact the institution's ability to continue to meet Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies and any specific evaluation criteria.

II. Broad Categories for Types of Substantive Changes³

- A. Change in Mission, Objectives, Scope, or Name of the Institution**
- B. Change in the Nature of the Constituency Served**
- C. Change in the Location or Geographic Area Served**
- D. Addition of a New Location or Branch Campus**
- E. Change in the Control or Legal Status of the Institution**

² 34 C.F.R. § 602.22.

³ 34 CFR § 600.22(a)(1)(ii)

F. Change in Programs or their Mode of Delivery that Represents a Significant Departure from Current Practice

G. Change in How Student Progress is Measured

H. Implementation of a Baccalaureate Degree Program⁴

I. Implementation of Direct Assessment⁵

J. Contractual Relationship with a Non-Accredited Organization

Institutions should refer to ACCJC's *Substantive Change Manual* for further information and details for all types of changes, including those that only require notification, those that can be approved administratively, and those requiring Substantive Change Committee approval.

III. Changes that Require Prior Approval from ACCJC before Implementation⁶

Institutions that have been placed on probation or show cause, have been subject to negative action by the Commission over the prior three academic years, or are under a provisional certification, as provided in 34 CFR 668.13, must receive prior approval from ACCJC to pursue the following changes (all other institutions must report these changes to ACCJC within 30 days):

- A change in an existing program's method of delivery.
- An aggregate change of 25 percent or more of the clock hours, credit hours, or content of a program since the institution's most recent accreditation review.
- The development of customized pathways or abbreviated or modified courses or programs to—
 - Accommodate and recognize a student's existing knowledge, such as knowledge attained through employment or military service; and
 - Close competency gaps between demonstrated prior knowledge or competency and the full requirements of a particular course or program.
- Entering into a written arrangement under 34 CFR 668.5 under which an institution or organization not certified to participate in the title IV, HEA programs offers up to 25 percent of one or more of the accredited institution's educational programs.

Institutions seeking prior approval should notify ACCJC of intent to implement change through ACCJC's [Substantive Change Inquiry Form](#). ACCJC will notify institution of timeline for implementation of change within 15 days of receipt of inquiry.

IV. Site Visits, Special Reports, and/or Comprehensive Institutional Evaluation

Federal regulations require that certain substantive changes include a site visit within six months of the start of operations as part of the approval. Visits are required for

- a new location where at least 50% of a program is offered, unless the institution has had at least two previously approved additional locations,

⁴ See the *Policy on Accreditation of Baccalaureate Degrees*

⁵ See the *Policy on Competency Based Education*

⁶ 34 CFR § 600.22(b)

- a new branch campus is established, and
- a change of ownership that results in a change of control.

The purpose of the visit is to verify that the information provided by the institution in its substantive change application was accurate and complete. The visit is also done to verify that the actions implemented align with the plans that received provisional approval by the committee.

As a result of a Substantive Change application or review, circumstances may come to the attention of the Substantive Change Committee that may cause the Committee to recommend to the Commission that a Special Report and/or visit is needed by an institution, particularly if information indicates a significant departure from Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission Policies.

Major substantive changes, or the accumulation of changes, may cause the Substantive Change Committee to decide that a comprehensive institutional self-evaluation is required.⁷ Comprehensive evaluations triggered by a major substantive change will proceed in the same manner as a regularly scheduled comprehensive review, with an institutional self-evaluation report, peer review and peer review team report, and action by the Commission on the accredited status of the institution.

V. Actions on Substantive Change

The charge of the Substantive Change Committee is to ensure that any substantive changes meet the expectations of accreditation (the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies) and that implementation of the change will not adversely affect the institution's capacity to continue to meet the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies. The actions of the Committee are considered actions of a decision-making body on the accredited status of a member institution (as to the substantive changes). The review is rigorous and verifies compliance with expectations in Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies.

Informal communications and feedback by ACCJC staff with institutional representatives prior to committee review of the institution's substantive change are intended to provide assistance to colleges as they progress through the substantive change approval process, but staff do not predict the outcomes of the Committee decision.

The Substantive Change Committee may take the following actions:

Approve the substantive change. The institution has demonstrated that it meets the evaluation criteria.

Approve the substantive change and require a Follow-Up Report with or without a visit, or a visit without an institutional report. The institution meets the evaluation criteria, but the committee has specific questions (which don't require deferral), identifies that general verification is needed of sustained practice, or has questions concerning further implementation stages.

⁷ 34 C.F.R. § 602.22(h)

Provisionally approve a planned substantive change that is subject to a federally mandated site visit. The institution's submitted plans for a change of ownership, new location, or creation of a branch campus demonstrate future actions that will meet the evaluation criteria. The provisional approval allows the institution to move forward with steps of implementation in preparation for seeking approval of the substantive change. The provisional approval may include a site visit. The provisional approval must state a date, not to exceed three years, by which the change must be approved for inclusion in the institution's accreditation. If that time is exceeded, then the substantive change request process must be initiated anew. A new location which requires a federally mandated site visit cannot be provisionally approved if there has been a change in ownership since the institution has successfully had three new locations approved by substantive change. The Committee may require additional reports or visits before the approval is final.

Defer pending additional information. Consideration of the request cannot move forward without receipt of additional information demonstrating the evaluation criteria are met.

Deny the substantive change. The institution has not demonstrated that the change meets the evaluation criteria.

Refer the proposed change to the Commission. The substantive change application can be referred by the Substantive Change Committee to the Commission when it has determined there may be the need for a comprehensive institutional self-evaluation, or for a Special Report and visit, or a Follow-Up Report and/or visit.

VI. Substantive Change Actions Involving Federally Mandated Visits

Federal regulations require that certain substantive changes include a site visit as part of the approval⁸. Generally, visits are required when there is an additional location where at least 50% of a program is offered, when a branch campus is established, or when there is a change in ownership that results in a change of control.

Adopted October 1972; Revised January 1978, June 1991, June 1996; Edited October 1997; Revised January 2002; Edited June 2002, August 2004; Revised June 2011; Edited June 2012, August 2012; Revised June 2013, Revised October 2013, Revised June 2015, June 2016, Revised June 2018; Revised January 2021; Edited January 2022; Revised January 2023; Revised January 2024.

- - - end - - -

⁸ 34 C.F.R § 602.22(f)(1)