

## 20. Policy on Complaints

As a service to students, the public, and accredited institutions, the DETC has a policy on complaints. Through its complaint policy, the DETC seeks to offer those lodging a complaint an equitable, fair, and amicable resolution of their problem as promptly as possible, thus mitigating the need for Accrediting Commission, legal, or other action.

This policy covers complaints against: accredited and non-accredited institutions and the Commission and Staff. The Policy is designed to achieve a fair (to all parties) and timely resolution of all complaints, regardless of the type of complaint.

### Definition of Complaint

A complaint is defined as a “substantial expression of dissatisfaction” by any person or group (including, but not limited to, any student, any faculty or staff of an accredited institution, any member of the general public, any representative of a Federal, State, or local government, and any member of any other institution or organization) about (1) an accredited institution’s courses, services, conduct, or personnel, or (2) the Accrediting Commission of the DETC.

### 1. Complaints Against Accredited Institutions

When the Accrediting Commission of the DETC (hereafter DETC) accredits an institution, it expects that institution to remain in compliance with all of the DETC standards for accreditation throughout the accreditation period granted. Therefore, one of the principal concerns of the DETC when it receives a complaint about an accredited institution is whether the institution is in compliance with the published standards.

Another concern of the DETC is the methods, policies, philosophy, and procedures of the institution for handling complaints on an ongoing basis. The DETC expects its accredited institutions to have operational procedures in place for fairly and promptly resolving complaints so that they do *not* become a matter for concern by outside agencies. Therefore, in investigating a specific complaint against an accredited institution, the DETC also examines whether or not the institution has effective methods for handling student problems on a routine basis. In so doing, the DETC looks to see if the institution’s procedures are equitable, consistently applied, and effective in resolving problems.

In one sense, when students have made a decision to file a complaint against their institution by contacting the DETC, they generally do so after having exhausted their efforts in working directly with the institution. At this point, the complaint has reached a new level of importance, and the expenditure of time and money for all parties will start to accrue. That is why the DETC is concerned about the effectiveness of the institution’s procedures for resolving complaints.

Finally, the DETC is concerned about the frequency and pattern of complaints about an accredited institution. DETC expects the institution to monitor all complaints it receives, and expects the institution to take steps to ensure that similar complaints do not become repetitive or routine.

Complaints the DETC receives about accredited institutions typically fall into three major categories: (1) complaints from students; (2) complaints from outside agencies; and (3) complaints from other accredited schools. Usually,

complaints are received in writing, and often via email and fax. Occasionally, complaints are received over the telephone. In those instances, the complainant is asked to send the complaint to DETC in writing.

**Records of Complaints:** The DETC maintains records of all complaints received against its accredited institutions and the manner of their resolution for the most recent period of accreditation, normally five years. The DETC makes summaries of these files available to visiting examining committees when they conduct on-site visits to institutions applying for re-accreditation. The Accrediting Commission also considers these summary files when it acts on an institution's application for re-accreditation. The complaints are analyzed according to how the institution handles them. The complaint files are tabulated and summarized annually (or more often if frequency warrants), and the nature of each complaint and its source is indicated. When an institution accumulates a significant number of complaints in a given area, the institution is advised that there is a problem in that area, and appropriate corrective measures are suggested.

At each meeting of the Accrediting Commission, the Executive Director of the DETC provides the Commission with an analysis of all complaints received since the previous Commission meeting. The analysis will present a summary report on complaints received during the period, any complaints unresolved from the previous period, categories of complaints by nature and source, and any other information the Commission desires regarding the record of complaints received by the DETC.

### Action

Regardless of the type of complaint the DETC receives against an accredited institution, the DETC's procedure for handling the complaint consists of the following steps:

1. Within 10 days of receipt of the complaint, the Executive Director of the DETC sends a letter to the complainant acknowledging receipt of the complaint and explaining the process the DETC will follow in investigating the complaint.
2. Also within 10 days of receipt of the complaint, the Executive Director forwards the complaint to the institution, requesting a written response from the institution within 15 days of its receipt. If appropriate, the Executive Director may suggest that the institution attempt to resolve the matter through direct contact with the complainant. Occasionally, when appropriate, the Executive Director may suggest possible ways of resolving the matter.
3. Within 15 days of receipt of the institution's response, the Executive Director reviews the documentation received from both the complainant and the institution and resolves the complaint. In most cases the institution will likely have presented sufficient information for disposition actions number one or two as listed in paragraph 4 below. If the Executive Director determines that the matter *has not* been resolved or additional facts are needed, a follow-up will be conducted. If additional information is needed from either the complainant or the institution before the complaint can be resolved, the Executive Director may give that party an additional 10 days to furnish the information. NOTE: The failure of the institution to provide either a response to the complaint or any additional information as requested by the Executive Director within the specified time frames will be considered a violation of the DETC's policy on complaints and will be referred to the Accrediting Commission for consideration and action.
4. After completing an investigation of the complaint, to include both a review of the information about the specific complaint as well as a review of the record of complaints the DETC has received about the institution, the Executive Director informs both the complainant and the institution—in writing—of the results of the

investigation. Based on the findings, the Executive Director, acting on behalf of and under authority from the Accrediting Commission, may take one of the following actions:

- Determine that the complaint has been resolved to the complainant's satisfaction, and close the file on the matter;
- Dismiss the complaint and absolve the institution of any wrongdoing.
- Postpone final action on the complaint for a period not to exceed two months if there is evidence that the institution is making progress in rectifying the situation. **In the case of postponement of action, the complainant will be kept informed of the status of the complaint and its final action.** NOTE: The failure of the institution to rectify the situation by the end of the two-month period will be considered a violation of the DETC's policy on complaints and will be referred to the Accrediting Commission for consideration and action.
- Notify the institution that, on the basis of the information provided, the DETC has determined that the institution is failing to meet the DETC standards and that the DETC is taking appropriate action. Such action may include requiring the institution to take specific corrective action and report back to the Accrediting Commission and/or conducting a Special Visit to the institution. If circumstances warrant, it may include initiating action that may result in the termination of the institution's accreditation. If appropriate, it may also include referring the matter to Federal, State, or local agencies for review and possible action.

## 2. Complaints About Non-Accredited Institutions

Because the DETC is interested in the field of distance education and in the welfare of all distance study students, the DETC extends its complaint referral services to students enrolled at non-accredited schools. It should be noted, however, that the DETC's authority, and consequently its effectiveness, is limited with respect to complaints it receives against non-accredited schools.

If DETC learns that an applicant institution is subject to adverse action by another recognized accrediting agency or has been placed on probation or an equivalent status by another recognized agency, it will promptly review the status of the applicant. DETC will not accredit an institution that is subject to a threatened action, an interim action, or an action taken by a state agency or another recognized accrediting agency, whereby the end result could or has led to suspension, revocation, or termination of the institution's legal authority to provide postsecondary education or the institution being put on public probationary status, or whereby their accreditation or pre-accreditation status could be revoked.

## 3. Complaints About the DETC Accrediting Commission and Staff

The DETC promptly reviews any complaint it receives against the DETC Accrediting Commission and/or its staff. Because of the seriousness with which it regards complaints of this type, the DETC requests that such complaints be in writing. If a complaint is received orally, the complainant is strongly encouraged to submit the complaint in writing. Anonymity will be honored only for good cause in these cases.

**Action**

The DETC’s procedures for handling complaints against the Accrediting Commission and/or its staff are as follows:

1. Within 10 days of receipt of the complaint, all materials related to the complaint are forwarded to the Chair of the Accrediting Commission.
2. Within 10 days of receipt of the complaint by the Chair, the Chair sends a letter to the complainant acknowledging receipt of the complaint and explaining the process the DETC will follow in investigating the complaint.
3. Also within 10 days of receipt of the complaint by the Chair, the Chair reviews the complaint and decides whether any additional information is needed from the complainant, the Commission, and/or DETC staff before the complaint can be considered. If so, the Chair requests that the information be provided to the Chair within 30 days.
4. Within 10 days of receipt of all the information pertaining to the complaint, including the original complaint and any additional information, the Chair convenes a conference call of the Executive Committee of the Commission to review the complaint.
5. After review of the complaint, the Executive Committee summarizes its findings and presents them to the full Commission at its next regularly scheduled meeting, at which time the Commission reviews the matter and reaches a final decision. If, however, the Executive Committee determines that the matter is of such urgency that it must be discussed and decided immediately rather than await the next Commission meeting, the Chair schedules a conference call of the full Commission as soon as possible so that the Commission can review the matter and reach a final decision.
6. The Chair notifies the complainant in writing of the Commission’s decision within 15 days of the close of the Commission meeting (or conference call) during which the complaint was reviewed.

# # #