



Commission on Colleges  
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools  
1866 Southern Lane  
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## **ETHICAL OBLIGATIONS OF MEMBERS OF SACSCOC BOARD OF TRUSTEES AND OF EVALUATORS**

### **- Policy Statement -**

Integrity, essential to the purpose of higher education, functions as the basic contract defining the relationship between the Commission and each of its member and candidate institutions. It is a relationship in which all parties agree to deal honestly and openly with their constituencies and with one another. Without this commitment, no relationship can exist or be sustained between the Commission and its member and candidate institutions.

Integrity in the accreditation process is best understood in the context of peer review, professional judgment by peers of commonly accepted sound academic practice, and the conscientious application of the *Principles of Accreditation* as mutually agreed upon standards for accreditation. The Commission's requirements, policies, processes, procedures, and decisions are predicated on integrity. (*Principles of Accreditation*, p. 5)

A self-regulatory process, accreditation is based upon a peer review process that requires institutional representatives from all degree levels to review institutions and to make decisions about their accreditation status. In order to maintain the credibility of those decisions, not only must the Commission hold institutions accountable for integrity governing all aspects of their operations, but also must insure that peer evaluators and elected Commission Board of Trustee members responsible for making accreditation decisions maintain the highest level of integrity in all matters dealing with the decision-making process of the Commission and in matters dealing with their own institutions. Integrity of the process mandates at least the following ethical obligations and understandings.

### ***Obligations to other Evaluators, Board Members, and Commission Staff***

The process for the determination of an institution's compliance with accreditation standards requires professional judgment of peers; in this context, professional judgment demands informed review, thoughtful analysis, and reasoned decision making. The *collective* professional judgment of peers determines the final report of a committee, and for Commission Board members, determines the accreditation status of an institution. Evaluators and Trustees have an obligation to represent all decisions as those of the total committee or the Commission and not those of particular individuals or groups. When making this collective decision, it is paramount that evaluators provide for each other an environment that supports a candid exchange of ideas, an opportunity for all opinions to be considered, a respect for individual differences and honest dissent, and a commitment to hold in confidence all such exchanges.

Commission staff members provide information and advice as is appropriate when assisting evaluators and Board members in making decisions on the accreditation status of institutions. Particularly germane are historical information on similarly situated institutions, and procedural and substantive advice on how the policies and accreditation standards have been interpreted and could be applied to an institution's

case, including possible action and follow up. Their role is an active one, providing advice that may include opinions on institutional patterns, institutional progress, and suggested action.

Although the staff's role in the process does not supplant the peer review and decision-making process, evaluators and Commission Board members should take into account information and advice provided by staff in order to ensure strength and consistency in the process and to prevent decisions that could lead to effective legal action on the part of an institution. Evaluators and Trustees should support an environment that allows staff to provide relevant and candid advice and to carry out their responsibilities to the Commission and to their assigned institutions, including responsibility for informing an institution of Commission action and the rationale for such action.

## **Ethical Obligations and Responsibilities Specific to Members of the Board of Trustees**

### ***Confidentiality***

All Commission Trustees must maintain complete confidentiality and conduct themselves with professional integrity in all accreditation activities and decisions. Confidentiality applies to all levels of the review process: review by the Committees on Compliance and Reports, the Executive Council, and the full Board. Moreover, Trustees are expected to maintain confidentiality regarding input from the staff just as they do regarding all other discussions conducted in the decision-making process.

As examples, ***Commission Trustees may not disclose to any member of a Committee on Compliance and Reports the following:***

- 1. information about an institutional case scheduled for review, including the analysis of institutional materials; information gained from a meeting on the record; committee discussions before and during the meeting; and the resource material constituting the case***
- 2. information distributed as part of Commission staff memos and oral comments by staff***
- 3. the names of assigned readers of a case***
- 4. information disclosed as part of a C & R or Executive Council's working agenda***
- 5. decisions of the Committees on Compliance and Reports or of the Executive Council***
- 6. rationale for a decision of the Board pertaining to an institution***

Without a commitment to confidentiality by all Trustees and in all aspects of the review process, they cannot freely execute their responsibility to conduct themselves with professional integrity in accreditation activities and decisions.

### ***Conflict of Interest***

Commission policies provide appropriate safeguards against conflict of interest in arriving at accrediting decisions. Commission Board members are expected to remove themselves from discussion and abstain from voting on institutional cases where conflict of interest, or the appearance of conflict of interest, exists. As examples, a Trustee would have a conflict of interest if he or she

1. is employed by the institution;
2. is employed within a state where the parent campus of the institution is located;
3. has been a consultant at the institution within the last ten years;
4. has been an appointee of the institution within the last ten years (e.g., board member);
5. has been an employee of the institution;
6. has been a candidate for employment at the institution within the last ten years;
7. is a graduate of the institution;
8. has a close personal or familial relationship with persons at the institution or a strong bias regarding the institution;
9. has served as a member of an on-site evaluation committee or an off-site review and developed the report used for action on the institution's accreditation;

10. is a stockholder or board member of the institution; or
11. has any other relationship that could serve as an impediment to rendering an impartial, objective professional judgment regarding the accreditation of an institution.

Board of Trustee members who are employed by an institution under consideration shall *absent* themselves from the room during the discussion and voting on their own institution during the meetings of the Committees on Compliance and Reports and the Executive Council.

If a Trustee recuses him or herself from a case reviewed by the Committees on Compliance and Reports or by the Executive Council, then recusal for the same case should take place during the vote by the full Board of Trustees. Conversely, if a Board member does not recuse him or herself during the review of a case, then the Board member may not recuse him or herself at the time of vote by the full Board. Conflicts of interest should be claimed at the earliest point of institutional review.

*Conflict of Interest and Undue Influence.* A Board member is expected to recuse him or herself from decisions pertaining to an institution when someone attempts to influence the Trustee regarding that institution's impending case. Examples of undue influence might include:

1. A Board member who is contacted by representatives of an institution regarding the institution's impending case or asking another Board member or individual to intervene and influence the Board member;
2. A Trustee serving on the board of an institution appearing for a meeting on the record and discussing the case with a sitting Board member who will take action on the institution;
3. A supervisor attempting to influence a Board member reporting to the supervisor regarding a case assigned for review to the Trustee; and
4. A Commission Board member seeking information from another regarding an impending recommendation on a case.

It is the responsibility of the Board member to report to the President of the Commission any attempt to influence the Commission's decision regarding an impending case.

### ***Integrity and the Board Member's Institution***

The Commission expects a Board member to hold his or her own institution accountable for the highest level of integrity in all dealings with its constituencies, including the Commission. Lack of commitment to integrity at a Trustee's own institution potentially compromises the credibility of the peer review process.

### ***Participation Responsibilities of the Board of Trustees***

Trustees are responsible for determining policy, reviewing and taking final action on the accreditation of institutions, reviewing fees schedules and the dues formula, and reviewing proposed changes to the Commission's standards for accreditation. (See "Standing Rules" for a complete list of duties.)

When accepting an appointment to the Board of Trustees, board members agree to the following responsibilities:

1. ***Meeting Attendance.*** All Trustees are either elected to serve on the Executive Council or are assigned to one of the Committees on Compliance and Reports. In accord with such service, Board members are required to attend the following meetings:
  - Orientation session for new Trustees held in May;
  - Meetings of the Board of Trustees held during the Summer Meeting in June (includes meetings of the Executive Council, Committees on Compliance and Reports, and the full Board);
  - Meetings of the Board of Trustees held during the Annual Meeting of the Commission in December (includes meetings of the Executive Council, Committees on Compliance and Reports, and the full Board);
  - College Delegate Assembly Business Session held during the Annual Meeting in December; and

- Spring meeting of the Executive Council, for those elected to that body.
2. **Board Member Assignments.** As a member of one of the Committees on Compliance and Reports (C & R), a Board member is assigned responsibility for the evaluation of a variety of institutional reports and the formulation of recommendations regarding the accreditation status of those institutions. Trustees assigned to serve on a C & R Committee are responsible for attendance at meetings, adherence to the meeting schedule, completion of reading assignments, and professional conduct in executing the work of the Commission.

As an elected member of the Executive Council, a Trustee serves on the executive body of the Commission with responsibility for interpreting policies and procedures; supervising, reviewing and acting on the reports of *ad hoc* and standing committees; approving the Commission's budget; overseeing and evaluating the work of its Executive Director; and initiating new programs, projects, and policy proposals. Executive Council members are responsible for attendance at meetings and for professional conduct in executing the work of the Commission.

3. **Communications.** Trustees serve as liaisons between the membership and the Commission staff. They may be asked to speak at state meetings, attend institutional events such as inaugurations, correspond with member institutions within the state, and assist the Commission office in disseminating information.
4. **Visiting Committee Service.** Trustees are expected to have had experience in serving as members of review committees or, absent such experience, are expected to serve as members or official observers on review committees during the first year of service on the Board.

### ***Failure of a Board of Trustees Member to Meet Obligations***

Ethical and participatory obligations of a Trustee are of such importance to the credibility and effectiveness of the work of the Commission that failure to fulfill such obligations will result in a resignation request or removal from service. Examples of circumstances that would generate either action are as follows:

1. Failure of a Trustee to attend two consecutive executive sessions of the Board or of the standing committee on which that member serves without prior notification to the President of the Commission;
2. Failure of a Trustee to execute responsibilities associated with service on the Committees on Compliance and Reports;
3. Failure of a Trustee to execute responsibilities associated with service on the Executive Council;
4. Evidence that a Trustee failed to uphold ethical obligations outlined in this statement;
5. Action by the Commission citing the Trustee's institution for non-compliance with Section 1 (Integrity) of the *Principles of Accreditation*; and
6. Action by the Commission placing the Trustee's institution on a public sanction or taking adverse action against the institution.

### ***Process for Review of a member of the Board of Trustees***

If a Trustee fails to meet the ethical and participatory obligations outlined above or if the Trustee's institution has been placed on a sanction or cited for integrity issues, the Board member will be expected to render his or her resignation to the Commission Chair within 30 days of the findings of the Commission. If the Trustee fails to do so, the Chair will request the Trustee to submit a written statement explaining the circumstances that precipitated the failure to meet Board member obligations and responsibilities, and will arrange for the Trustee to meet with the Executive Council. The Executive Council will review the case at its next meeting and will render a final decision regarding the status of the Trustee's service.

If a Board member is in any way involved in litigation with the Association or the Commission on Colleges or both, the Trustee will not be allowed to participate in the work of the Commission until litigation is concluded, including all appeals.

## Ethical Obligations and Responsibilities Specific to Evaluators

### ***Confidentiality***

Evaluators, including lead QEP evaluators, must maintain complete confidentiality in all accreditation activities and decisions. Confidentiality applies to all documents, correspondence, and discussions relative to all phases of the review. Moreover, peer evaluators are expected to maintain confidentiality regarding input from the staff just as they do regarding all other discussions conducted in the review process.

As examples, ***evaluators may not disclose to anyone the following:***

- 1. information about an institutional case under review, including the analysis of institutional materials; committee discussions before and during the meeting; and the resource material constituting the case***
- 2. information distributed by Commission staff and oral comments by staff***
- 3. findings and recommendations of the committee***
- 4. former decisions of the Committees on Compliance and Reports or of the Executive Council that may have been shared as part of the record for review***
- 5. rationale for a committee recommendation pertaining to an institution***

Without a commitment to confidentiality by all evaluators and in all aspects of the review process, peer evaluators cannot freely execute their responsibility to conduct themselves with professional integrity in accreditation activities and decisions.

### ***Conflict of Interest***

Commission policies provide appropriate safeguards against conflict of interest in arriving at accrediting decisions. Evaluators, including lead QEP evaluators, should not accept appointment to a review committee where conflict of interest, or the appearance of conflict of interest, exists. The Commission relies on the personal and professional integrity of individual committee members, expects them to be sensitive to potential conflicts of interest in the peer review process, and assumes they will act accordingly. If it is discovered that a conflict of interest situation may have significantly affected the evaluation of an institution by a visiting committee, the Chair of the Commission may ask that a further evaluation of the institution be initiated to determine the validity of the original findings of the visiting committee.

As examples, an evaluator would have a conflict of interest if he or she

1. is employed within a state where the parent campus of the institution is located;
2. has been a consultant at the institution within the last ten years;
3. has been an appointee of the institution within the last ten years (e.g., board member);
4. has been an employee of the institution;
5. has been a candidate for employment at the institution within the last ten years;
6. is a graduate of the institution;
7. has a close personal or familial relationship with persons at the institution or a strong bias regarding the institution;
8. is a stockholder or board member of the institution;
9. has any other relationship that could serve as an impediment to rendering an impartial, objective professional judgment regarding the accreditation of an institution; or
10. is a Board of Trustee member and has been invited to serve as chair or member of an evaluation committee scheduled to review the institution of another Board member.

Members of review committees must not give advice to or consult with the visited institution, in relation to any issues contained in the follow-up responses or monitoring reports submitted by the institution, until

initial action has been taken by the Commission in connection with these issues. A committee member who violates this policy will not be used as an evaluator in the future. An institution is expected to respect the integrity of the accreditation process by not engaging any team member as a consultant, paid or unpaid, or as an employee for this period of time.

*Conflict of Interest and Undue Influence.* An evaluator is expected to contact Commission staff when an attempt is made to influence the evaluator's judgment or to influence an impending review. Examples of undue influence might include:

1. In advance of an off-site review, an evaluator is contacted by representatives of the institution to discuss the upcoming off-site evaluation;
2. A supervisor attempts to influence an evaluator reporting to the supervisor regarding an upcoming institutional review; and
3. In advance of an on-site review, an evaluator is contacted by representatives of the institution to discuss the upcoming on-site evaluation for reasons other than providing requested additional information or clarification.

### ***Participation Responsibilities of Peer Evaluators***

When accepting an appointment to serve, a peer evaluator agrees to the following responsibilities:

1. ***Meeting Attendance.*** All evaluators are expected to arrive and depart on the dates and at the times specified by committee chairs or Commission staff. They are expected to participate in all scheduled meetings and conference calls.
2. ***Assignments.*** All evaluators are expected to analyze an institution's compliance with specific accreditation standards, formulate recommendations or statements of committee findings, and write draft narrative that reflects the consensus of the committee. Fulfilling this responsibility requires completion of reading assignments, communication with other committee members and Commission staff, and professional conduct in executing the work of the Commission.

All committee members work under the leadership of the committee chair.

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