

# Conflict of Interest Policy

## Scope of Policy

In carrying out its accreditation responsibilities and commitments, the Commission seeks to ensure that its decisions represent fair and reasonable interpretations of Commission standards and policies as informed by its professional judgment, the professional judgment of those engaged in the peer review process, and the characteristics of the institutions that are the subject to review. To preserve the integrity of this decision process and the quality of the education it intends to assure, it is imperative that the Commission avoid actual and apparent conflicts of interest. The obligation to diligently identify and avoid conflicts also applies to the Commission's business decisions and other activities as a non-profit organization.

Individuals involved in the review and decision process related to an institution's accreditation must act in the best interests of the Commission, its member institutions, and the public. The potential for a conflict of interest arises when an individual's responsibility to exercise judgment is or may appear to be inconsistent with competing interests of a professional, personal, or private nature, including but not limited to financial interests. A conflict of interest is defined as a circumstance in which an individual's capacity to make an impartial and unbiased decision is or may be affected by a prior, current, or anticipated institutional affiliation(s) or other significant relationship(s) with an accredited institution or an institution seeking recognition by the Commission, or with a business enterprise or individual. Such a conflict or appearance of conflict can arise, for example, from the individual's direct relationship with an institution or organization (or the relationship of an immediate family or household member of the individual) about which the Commission is making a consequential decision, or from the potential for the individual or his or her relatives to benefit from the results of a Commission accreditation or business action.

The duty to avoid conflicts of interest and the appearance of conflicts of interest applies to all participants in the accreditation process pertaining to an institution, including individuals who are selected to serve on review teams, Commissioners, committee and panel members, working group members, staff members, consultants, and any other individual who acts on behalf of the Commission. More details about how the policy relates to each of these different roles are provided below.

## Types of Conflicts

The following are examples of affiliations and other relationships that should be disclosed by peer review team members, Commissioners, Commission committee members and appointed panels, and Commission staff and consultants. Any relationship involving a written agreement and/or compensation arrangement may create a conflict of interest or the appearance of a conflict of interest and also should be disclosed in light of this policy. Affiliations that would pose a conflict of interest or the appearance of a conflict with regard to an institution under review include being a graduate of or holding an honorary degree from the institution, employment within the past five years, or any of the following if they currently exist or existed during the past 12 months: applicant for employment, board member (including institutional foundation boards), appointee, paid consultant or student. Other significant relationships that should be disclosed for their potential in prejudicing decision-making and that may require recusal include the following: having a close relative (spouse, child, or

parent) or a household member affiliated with the institution under review, receiving an award from the institution, and/or having a close personal or professional relationship at the institution under review.

Stock ownership in an applicant, candidate or accredited institution, or in their respective parent company or affiliated entity (excluding shares held indirectly through mutual funds, insurance policies, or blind trusts), also give rise to a conflict or potential conflict. This restriction applies to an individual and the person's spouse, partner, child, other dependent, or household member.

## **Conflict of Interest Disclosure Procedures**

Individuals in a situation or who become aware of a situation that raises an actual or potential conflict or appearance of conflict must disclose the conflict or potential conflict. The path of disclosure is as follows: Peer reviewers should disclose to the appropriate WSCUC staff liaison; WSCUC staff should disclose to the President; the President and Commissioners should disclose to the Commission Chair; and the Commission Chair should disclose to the Vice Chair.

After such disclosure, the person to whom the conflict is disclosed must make a decision about how to manage the situation to avoid the actual or perceived conflict consistent with the highest ethical standards. While not every situation requires recusal, when it is determined that a conflict of interest exists, or that the appearance of a conflict of interest may affect confidence in the integrity of the Commission process pertaining to an institutional decision, the individual subject to the conflict, real or apparent, must not accept the assignment and must abstain from all aspects of deliberation and decision-making, including voting. If a conflict emerges after an assignment has been accepted, the individual must abstain from participating in the decision as to the particular institution or matter and resign from the assignment. To this end, the following two safeguards are observed by the Commission to help identify real and apparent conflicts: (1) an institution has the right to challenge any participant in the accreditation process based on a conflict of interest, and (2) internal disclosure procedures exist within the Commission to remind individuals to consider their relationships so that the Commission can meet its obligations under this policy which include avoiding conflicts by maintaining a record of potential conflicting relationships that can be consulted during institutional reviews.

## **Considerations for Peer Review Committees and Team Members**

All team members are required to complete the [Standards of Conduct, Confidentiality Agreement and Conflict of Interest Disclosure Form](#) before serving on a team. In selecting review teams, the Commission prohibits individuals who have a conflict of interest from participating in a specific institutional review. In reviewing proposed teams, institutions are encouraged to bring to the attention of Commission staff any possible conflicts of interest or related concerns. Individuals invited to participate are expected to decline to serve in the evaluation of an institution as to which they have a conflict of interest. If unsure about a conflict of interest or the appearance of a conflict, individuals are expected to disclose the circumstances to the Commission staff liaison assigned to the review for discussion and evaluation. Team members are requested to be sensitive to and avoid activities that could give the appearance of a conflict of interest (such as using their participation in the accreditation process to promote their own professional opportunities, or consulting or accepting employment with an institution for 12 months after they have participated in any review of that institution).

## **Considerations for Commissioners, Commission Committee Members, and Commission Appointed Panel Members**

All Commissioners and members of Commission committees and appointed panels, such as the Appeals Panel, are required to complete the [Standards of Conduct, Confidentiality Agreement and Conflict of Interest](#)

[Disclosure Form](#) upon joining their respective body. This form is updated annually and as needed during tenure on the Commission, committee or appointed panel. Commissioners and committee and appointed panel members are expected to commit themselves to full disclosure and recusal in any business or corporate matters or institutional consideration involving a conflict of interest or the appearance of a conflict. Commissioners and members of Commission committees or panels are expected to refrain from entering into any new private consulting or employment arrangements with an institution that maintains, is seeking, or is eligible for accreditation status by the Commission both during their tenure on the Commission and within one year following termination of their service.

Where a conflict of interest or an appearance of a conflict that is determined to require recusal has been found to exist for a Commissioner, or a member of a Commission committee, it shall be reported to the Commission or committee as appropriate and noted in the meeting minutes. Commissioners and Commission committee members will excuse themselves from the room when there are deliberations or votes on decisions regarding institutions as to which they have a conflict of interest or an appearance of a conflict that warrants a recusal, including in the case of institutional decisions when they participated on the institution's most recent review team. In addition to not participating in such formal deliberations, Commissioners should neither initiate nor participate in any informal conversations with their fellow Commissioners about matters from which they or others in the conversation are recused. Persons who are uncertain regarding the possible appearance or reality of a conflict of interest should seek the direction of the Commission Chair and/or President.

## **Considerations for Commission Staff**

All staff members are required to complete the [Standards of Conduct, Confidentiality Agreement and Conflict of Interest Disclosure Form](#) on an annual basis. Commission staff are committed to full disclosure and restraint in any institutional consideration or business decision involving a conflict of interest or appearance of conflict. Staff members will absent themselves from deliberations on decisions regarding institutions as to which they have a conflict of interest or appearance of a conflict that warrants recusal. Staff members may not participate in private consulting or other employment arrangements with any institution that maintains or is seeking accreditation status by the Commission. Staff also may not receive honorary degrees or awards from any institution with candidate or accredited status with the Commission.

Staff shall give notice of any conflict of interest, or situation that might be perceived as a conflict of interest, to the President. In the case of the President, s/he shall give notice to the Commission Chair. A record of conflicts and the affected institutions will be kept on file consistent with corporate records and retention policies.

## **Considerations for Consultants and Other Agency Representatives**

Consultants and others with a formal contractual relationship with the Commission who in the course of their work may become involved in Commission policy, business decisions, institutional evaluation, or an accreditation decision regarding specific institutions will be required to complete the [Standards of Conduct, Confidentiality Agreement and Conflict of Interest Disclosure Form](#) and the form shall be kept on file. Notice of any conflict of interest, or situation that might be perceived as a conflict of interest, shall be provided by the contractor to the president for review. A record of institutions and matters as to which there is a conflict of interest will be kept in the consultant's file.