

Policy on Complaints Against an Institution or Accredited Program

Purpose and Limitations

The ABHE Commission on Accreditation (COA) values reports from students, employees, or other interested parties concerning institutions that are perceived to be significantly out of compliance with ABHE standards, policies, or procedures. The purpose of such notification is to address compliance with the ABHE Standards, policies, and procedures. The COA will review complaints regarding institutional or program compliance in a timely, fair, and equitable manner.

ABHE Commission on Accreditation is not a regulatory agency, and its authority is limited to actions related to accreditation review and recognition, to which an institution submits voluntarily. The COA will only consider complaints that evidence significant noncompliance with ABHE Standards, policies, or procedures for ABHE applicant, candidate, or accredited institutions. If an institution is found out of compliance with ABHE standards, policies or procedures, the COA will take appropriate action as needed.

The COA does not mediate disputes between individuals and member institutions or review individual cases of admission; granting or transferability of credits; grades and application of academic policies; fees and student financial aid; student discipline; faculty or staff appointments, promotion, tenure, contractual rights and obligations, and dismissals or similar matters; personal comments, or administrative decisions. The COA also will not serve as a grievance panel when the outcome of institutional grievance or appeal processes is unsatisfactory to the complainant. The COA will not seek damages or restitution on behalf of the complainant and will not accept statements that include profanity or defamatory comments.

The COA considers only recent events in complaints. One of the following must apply for ABHE to act on the complaint: (1) the event(s) occurred less than two years ago, (2) grievance/appeal was exhausted less than one year ago, or (3) litigation/legal proceedings (and appeal) were final less than one year ago.

Where a complaint may be addressed through institutional grievance processes, the COA requires evidence that all institutional grievance and appeal processes have been fulfilled and that noncompliance with ABHE Standards, policies, or procedures continues after the grievance or appeal process has been completed. The COA will not act on a complaint under litigation or criminal investigation until such action (and appeal, if applicable) has been completed; however, if there is credible evidence that the institution is systemically out of compliance with ABHE Standards, the COA may consider such evidence apart from disputed allegations. The Commission will not make judgments concerning the legality of an action.

Institutional Responsibilities

ABHE standards require that institutions have published procedures for addressing formal complaints and grievances (student and employee) and that there be equitable and consistent treatment of employees and students consistent with published policies (see Standard 1: EE 3;

Standard 4: EE 5). The institution must maintain a record of formal complaints since its last decennial review and make those available to visiting teams during evaluations.

Furthermore, institutions may not take retaliatory action against any individual who has filed a complaint with the COA. Institutions are expected to cooperate fully with any investigation of complaints, and any allegation of retaliatory action will be subject to investigation by the COA as a breach of Standard 1 (Integrity and Mission).

Submitting a Complaint

The Complaint Form and Policy are available at www.abhe.org/accreditation/accreditation-documents/. Complaints and supporting documentation must be submitted in writing to the COA Executive Director via email at coa@abhe.org or postal mail at 5850 T.G. Lee Blvd., Suite 130, Orlando, FL 32822. Digital copies are preferred for all materials.

It is the responsibility of the complainant to (1) state the nature of the complaint as succinctly and clearly as possible, (2) describe the details of the complaint in clear language, including the timeline of events, (3) describe all steps taken to resolve the complaint, including institutional grievance and appeals processes, (4) list all documents submitted supporting the complaint, (5) affirm the incident(s) leading to the complaint is not currently under litigation or criminal investigation, and (6) sign the complaint. The COA does not investigate undocumented allegations unless there is a pattern of noncompliance on record. Supporting evidence should be provided to support all statements material to the complaint. The COA is also not obligated to receive additional documentation from the complainant after the initial submission of the complaint.

A copy of the complaint and related documentation will be furnished to the institution, and the institution will have the right to provide a response before the complaint is reviewed by the COA. The complainant should not reveal any fact or opinion that the complainant does not want to be shared with the institution. All individuals named as complainants must affirm by signature their support of the complaint (i.e., one individual cannot sign on behalf of other complainants).

Complainants may request that contact information and other personally identifiable information on the complaint form be removed prior to submission to the institution. Even if such a request is made, the COA cannot guarantee anonymity throughout the process. The COA will not remove personally identifiable information from supporting documentation submitted with the form. Complainants should remove such information, as deemed necessary, prior to submission of the complaint to the COA.

All complaints are reported to the COA at the next scheduled meeting after processing. Where there is a pattern of complaints, the COA may take whatever action it deems appropriate, including no immediate action, requiring progress reports, conducting focused visits, or imposing sanctions.

Occasionally, the COA or its staff receives anonymous complaints or media reports regarding an institution that holds standing with the COA. While anonymous complaints and media reports are reported to the COA, in the absence of a pattern of such complaints, no action is taken unless directed by the COA.

Complaint Procedures

1. When an inquiry or notice of intent to file a complaint is received by the COA Office, the complainant is provided a copy of the *Policy on Complaints Against an Institution or Accredited Program* and a copy of the Complaint Form within 10 working days.
2. When a documented complaint is received, the COA Executive Director or Director's designee will review the documentation within 30 calendar days to determine whether the complainant has met all the requirements for submitting a complaint. If any required elements are not appropriately documented, the complainant will be notified of the deficiency and be given 30 days to resubmit the complaint. If the COA Executive Director or designee's review determines that the complaint does not relate to the institution's compliance with Standards or policies, or the complaint is not sufficiently documented to make such a determination or pursue further review, Commission staff will notify the complainant, and the complaint will be closed.
3. Upon receipt of satisfactory documentation, the COA Executive Director or Director's designee will notify the chief executive officer of the institution against which the complaint and supporting documentation has been directed. The chief executive officer and board chair will receive a copy of the complaint and the institution will be requested to respond to the complaint in writing within thirty (30) days of the date of notification. Evidence should be provided to support all statements material to the complaint response. Digital copies are preferred for all materials.
4. When steps 1-3 above are complete, the complaint will be placed on the Commission agenda for review and determination regarding the complaint.
5. Both parties will be notified within 30 calendar days after the effective date of the Commission determination regarding the complaint. Commission decisions, communicated by COA staff to the complainant and the institution, are final.

Adopted October 1982; Revised October 1997, November 2007, February 2011, November 2011, June 2017, June 2024