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**TO: All MSICHE Member Institutions
State and System Colleagues**
**FROM: Elizabeth H. Sibolski, President
Heather F. Perfetti, President-Elect**
RE: MSICHE May 2020 Updates
DATE: May 6, 2020

On behalf of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSICHE), we hope that this memorandum finds you, your colleagues, students, and your loved ones safe and in good health as we continue to respond to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. We recognize and appreciate those at your institutions who continue to be impacted personally by the challenges of the pandemic yet continue to meet new and unique professional demands so that the important academic programming and services for your students continue.

The Commission remains committed to working with you and your institution during this challenging time and has been moving quickly to make needed policy or procedural changes that align with the guidelines from the United States Department of Education (USDE). We would be remiss if we did not thank you for the care you have taken to address issues of equity, access, and student support services while moving instruction online. Furthermore, we thank you for being responsive to the Commission and keeping us updated.

Please continue to access the MSICHE Response to COVID-19 (coronavirus) website for updates (msche.org/covid-19) and additional resources. As always, chief executive officers and accreditation liaison officers (ALOs) should contact their assigned MSICHE Vice President liaison with questions and concerns.

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide the key contacts at MSICHE member institutions with a number of important updates related to the activities undertaken for the Annual Institutional Update (AIU), temporary flexibilities or waivers in Commission policies and procedures, upcoming events, advocacy for institutions and students, and the comment period for Commission policies and procedures.

Above all, the Commission remains focused on the safety, health, and well-being of our member institutions and all who contribute to peer review. Please contact us if we can offer assistance and support during these challenging times.

Accreditation Activities: Updates

- *Annual Institutional Update (AIU)*

The 2020 Annual Institutional Update (AIU) had been rescheduled from earlier this spring and will now launch on **Monday, July 13 and remain open through Friday, August 14**. Additional information specific to the AIU will be sent to key contacts in June. Please update your institution's key contacts in the MSCHE portal to ensure appropriate individuals receive important messaging. Several enhancements to the 2020 AIU based on feedback from our member institutions and peer evaluators were implemented, including easier portal navigation. We understand the challenges associated with completing the AIU for our institutions during this time and intend to be mindful of these challenges as we move through the AIU process. Institutional support will again be provided through email, chat, and by phone. As a reminder, the AIU is a mandatory activity under the MSCHE *Accreditation Review Cycle and Monitoring Policy and Procedures*. If required by a previous Commission action, the institution must also provide Recommendations Responses through the appropriate tab in conjunction with the AIU.

- *Distance Education Flexibilities (Substantive Change)*

The Commission remains hopeful that the USDE will extend the flexibility to offer distance education beyond June 1, 2020, but has not yet received such guidance. A communication was distributed on May 4, 2020, to institutions that do not hold the alternative delivery method of distance education within the scope of their accreditation status. This communication notified them that the Commission has established temporary procedural modifications to expedite review under the *Substantive Change Policy and Procedures* and *Substantive Change Guidelines* for those institutions affected by the limitations of the current flexibility and who need to obtain more permanent approval to include the distance education alternative delivery method within the institution's scope of accreditation for summer or fall. **The expedited review process will be available only if the USDE extension is not forthcoming.**

To assist these institutions with submitting a substantive change request for distance education, the Commission has modified and focused its substantive change application for this purpose and posted it on the Commission's website (msche.org/substantive-change). Institutions will describe their plans for delivering programs and courses via distance education and will provide information on faculty, student, and technology support, among other information. Substantive change requests must be uploaded into the secure MSCHE portal by June 1, 2020. Institutions should review the updated guidance from USDE issued on April 3, 2020, related to licensure and FERPA considerations. The Commission will take an accreditation action, retroactive to June 1, 2020, to permanently include the alternate delivery method of distance education within the institution's scope of accreditation in accordance with its *Accreditation Actions Policy and Procedures*. The Commission's action will be published on the institution's Statement of Accreditation Status (SAS). Institutions that submit incomplete or insufficient requests, or those that do not meet the June 1 deadline, will be advised to use the regular substantive change process.

Institutions that already hold approval to offer programs by this delivery method **do not** need to do anything more in terms of approval with MSCHE. Institutional representatives should consult the institution's Statement of Accreditation Status at the Commission's website, and click the tab *Alternative Delivery Method*, if you are unsure of the institution's status regarding distance education.

- *Delayed Visits and Virtual Site Visits*

As you already know, the Commission offered options to institutions and teams with spring visits to replace on-site visits with virtual ones, aligned with guidance issued by USDE. Hosting virtual site visits was not offered to applicant institutions, institutions on probation, or under certain circumstances where the nature of the Commission's concern necessitated on-site review. Institutions hosting virtual visits must also conduct follow-up, in-person visits within a reasonable period following the virtual site visit. The Commission wanted to share across the membership that 16 institutions requested virtual site visits (11 evaluation visits and five follow-up visits).

We recognize that the transition to virtual site visits was not easy. We are grateful to our institutions and teams who needed to quickly adapt to this new modality all while maintaining the highest level of commitment to the peer review process.

Feedback has been positive and the virtual site visits have been described as meaningful, robust, collegial, and conducted with integrity.

Those who decided not to host a virtual site visit, or were ineligible to do so, have had their visits delayed. The Commission delayed on-site evaluation visits for two international institutions and 30 domestic institutions (15 evaluation visits, 15 follow-up visits).

- *Fall Reports*

Staff sought approval from the Commission to adjust future reporting deadlines. Reports due May 1, 2020, could have been rescheduled for October 1, 2020, while reports due September 1 or October 1, 2020, will be rescheduled for December 1, 2020. Changes in due dates will be noted on the institution's Statement of Accreditation Status (SAS).

Upcoming Events

- *Recorded Broadcast*

The Commission is planning for a recorded broadcast for all constituents in May. This broadcast will provide updates on the MSCHE response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) as well as highlight the exceptional and student-focused responses from institutional members across the region. In addition, a high-level overview of federal regulatory changes as well as the impact on Commission policy and procedures will be shared.

- *Webinar: Four-Hour Live Event*

MSCHE invites you to join us for an optional webinar *Federal Regulations and Changes to MSCHE Policies and Procedures* as staff take a deep dive into the upcoming changes to federal regulations effective July 1, 2020, and the impact on MSCHE policies and procedures. MSCHE staff, including the President-Elect, will relay how the Commission expects to align MSCHE policies, procedures, and guidelines with federal regulation, and provide updates on other policy changes resulting from the Commission’s regular policy review and development process. This event was originally scheduled as the last in a series of workshops from spring 2020 in the form of two half-day, in-person workshops. It has now been converted into one longer, four-hour session as a webinar. The event is scheduled on June 11, 2020, from 10:00 am to 3:00 pm.

[Register Here](#) by June 8 | Cost: \$175

- *Fall 2020 Virtual Town Hall and President-Provost Meeting: Save the Date*

MSCHE will host virtual events in September to share updates from the Commission, answer questions from institutional representatives, and engage with presidents and provosts on a variety of topics. Featured speakers will include incoming President Dr. Heather Perfetti, Senior Vice President and Chief of Staff Dr. Stephen Pugliese, and Senior Vice President for Accreditation Relations Dr. Christy Faison. The focus of the Commission’s updates will be the state of the Commission and its membership following the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the regulatory changes effective July 1, 2020, and the strategic priorities and vision for the Commission under its new leadership. More details about registration will be distributed to key contacts and posted on the website soon.

September 15, 2020 – 1 pm to 3 pm:	Virtual President-Provost Meeting
September 21, 2020 – 10 am to 12 noon:	Virtual Town Hall

- *2020 Annual Conference*

The Commission continues to plan for the **MSCHE 2020 Annual Conference: Learning from Change and Bringing the Future into Focus** from December 2-4, 2020, in Philadelphia, PA. A revised Call for Proposals is encouraging session proposals that deal with the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis, emergency management, business continuity, and other important topics that can serve others in the region well when we come together at the Philadelphia Marriott Downtown Hotel. Completed proposals should be received no later than the extended deadline of May 8, 2020, at 5 p.m. Eastern. [Click here to learn more and submit a proposal.](#) MSCHE understands that the future impact and aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic remains unpredictable. While planning continues for the Annual Conference, the Commission is exploring a number of different options and contingencies in the event the original date is impacted.

Advocacy for Institutions and Students

- On April 30, 2020, the MSCHE formally endorsed two statements: a *Statement of Principles on Acceptance of Credit* issued on behalf of the American Association of Community Colleges, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, American Council on Education, Association of American Universities, Association of Public and Land-grant Universities; and National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities and a *Joint Statement on the Transfer and Award of Credit* issued by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), and American Council on Education (ACE). The statements can be found at the following links:

<https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Statement-Acceptance-of-Credit-Principles-041620.pdf>

<https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Joint-Statement-on-the-Transfer-and-Award-of-Credit.pdf>

MSCHE already calls for its institutions to possess clear policies and procedures regarding the evaluation and acceptance of transfer credits through its standards for accreditation, requirements of affiliation, and policies and procedures. However, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has intensified the need for institutions to reevaluate existing policies and procedures to ensure equitable outcomes and transparency for constituents in these unprecedented times. The statements aim to promote transfer credit policies that are reasonable, well-articulated, and facilitate transfer of credit in a manner that recognizes and reduces the extraordinary burdens and traditional inequities for students.

- On April 24, 2020, MSCHE was one of 52 organizations that signed a letter to Congress encouraging increased access to funding through the E-Rate and Lifeline programs to expand broadband for the benefit of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions. You can find more information about this here: <https://higherlearningadvocates.org/news/partner-organizations-urge-congress-increase-broadband-access/>
- On April 20, 2020, as a member of the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC), MSCHE was a signer on a letter to United States Department of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos urging an extension of the distance education flexibility: <https://www.c-rac.org/post/c-rac-members-urge-continued-flexibility-to-support-postsecondary-distance-learning>.

Commission Policies and Procedures: Comment Period

While we know this is a difficult time to seek comment from institutions on the Commission's policies and procedures, your input is critical to policy development. Several policies and procedures will be distributed to institutional members in the coming weeks. While many changes are based on the federal regulations published on November 1, 2019, and effective July 1, 2020, other changes that you will see have resulted from the Commission's regular review of its policies and procedures.

Resources

MSCHE: www.msche.org/covid-19

U.S. Department of Education: www.ed.gov/coronavirus

Download a PDF of this memo at <https://go.msche.org/20200506-msche-may-2020-updates>