



Policy on Exceptions due to COVID-19

On March 13, 2020, the ABHE Commission on Accreditation (COA) approved emergency exceptions to select ABHE policies and procedures concerning delivery options and evaluation team visits for the Spring 2020 term in the wake of challenges institutions may face in coping with COVID-19 (coronavirus). CEOs and accreditation liaisons at all ABHE institutions were notified of the possibility of exceptions related to course delivery on March 13 and/or March 16. CEOs, accreditation liaisons, and evaluation teams of institutions scheduled for evaluation team visits in the remainder of the Spring 2020 term were notified on March 13 of the possibility of exceptions related to evaluation team visits for the current term.

Exceptions in Educational Delivery Methods:

Effective March 13, 2020, institutions may adopt reasonable alternatives to currently approved delivery methods to prevent community contact during the COVID-19 crisis. The ABHE Commission on Accreditation (COA) will not take negative action against an institution that pursues a reasonable alternative in delivery to maintain the highest possible quality of education for their students to complete the current academic term, even if such actions temporarily exceed normal policy provisions. The COA may extend authorization of exceptions if COVID-19 restrictions are not lifted before the summer term. Extension of exceptions into the summer term is not automatic.

In particular, all ABHE institutions are approved to offer less than 50% of an academic program via distance education without a substantive change. Switching to online delivery *for the remainder of the current semester* due to the threat of community spread of COVID-19 will not push institutions beyond the existing provisions for alternative deliveries in ABHE policies.

Institutions that have COA approval to offer 50% or more of a program via distance education may offer additional programs online without a substantive change or prior approval by the COA. Should COVID-19 restrictions continue into the summer term, institutions that do not have approval to offer 50% or more of a program via distance education may temporarily continue offering courses online in the summer term without substantive change approval from the COA for 50% or more of a program via distance education. Institutions that plan to continue distance education on a permanent basis must follow the procedures for substantive change approval in the ABHE Policy on Substantive Change.

There may be other aspects of campus life or institution-specific requirements that need special consideration during the COVID-19 crisis to avoid community contact. Institutions should feel free to consider alternatives in serving students during this uncertain situation (e.g., exceptions to chapel requirements, ministry formation requirements, field-education assignments, and internship assignments).

All temporary adjustments to delivery of academic programs for the current semester are to be reported by email to coa@abhe.org. These will be reported to the COA for approval on an “act and inform” basis. Accommodations for individual students do not need to be reported. If COVID-19 restrictions continue and the COA extends exceptions into the summer term, institutions will be notified of the extension and will need to report all temporary adjustments to delivery of academic programs for the summer term at that time.

If you have any questions about a specific solution, please contact coa@abhe.org.

Exceptions in Evaluation Team Visits for Spring 2020:

Spring 2020 evaluation team visits conducted after March 16, 2020 may adopt alternative means for completing the evaluation visit. Institutions which have closed their campuses or discontinued on-campus classes due to COVID-19 will not be required to host an on-campus evaluation team this spring. Evaluators who have health concerns will not be required to travel to fulfill evaluation responsibilities during the COVID-19 crisis.

As an option, institutions may host a partial on-site/partial off-site team visit or a virtual evaluation team visit (all evaluators off-site). These alternatives apply to reaffirmation visits for Spring 2020, and institutions and team chairs should work with their assigned Commission Staff Representative (CSR) to coordinate arrangements for a particular visit. The COA also acknowledges that circumstances are changing rapidly and an initial solution may need to be modified before the visit occurs because of unforeseen factors. In some cases, a limited team may visit as scheduled and a follow-up visit will explore areas where off-site evaluators cannot effectively evaluate the institution. For virtual visits, where all evaluators are off site, a follow-up or Supplemental Evaluation Visit (SEV) will be required. In most cases the SEV will be conducted by one individual, but where several areas need exploration, an SEV of two or three on-site evaluators may be necessary. Such on-site visits will not occur until after COVID-19 restrictions are removed.

Where a virtual team visit is desirable or necessary, the institution should gather contact information from individuals the evaluation team wishes to interview and provide that information to the team. Telephone interviews are a perfectly acceptable alternative to face-to-face interviews. ABHE has licenses for Zoom and GoToMeeting, which may be used for video or audio conferencing as needed to conduct group meetings without community contact. Teams may also use institutional conferencing systems for meetings with institutional representatives, but not team executive sessions. As is already the case, institutions may upload additional materials to the evaluation team’s OneDrive through a secure link. Chairs may also extend the time for reports by a few days where there is difficulty completing interviews and/or acquiring additional documentation within the normal three days of a team visit. Team executive sessions may be conducted by Zoom, GoToMeeting, or other secure (private) electronic means. This is not an exhaustive list of options but offers suggestions to make an emergency virtual visit comparable to a traditional on-site visit. For all evaluation team visits, interviews with institutional personnel must be employed to supplement the review of documentation.

If you have any questions about a specific situation, please contact the team CSR or coa@abhe.org.

Adopted March 20, 2020