

Advisory information from ACOE re: COVID-19

As of March 16, 2020

Reporting program modifications to ACOE

The purpose of this advisory is to provide guidance to schools and colleges of optometry dealing with the COVID-19 emergency. ACOE recognizes that programs may find it necessary to make adjustments to their normal operations. Some of these adjustments may impact the program's continuing compliance with ACOE standards.

In this situation, the ACOE seeks to avoid disruption to the academic programs to the extent possible while safeguarding the health of students, staff, and faculty. However, in some circumstances, the temporary closing of the school or college or alteration of the academic calendar may be necessary, as determined by the institution. While giving priority to the health and safety of their communities, the schools and colleges of optometry must recognize that the degrees they award represent to the profession and the public that the graduate has completed a specified rigorous program of didactic and clinical education and is sufficiently prepared to enter clinical practice.

During this time of national emergency as a US Department of Education (USDE) recognized accreditor, ACOE is able to allow programs to modify portions of their curriculum to allow courses typically taught in lectures/classrooms to be delivered through on-line learning as long as means exist for students to have substantive communications with faculty on a regular basis. ACOE is requiring programs to submit a written update of substantive adjustments programs temporarily put in place to navigate this crisis, including moving to online instruction and modifications/cancellations/reductions in clinic rotations. **This update must address plans to ensure program learning objectives and the program's mission, goals and objectives continue to be met for didactic courses, laboratories and clinical training.**

Recognizing the administrative burden the COVID-19 situation is placing on programs, ACOE requests updates at this time to be no more than one page in length. Supporting documents that are referenced in updates, such as communications to students, faculty and staff, may be attached. We recognize this is a highly fluid situation, and programs may need to make further adjustments and provide additional updates as the situation develops. Upon receipt and review of updates from the programs regarding impacts of COVID and any changes that are being implemented, the ACOE may request programs to submit additional information. Professional optometric degree programs should submit reports on modifications to their programs via email to ACOE at accredit@aoa.org along with their program's annual report, which will be due on May 1, 2020. (Optometric residency programs and optometric technician programs will be advised at a later date regarding what information they may need to submit and when it should be submitted.)

The USDE Office of Postsecondary Education has also issued [Guidance to educational institutions for interruptions of study related to Coronavirus COVID-19](#). This document and other resources for educators from USDE are available on the [USDE website](#).

Update on site visit scheduling

The ACOE is monitoring statements and travel advisories published by the Center for Disease Control regarding the Coronavirus COVID-19. Several site visits scheduled for the month of March and April have had to be postponed, and the ACOE will continue to reach out to programs and site teams to assess the feasibility of conducting visits as scheduled. The situation has been rapidly evolving.

Some institutions and health care organizations are restricting their employees' travel. We ask site visitors to use their judgement as it relates to their personal safety and to reach out to the ACOE staff if you have any questions or concerns. We also request programs with a site visit scheduled to contact the ACOE staff if their facilities or educational institutions issue any directives that might cause the need for a rescheduling of a site visit. The ACOE will reschedule the postponed site visits as soon as practical giving priority to programs that are seeking initial accreditation. For information on professional optometric degree program site visits, contact [Joyce Urbeck](#), ACOE director, and for optometric residency site visit, contact [Kim Mohr, Ed.D.](#), ACOE manager-residency programs.

As an accreditor recognized under the criteria established by the U.S. Department of Education, ACOE is obligated by federal regulations to conduct in-person site visits. We cannot conduct virtual site visits. If the USDE relaxes or changes this rule, the ACOE could consider it in the future, but it doesn't seem to be an option now. The USDE requires the following of recognized accreditors:

Section 602.17 - Application of standards in reaching an accrediting decision. The agency must have effective mechanisms for evaluating an institution's or program's compliance with the agency's standards before reaching a decision to accredit or pre-accredit the institution or program. The agency meets this requirement if the agency demonstrates that it—...

...(c) Conducts at least one on-site review of the institution or program during which it obtains sufficient information to determine if the institution or program complies with the agency's standards.