



3624 Market Street
Suite 2 West
Philadelphia, PA 19104
(267) 284-5000
www.msche.org
Follow us: @mscheorg

TO: Team Chairs & Institutions with Spring 2020 Visits (Evaluation and Follow-Up Teams)
Team Members with Spring 2020 On-Site Visits
State and System Observers Participating in Spring 2020 On-Site Visits
FROM: Elizabeth H. Sibolski, President
Heather F. Perfetti, President-Elect
RE: Flexibility for Spring 2020 Visits
DATE: March 13, 2020

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) is awaiting guidance from the United States Department of Education (USDE) relating to flexibility that may be offered under existing regulations to support virtual evaluation and follow-up team visits due to the continuing concern of the coronavirus (COVID-19). Current regulations and Commission policies and procedures require on-site reviews, but we anticipate guidance to be released about the possibility for virtual visits to serve as substitutes for on-site visits.

This communication supplements those provided earlier this week and is intended to assist peer evaluators and institutions with determining how best to proceed with visits. The Commission wants to both ensure the integrity of the evaluation process with a thorough and objective review while remaining sensitive to the safety, health, and well-being of all staff, peer evaluators, and institutions.

The Commission is offering options to institutions and teams to replace on-site visits with virtual ones, contingent on guidance expected to be issued by the USDE, or to delay the on-site visits, as circumstances relating to the coronavirus (COVID-19) continue to change rapidly at institutions, within states and systems, and for individuals. An immediate assessment of the availability of the team and of the technology is critical to determining whether a virtual visit is possible. The Commission will make every effort to maintain the team composition.

Team chairs and the presidents of institutions with upcoming visits should review the following and determine if a virtual visit can serve as an appropriate substitute for an on-site visit or if the visit should be delayed:

- Reports and evidence must be uploaded by the institution in accordance with the original timeframe of the on-site visit.
- Virtual visits may adhere to the timeframe of the original on-site visit dates if possible. If it is not possible to conduct the virtual visit during the original dates, depending on the date of the rescheduled visit, the Commission may not take action following the rescheduled visit until November 2020.

- Team chairs should verify their team’s ability and willingness to participate in the virtual visit during the original dates. State and system representatives who were accompanying the team should also be included in the virtual visits.
- If team members are unable to participate in the virtual visit remotely, an alternate date may be determined. If not all team members are able to participate, the team chair should work with the Commission to ensure that the team composition has the necessary expertise to proceed with the visit. Once the team has verified participation in a virtual visit, the team chair should outreach to the institution to discuss its technological capabilities to support the visit.
- Institutions should assess their technological capabilities to support virtual, confidential interviews, whether small or large, and team meetings and inform the team chair immediately if they foresee serious difficulties in supporting a virtual visit. That assessment should include determining if virtual visits are possible to all geographic locations that the team intended to visit. Verifying information about branch campuses and one-third of active additional locations is still required.
- Team chairs should continue to coordinate the interview requests from team members and share those with the institution, with the understanding that the team member will have to participate via the technology supported by the institution, or by phone if necessary. The virtual visits should include and engage constituencies in the process no differently than if the visit was on-site.
- Team chairs should plan to conduct virtual team meetings through the institution’s technology or may use technology from their own institution if necessary and should document who, from the team and from the institution, has participated in each meeting.
- Additional evidence requested by the team should be uploaded into the MSCHE secure portal so that all team members can access the materials while at a distance during the virtual visit.
- The draft of the team report must summarize the team’s findings no differently than if the visit was on-site.
- Team chairs should deliver the oral exit report via technology supported by the institution and as planned on the last day of the virtual visit after speaking privately with the president prior to the oral exit report.
- The team and the institution should maintain Commission expectations around confidentiality. The team and the institution should not record any part of the virtual visit, in any manner or for any reason.
- The team and the institution should adhere to all timelines related to the submission of draft reports, corrections, final reports, institutional responses, and the confidential brief.

If a team or an institution is unable to commit to a virtual visit, the visit will need to be delayed due to extraordinary circumstance (*Accreditation Actions Policy and Procedures*). Depending on the length of the delay, the Commission may be required to take action to grant the delay in order to provide the institution with sufficient time under existing policies and procedures.

Hosting a virtual visit will not be offered to institutions on probation or under certain circumstances where the nature of the Commission’s concern requires on-site review. Applicant

assessment team visits and substantive change site visits may not be conducted virtually. In those cases, the MSCHE VP liaison will communicate directly with the affected institution, and the Commission may act to delay the visit.

All peer evaluators are asked to work with their travel companies and airlines to request refunds or credits for expenses that may have already been incurred for travel to the institution. Questions about travel reimbursement issues can be directed to Commission staff.

Institutions will receive a separate communication from the email of Dr. Sibolski with a link to provide information about the upcoming visit after consulting with their team chairs. Please check your spam or junk mail folders if you do not receive this email. The information that institutions should be prepared to submit is as follows:

- My institution will host a virtual visit on our originally scheduled dates.
- My institution will host a virtual visit but must revise the dates.
- My institution is unable to host a virtual visit and must request a delay.

Commission staff will then outreach to each institution following submission of this information.

As a reminder, the Commission continues to monitor the guidance released by the USDE, and we are awaiting guidance specific to the virtual visits.

In addition, the Commission continues to monitor the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19), and updates will be provided at our website (msche.org/covid-19) as well as communicated directly with constituencies as the circumstances may warrant. Please be assured of the continuing interest of MSCHE in the safety, health, and well-being of our member institutions and all who contribute to peer review.

Please contact your MSCHE Vice President liaison if you have any questions or concerns about any of the communications you have received. We appreciate your cooperation and timely response to this request.

Download a PDF of this memo at <https://go.msche.org/20200313-Info-for-Chairs-and-Institutions-w-Visits>