

## Policy on Use of Accreditation Consultants

### Key to Changes: ~~Delete~~, Add

Accreditation consultants can be of great benefit to both institutions seeking accreditation and accredited institutions pursuing innovation. The ABHE Commission on Accreditation (COA) recognizes two kinds of consultants, Commission Staff Representatives (CSRs) and private consultants.

#### **COA Staff Representative (CSR):**

Each applicant institution is assigned a representative from the COA's senior professional staff who will work with the institution and serve as the institution's primary contact with the COA office throughout applicant and candidate status. The Commission Staff Representative (CSR) provides guidance in understanding and interpreting ABHE Standards, policies, and procedures. The CSR also appraises the COA of institutional progress related to achieving and maintaining ABHE accreditation. The CSR fulfills the following functions:

- Conduct an annual visit to the institution in any year that the institution does not host an ABHE evaluation team. The purpose of this visit is twofold: (1) to provide the COA with an on-site report of the institution's progress in addressing the Standards for Accreditation and any concerns the COA may have expressed concerning achievement of the Standards, and (2) to provide guidance and professional advice to the institution concerning ABHE Standards, policies, and procedures.
- Answer questions related to ABHE Standards, policies, and procedures and provide clarification as needed throughout the year. If mutually agreed upon by the CSR and the institution, one follow-up visit per year may be scheduled to provide additional clarification and advice regarding accreditation processes.
- Debrief the institution after COA meetings concerning COA actions. The CSR provides clarification concerning areas where the institution may have questions about a COA action and guidance concerning next steps in responding to COA concerns.
- Accompany and support the visiting team for comprehensive visits for candidate status and initial accreditation to ensure the team has reviewed and commented on all pertinent requirements and provide clarification to the team regarding questions about ABHE Standards, policies, or procedures.
- Represent the COA to the institution. As such, the CSR is not an advocate lobbying for the institution's favor, nor a surrogate in dispensing COA authority. The COA staff representative is an interpreter ensuring clear communication between the COA and the institution and protecting the review process from misinterpretation or inconsistent application.
- Restrict engagement in institutional processes and activities to advice concerning COA matters—the COA staff representative is not to serve as a private consultant in developing materials, policies, or accreditation documents.

- Be free from conflicts of interest for institutions to which the CSR is assigned.

### **Private Consultant:**

A private consultant can provide further assistance to institutions in understanding and achieving accreditation requirements, developing substantive change proposals, building and organizing thorough documentation, and understanding best practices in higher education. The private consultant can mentor institutional staff members on appropriate professional performance, teach processes, such as assessment and planning, and identify solutions to problems that are common to emerging schools. An effective accreditation consultant should be like a scaffold used in constructing a building, then removed when construction is complete, with the ultimate goal of making the institution more effective and worthy of the recognition of accreditation.

The COA provides the following guidelines to ensure that a school's partnership with an accreditation consultant is appropriate.

- A school using an accreditation consultant should be candid as to the role played by a private consultant in preparation of COA materials (advisor, trainer, document editor, writer, evaluator, etc.).
- Institutions that wish to have COA staff disclose information to a private consultant should make that known in writing. Such a disclosure release will be in effect until revoked by the institution.
- Institutions should provide consultants with all pertinent COA communications regarding progress to achieve maximum benefit from consultation services. These may include staff consultation reports, evaluation team reports, and COA action letters, depending on the scope of service provided by the consultant.
- The institution may elect to have a private consultant present for **consultation** meetings with a COA staff representative, ~~evaluation team, or the COA~~. The purpose of the consultant's presence is exclusively to assist the institution in understanding comments and questions and subsequently achieving the desired quality improvement. The consultant is not authorized to speak on behalf of the institution or to answer questions posed to institutional personnel. **Private consultants may not be present for evaluation team visit meetings or Commission meetings and debriefs.**
- The relationship between an institution and consultant should be marked by professionalism and integrity. Terms of service should be mutually understood and fulfilled. Neither party should misrepresent the institution.
- Under no circumstances does the responsibility for complying with ABHE Standards, policies, or procedures transfer from the institution to the consultant. It is the institution's obligation to satisfy COA requirements.

Adopted February 2015; **PROPOSED January 2023**