Accreditation During COVID-19:
A Continuing Commitment To Quality Assurance

Council of
Regional Accrediting Commissions

Accreditation During COVID-19

*How C-RAC Members have adapted to the ongoing pandemic*

As the COVID pandemic continues to reverberate across the U.S. postsecondary system, C-RAC members have worked proactively to adjust their day-to-day operations and modify their interactions with institutions while maintaining accreditors' central obligation to quality assurance.

Each C-RAC member worked diligently and quickly to adapt to the remote learning environment, creating new training resources to support virtual visits, embracing online tools to allow for more real-time engagement with institutions, and developing new digital resources to help explore and address pandemic-related challenges.

Here are a few of the highlights that illustrate how accreditors adapted to the COVID shifts in higher education:

- C-RAC members engaged with the U.S. Department of Education to encourage policymakers and the administration to **allow greater flexibility** for institutions in offering emergency remote learning, permit accreditors to undertake virtual accreditation evaluation visits, **increase reliable broadband service** for students, and **provide additional federal support** for students and institutions.

- Many C-RAC members also created remote training and professional development programs to help prepare and guide Commission staff and volunteers. As noted by the **Accrediting Commission for Community & Junior Colleges (ACCJC)**, "Holding quality professional development opportunities via short, focused [online] sessions enabled effective participation from the field [and] facilitated effective work of the peer review teams." The **Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)** said technology enhanced communication between committee members, allowing for more informed and in-depth conversations.

- The **New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE)** established a new Distance Education Expedited Review Committee composed of experts in the field of distance education that could help manage and support quality assurance as the Commission moved to more rapidly evaluate new online program offerings without losing focus on quality.

- All C-RAC members significantly ramped up their outreach and communications efforts. As the **Higher Learning Commission (HLC)** put it, "over-communicat[ing] to help alleviate institutional stress about accreditation" and provide ongoing guidance to members. **SACSCOC** noted that "COVID accelerated the commission's implementation of technology enhancements to improve efficiency [and] increased interactions with institutions."

- Each C-RAC member also created new communications programming and tools for staff and institutions, including new resource centers on their websites, podcasts, and virtual events to help encourage open communication with their membership. Examples include the **Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)**, which began offering "Virtual Coffee with the Commission" events; **WASC Senior College & University Commission (WSCUC)**, which held "State of the Community" sessions to reassure institutions about fundamentals and discuss practical issues and "Coffee with CEOs" sessions; and the **Northwest Commission on Colleges & Universities (NWCCU)**, which launched a series of listening sessions with member institutions, among others.
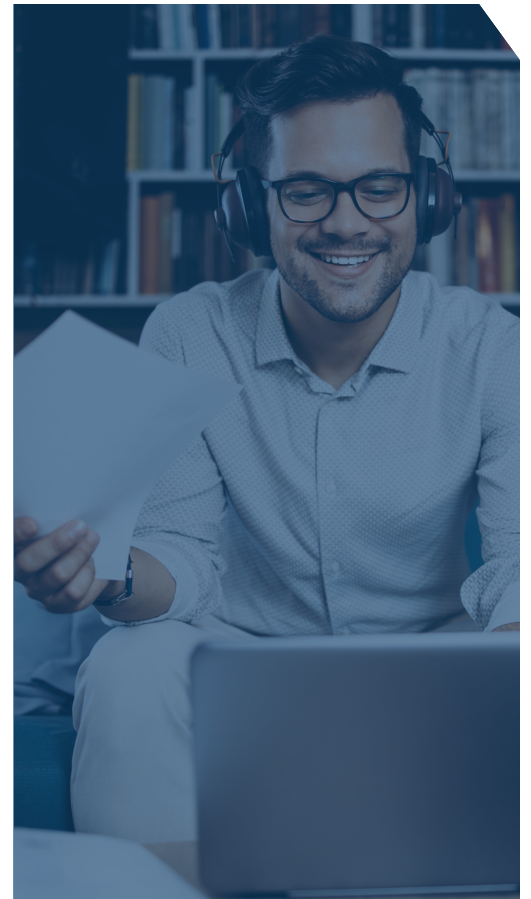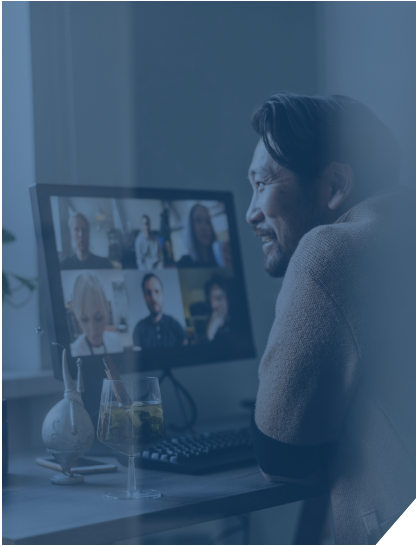
- Most C-RAC members, including **ACCJC** and **HLC**, embraced video messages and webinars as an important engagement tool during the pandemic: "The videos we produced and shared with our membership were extremely well-received, and [HLC] will continue to create periodic videos on special topics." **MSCHE** also launched an audio podcast series, Pillars of Change, to spotlight highly effective institutional practices that have made a difference in the lives of students through diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

- Each C-RAC member conducted periodic surveys of their memberships to better understand how institutions were handling the pandemic and identify areas where they could benefit from greater support. According to **WSCUC**, "[The surveys] helped us understand practical challenges and the mood, needs, good ideas and ways that we could be helpful to institutions" and, as noted by **NWCCU**, "[formed] the basis for additional training, workshops, webinars" for Commission staff and institution liaisons.

Key Takeaways: C-RAC Voices

Reflections from Commission leaders

As we reflect on lessons learned over the last year and a half and how higher education might evolve in a post-pandemic era, here are a few key takeaways from each Commission:

ACCJC: "The pandemic forced accreditors to consider the impact of policies and to focus on being more flexible to assists institutions in providing quality education and services. It presented an opportunity for us to move past a 'we've always done it that way' mentality and evolve our thinking to 'how can we meet our missions and support student success given the current situational/environmental constraints'."

HLC: "The pandemic environment made [us] all more emotionally intelligent and empathetic to others in the office and at our institutions. Our commitment to quality is the same pre- and post-pandemic. We never let our guard down."

MSCHE: "No matter the circumstances, quality is central to the trust that members and the public have placed in the Commission, and while accreditation may look different in the virtual environment, the focus and evaluation of quality across the higher education landscape does not change."

NECHE: "Student success has always been a focus of our work at NECHE and the onset of the pandemic has not altered this focus. Our processes of continuous improvement do continue to evolve, certainly in partnership with our institutions with an increased focus on equity."

> **"The pandemic requires accreditors to be even more focused on the issue of promoting student success and closing equity gaps."**

NWCCU: "The pandemic requires accreditors to be even more focused on the issue of promoting student success and closing equity gaps, because it only exacerbated the disparities in access, support, and resources available to students from underserved or underrepresented communities."

SACSCOC: "Some of the protocols held sacred in higher education are being reassessed for meaning and purpose - but each decision made by the Commission has been and will continue to be guided by our continued focus on assuring the quality and integrity of programs offered at member institutions while also making sure students would not be harmed by any changes implemented."

WSCUC: "WSCUC's approach is that accreditation measures deep and enduring mission, capacities, and effectiveness, including abilities to govern, plan, lead, reflect, and adapt, to generate student success, and to sustain the institution. In a time of 'unscripted challenges' the capacities and commitment to mission and student success at the heart of accreditation should provide both the guiding principles and necessary tools to navigate change."

Spotlight: Commission Resources

Commission efforts to enhance engagement & advocacy before, during, & after COVID-19 include:

ACCJC:

- **Educational Series:** Short videos developed in conjunction with Accreditation Liaison Officers and Chief Executive Officers to help provide needed services and resources that assist colleges with their accreditation efforts.

- **Guide for Conducting Virtual Visits:** A resource designed to assist colleges, chairs, and team members in conducting and fostering an effective and meaningful virtual accreditation visit.

- **ACCJC Connect:** In an effort to both streamline and enhance communications to the field, ACCJC developed ACCJC Connect, which serves as a one-stop-shop for calls to action, Commission announcements and updates, and upcoming events.

HLC:

- **Comprehensive COVID-19 Resources:** HLC created a single location on its website for all resources related to COVID-19, including health and safety guidance for peer reviewers, FAQs, updates from the Department of Education, and policy changes.

- **Virtual Events:** Timely virtual events and workshops for institutional and professional development regarding distance education, peer reviewer training, and more.

MSCHE:

- **Pillars of Change Podcast:** A podcast series to spotlight highly-effective institutional practices that have made a difference in the lives of students through diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

- **COVID-19 Resources Webpage:** A repository of information for institutions, peer evaluators, and the public as to the latest communications, policy waivers, and guidance.

- **Advocacy Information:** A website section dedicated to advocacy initiatives undertaken or supported by MSCHE in the wake of the pandemic.

NECHE:

- **Student Success Resources:** A compilation of resources to help institutions improve academic programs and services for students.

- **NECHE "On The Road" Podcast:** A podcast with conversations between the NECHE president and institutional leaders throughout the region on issues important to them.

NWCCU:

- **NWCCU Webinars:** In response to the pandemic and based on surveys of its member institutions, NWCCU created topical webinars that have been popular with the NWCCU community.

- **Equity Training Resources:** NWCCU has brought an equity focus to all its work and has created online training resources, in part driven by the needs of member institutions and the student populations they serve, and also because of the extant racial and ethnic disparities exacerbated by the pandemic.

SACSCOC:

- **Coronavirus & the Commission:** A regularly updated webpage with the latest resources and information that institutions need to know.

- **Institute on Quality Enhancement and Accreditation:** An annual discussion on issues and policies affecting postsecondary quality and student success.

- **President's Communique:** Frequent communications from the SACSCOC president on the most pertinent issues facing member institutions.

WSCUC:

- **The Key Indicators Dashboard:** WSCUC launched the KID in August 2021 to present detailed trend and comparative information on WSCUC-accredited undergraduate institutions in a clear, easy to use format that is available to the public.

- **WSCUC State of the Community Webinars:** Periodic webinars intended to address community concerns and share the latest information.

- **COVID Resources Website:** Compiling information and resources to support COVID-related concerns and questions.

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The Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) represents the seven organizations responsible for the accreditation of roughly 3,000 of the nation's colleges and universities. Our work helps ensure that students attending accredited postsecondary institutions in the United States have access to quality education opportunities. The public can feel confident that the colleges and universities accredited by C-RAC members are stable and held accountable for student outcomes. Learn more at **c-rac.org.**