

Advisory information re: COVID-19 from ACOE for Optometric Residency Programs as of March 27, 2020

Program Modifications and Reporting to ACOE

The purpose of this advisory is to provide guidance to optometric residencies 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 residents, staff, and faculty. However, in some circumstances, the temporary closing of the location of the residency or alteration of the academic calendar may be necessary. While giving priority to the health and safety of their communities, the optometric residencies must recognize that the completion of their program represents to the profession and the public that a resident has attained advanced competencies in eye, vision, and health care through an educational program centered on clinical training.

During this time of national emergency as a US Department of Education (USDE) recognized accreditor, ACOE is authorizing programs to modify portions of their curriculum to allow didactic components and scholarly activities to be delivered through on-line/distance learning, as long as, means exist for residents to have substantive communications with faculty on a regular basis. There are alternative educational experiences that could be developed for residents. As we look at flexibility to address the effects of this public health emergency, it is imperative that adaptive considerations still ensure program learning objectives and the program's mission, goals, and objectives are met.

There are options that residencies have as to the question of whether or not the resident has met the goal with regard to the number of patient encounters.

- Since we are a significant way through the program year, there are sure to be some instances where the resident has already met or exceeded the goal of patient encounters. If that is the case, then when all other requirements of the program are satisfied, the resident can be considered as completed the program and the ACOE will, during this extraordinary time, liberally accept that the resident has satisfied the 'equivalent' of a twelve month program.
- Should encounter numbers not meet the goal, or other requirements not be satisfied, then the program could consider extending the current resident's program into the timeframe of the upcoming new year program, contingent on the residency being capable of demonstrating that there would be adequate patients, facilities, and faculty to accommodate the overlap.

- An alternative consideration, for a program that finds that they are close but not able to satisfy the goals of their program, is to develop remote clinical presentations/experiences/simulations related to the program's emphasis area that could satisfy some of the deficiencies.
- The affiliate may provide educational (didactic/scholarly and/or clinical) activities for the resident.

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 components, scholarly activities, and clinical training.**

Recognizing the administrative burden the COVID-19 situation is placing on programs, ACOE requests updates to be no more than one page in length. Supporting documents that are referenced in updates, such as communications to residents, 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. Residency 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 September 1, 2020. (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 residency program site visits, contact [Kim Mohr, Ed.D.](#), ACOE manager-residency programs.

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Additional Considerations on Site Visits

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. The USDE has recently notified accrediting agencies that consideration of conducting virtual site visits may be permitted on a temporary basis. The ACOE is in the process of looking at implementing this possibility. These virtual site visits could only be considered for programs that are otherwise in good standing or to programs that are engaged in renewal of accreditation. In other words, the virtual site visits could not be considered for residency programs seeking an initial award of accreditation. Additionally, it should be understood, through the guidelines established for this temporary consideration, that should an accreditor employ a virtual site visit, the agency must perform a follow-up in-person visit within a reasonable period of time following the virtual site visit.