

Amendment to ACOE’s Advisory Statement on Temporary Flexibilities for Professional Optometric Degree Programs regarding modifications to program established curriculum requirements, program length, use of distance learning, and complying with ACOE standard 2.10.2.1 re: externship site visits by the program—October 23, 2020

The U.S. Department of Education’s (USDE’s) approval for the continued use of distance learning is being clarified. Per Guidance published June 16, 2020 ([Guidance for interruptions of study related to Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) \(Updated June 16, 2020\)](#)), flexibilities are extended through the end of the academic year that includes December 31, 2020 or the end date for the COVID-19 Federally declared emergency, whichever occurs later. If the USDE further extends the waiver the ACOE will continue to authorize professional optometric degree programs to offer education through distance learning for the period of time authorized by the USDE.

ACOE encourages programs concerned with continued compliance to Title IV, Higher Education Act (HEA) policies associated with distance learning should USDE flexibilities end to explore seeking approval through their regional accreditor.

Should programs decide to continue using distance learning for the future as part of their curricula beyond the USDE’s waiver period, the ACOE considers this to be a substantive change and will require the program to seek and obtain approval of the continued offering of coursework through distance learning. The ACOE acknowledges its guidance around the ongoing use of distance education within its policies, procedures, and standards is limited and will develop updated guidance addressing this topic.

Regarding the section of Standard 2.10.2.1 that states “Each site must be visited by personnel designated by the program within one year of placement of the first extern(s)...”, the ACOE amends its prior guidance. In those instances where a site must be visited to meet this section of the standard, the program may conduct a remote (virtual) visit in lieu of an in-person visit. The allowance for use of virtual visits is extended to the end of the 2020-2021 academic year, or the end of the COVID-19 Federally declared emergency, whichever occurs later.

- *M/S/C: The ACOE adopts the Amended Advisory Statement on Temporary Flexibilities for Professional Optometric Degree Programs regarding modifications to program established curriculum requirements, program length, use of distance learning, and complying with ACOE standard 2.10.2.1 re: externship site visits by the program. This statement will supersede any previous advisories on the topics. (Vote tallied 10-0).*

ACOE’s Advisory Statement on Temporary Flexibilities for Professional Optometric Degree Programs regarding modifications to program established curriculum requirements, program length, use of distance learning, and complying with ACOE standard 2.10.2.1 re: externship site visits by the program—June 27, 2020

Schools and colleges of optometry are allowed temporary flexibility to modify program-dictated curriculum requirements, as long as the program still ensures the competence of the students and continues to comply with professional optometric degree program standards. Programs must consider the impact of curricular changes on graduate’s eligibility for licensure.

Schools and colleges of optometry are permitted temporary flexibility to modify the length of the professional optometric degree program if the program continues to meet the requirement of at least four academic years of equivalent instruction and ensures the competence of graduates.

The U.S. Department of Education has approved the continued use of distance learning for the start of the next academic session and through December 31, 2020 due to continued challenges resulting from the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The ACOE authorizes professional optometric degree programs to offer education through distance learning on a temporary basis to allow programs to comply with federal, state and local directives concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. If a program should decide to continue using distance learning for the future as part of their curricula, the ACOE will require the program to seek and obtain approval of the continued offering of coursework through distance learning. The Council would consider the continued offering of course work to be a substantive change, and programs are required to notify ACOE for consideration of approval prior to continued implementation. If the USDE extends the waiver beyond December 31, 2020, the ACOE will continue to authorize professional optometric degree programs to offer education through distance learning for the period of time authorized by the USDE.

Regarding the section of Standard 2.10.2.1 that states “Each site must be visited by personnel designated by the program within one year of placement of the first extern(s)...”, in those instances where a site must be visited by December 31, 2020 to meet this section of the standard, the program may conduct a remote (virtual) visit in lieu of an in-person visit.

- *M/S/C: The ACOE adopts the Advisory Statement on Temporary Flexibilities for Professional Optometric Degree Programs regarding modifications to program established curriculum requirements, program length, use of distance learning, and complying with ACOE standard 2.10.2.1 re: externship site visits by the program. This statement will supersede any previous advisories on the topics. (Vote tallied: 10-0.)*