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Complaint Resolution Statement for Postsecondary Education Matters

Complaint Resolution Statement – To comply with US Department of Education regulations released in 2010 called “Program Integrity Issues” and related to eligibility for federal student financial aid programs, the Vermont Department of Education provides this information.

Are you a parent, faculty member, or student seeking an outlet for a complaint about a condition or incident involving a postsecondary school operating in Vermont? These guidelines are provided to help you. Basically, there are three avenues to pursue: the institution’s established complaint resolution procedures, the Attorney General’s office, or the institution’s accrediting agency. The vast majority of complaints should be resolved with the school itself.

The number one source of successful resolution is the school itself.

The VT Department of Education does not intervene in the internal procedures of colleges and universities. 34 CFR (Code of Federal Regulations) 668.43b requires institutions to make available to students information about how to file a complaint. Postsecondary schools participating in federal student financial aid programs are required to have formal grievance procedures. The school’s student handbook usually describes the steps you must make to begin a grievance process. Often schools have both formal and informal process to resolve complaints. The procedures should include steps to ensure that your concerns will be heard fully and fairly, and the procedures must provide for the prompt and equitable resolution of complaints.

When approaching the institution, you should be specific in describing the nature of the complaint and relevant information: the name of the parties involved, including witnesses, dates, the policy or procedure violated (if known), the course/program, and contact information. In addition, it is important to include any supporting material that substantiates your complaint.

Sometimes violations of federal or state laws are alleged. In the case of discrimination, the appropriate course is the Office of Civil Rights. In the case of suspected consumer fraud, such as false advertising, or violation of a state law, the state Attorney General is the appropriate contact for filing a grievance.

Rarely, the appropriate place for a complaint is with the **institution’s accrediting body**. The institution will tell you if they are accredited and by which accrediting agency. For schools accredited by New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), please use the following instructions or see the NEASC website.

NEASC – Complaints

Complaints are more formal expressions of concern regarding an institution’s compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*. A required *Complaint Form* exists to help organize complicated information. Complaints must meet five criteria to be accepted for consideration by NEASC:

1. Focus on **institutional conditions**, not individual experiences;
2. Cite specific **Standards** and provide substantial **evidence** beyond general allegations that the standard may have been violated;
3. Indicate that a **serious effort has been made to resolve** the issue through the institution's internal procedures.
4. Be **signed** and include **permission to forward** the complaint to the institution. (Anonymous complaints or requests to keep complaints confidential cannot be accepted.)
5. Be submitted in a **timely** manner (Normally, the Commission will not consider matters that occurred more than three years prior to the filing of the complaint.)

Complaints are reviewed to ensure that they meet the NEASC Commission's criteria listed above. Consult the *FAQs About Complaints* on the NEASC website to ensure that your concern meets the criteria. Individuals with concerns that do not meet the criteria for complaints are encouraged to submit those concerns as Public Comments.

If the complaint meets the NEASC Commission's five criteria for consideration, it is forwarded to the institution's president, who is asked to respond within 30 days. At its next regularly scheduled meeting, the Commission considers both the complaint and the institution's response and determines whether or not further action is required. The complainant and the institution are notified in writing of the Commission's decision in the matter.

For further information, consult the policy and procedures for *Public Comments* or the policy on *Consideration of Complaints Against Affiliated Institutions*. For guidance on filing either a Public Comment or Complaint, email *Louise Zak (lzak@neasc.org)* or call 781-541-5413 to be in touch with NEASC directly.

If you believe you have exhausted avenues listed above and have a valid complaint about a violation, you may send it to the Vermont Dept. of Education in writing so that we can direct the complaint appropriately. All complaints should be specific in describing the nature of the complaint and relevant information: the name of the parties involved, including witnesses, dates, the policy or procedure violated (if known), the course/program, the name of the institution, and complete contact information. In addition, please include any supporting material that substantiates your complaint, including correspondence with the school about the issue.

In summary, we encourage you to work directly with your institution to satisfy complaints. In most cases, that is the only appropriate avenue for you to pursue.

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