Guide for Conducting Virtual Visits: An Addendum for Peer Review Team Chairs, Team Members, and Colleges
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1. Introduction

This Guide for Virtual Visits is intended to serve as an addendum to the Team Chair Manual and the Guide for Peer Review Team Members, which are the primary sources for preparing for a visit. ACCJC developed this Guide for Virtual Visits to assist colleges, chairs, and team members in conducting and fostering an effective and meaningful virtual accreditation visit.

The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) recognizes that there may be extraordinary and unforeseeable circumstances that can significantly impact a college’s operations or ACCJC’s operations to conduct an on-site peer review visit. ACCJC’s decision to conduct virtual visits for the comprehensive reviews was made in collaboration with colleges, including inquiring about their willingness and capacity to host a virtual visit, as well as with team chairs to lead a virtual peer review visit in lieu of on-site comprehensive visits.

Regardless of the format for an accreditation visit, ACCJC is dedicated to upholding high standards and the integrity of the peer review process for the benefit of its members and students. It is also committed to ensuring that the virtual visit relies on an engaged, interactive format, rather than solely document-based reviews in accordance with the U.S. Department of Education’s guidance of May 15, 2020 (updated June 16).1

While the format for the peer review visit is changed from on-site to virtual, ACCJC is committed to protecting the value and integrity of the accreditation process including:

- assessment of the college grounded in the Commission’s Eligibility Requirements, Standards, and Policies;
- peer review team recommendations to the college for improvement and to the Commission for their decision making process;

2. Virtual Meeting Protocols

To ensure the integrity of the peer review process, virtual visits must be conducted in a manner consistent with the on-site process. This includes the work of the peer review team to effectively engage with colleagues at the college with professionalism and a spirit of collegiality; conduct discussions grounded in the Standards and policies; hold interviews and meetings with relevant constituents to clarify processes described in the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report; and verify that Standards are met.

Consistent with the training manuals and mandatory trainings prior to the visit, the Commission emphasizes the critical role of the team chair and peer review team, and the expectations that the team chair and team be prepared in advance of the visit, make effective and efficient use of time, complete assignments according to prescribed schedules and deadlines, and make purposeful requests for additional evidence and interviews in accordance with Accreditation Standards.

Recognizing the vital role of technology to conduct virtual site visits, ACCJC requires that team members and colleges ensure their readiness for an effective visit by following the protocols below and in Appendix A:

**Virtual Platform:** ACCJC uses Zoom for Team Chair and Team Trainings, but team chairs/colleges may use a different platform during the visit. All team members must work with the team chair to ensure they have the proper software downloaded. **Examples of virtual platforms are:** Zoom, GoToMeetings, ConferZoom, or Google Meet. **Any platform that is used must have security protocols in place. All meetings must be password protected.** The team chair is responsible for ensuring all team members are trained in their chosen application. ACCJC confirmed through its invitation to peer reviewers that they are willing and capable of working on a virtual platform.

**Technology Capacity:** Join meetings early with required downloads installed and tested. Simultaneously, remember to be flexible and understanding of technological glitches. Consistent with on-site trainings and meetings, no events or meetings shall be recorded.

**Participation and Presence:** To participate in the virtual training and visit, peer reviewers must leverage technology to ensure quality interactions with fellow team members and representatives from the college under review. The microphone and chat features must be used appropriately, and all cameras (video) must be on for meaningful interaction. It is expected that each team member be fully present (video and audio) for the duration of ACCJC trainings and the virtual site visit.

**Pro-Tip:** For consistency in appearance, the team may consider renaming their online profiles as follows-- ACCJC Team: First Name Last Name. This helps the college identify the team members who may span across multiple screens in the virtual format.

**Personal presentation:** Peer reviewers and all college personnel must present themselves consistent with their professional environment and practice, dressing appropriately and minimizing interruptions and/or multi-tasking.

**Time Management:** During the virtual site visit, time management will be an essential component of the success of the visit. All meetings should start and end at the scheduled times. Team members should closely monitor the virtual interview meeting time and make sure there is adequate time for questions, answers, and follow-up questions. Please do not extend the virtual meeting time, as others may need to connect to another meeting.
Pro-Tip: Each meeting should have at least a 15-minute buffer before the next scheduled meeting. This buffer will give peer reviewers and college staff time to decompress from interviews and meetings, as well as time to prepare for the next meeting, if one is scheduled. Try not to schedule more than three simultaneous meetings during the same block of time to allow for effective trouble-shooting in case it is needed.

3. Schedule for Virtual Visit

The virtual visits will include the same scheduling components as the on-site visits, per the Team Chair Training Manual and the Guide for Peer Review Team Members; however, team chairs and the college may exercise flexibility in the timing of the meeting schedule. For example, teams may include peer reviewers from the Pacific Islands, in which case time zones should be taken into consideration.

Colleges, team chairs, and team members make a commitment to setting aside the days and time required to effectively participate in the mandatory trainings and the peer review visit as specified in the ACCJC invitation letter for the peer review visit.

The team chair will communicate with the college and submit requests for interviews (preferably with more than one week’s notice). The college will develop the schedule of meetings in collaboration with the team chair. The schedule must indicate the dates, times, and virtual location (link) to meetings and interviews, as well as names and positions of expected attendees. The team chair will schedule time for the team to hold discussions on their findings and time to complete writing of the draft report. Consistent with on-site visits, interviews and meetings will not be recorded.

Please note the following protocols for the various types of meetings that occur:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Meeting</th>
<th>Responsible Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews between team members and college representatives or groups</td>
<td>The college will determine the virtual location and provide links.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews between team members and district personnel</td>
<td>The district will determine the virtual location and provide links.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome Greetings, Open Forums, Exit Report</td>
<td>The college will determine the virtual location and provide links.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Meetings (for team members only)</td>
<td>The team chair will set up virtual location and provide links.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following guidelines provide additional parameters for various types of meetings during the virtual visit:
A. **Welcome Greetings** - The team chair and college president should discuss the most effective way to kick-off the virtual visit. This can be done via videoconference call, an introductory video, or email announcement. The purpose of the kick-off is to acknowledge that the visit has begun and to set a collegial tone for the visit; to acknowledge the members of the peer review team and purpose of the comprehensive visit; and to provide recognition of the effort the college has made in developing the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report and preparing for the visit.

B. **Interviews** - The team chair will provide the college with requested interviews and topics to be discussed. When sending requests for evidence or interviews, it is helpful to communicate the topic of discussion with the college; include the specific standard and questions the team member is seeking to understand or trying to validate. This helps the college come prepared for the meetings and alleviates potential anxiety concerning the request.

The college shall schedule interviews and provide names and position titles of institutional representatives who will attend. The college shall provide the virtual meeting location. Interviews and other institutional meetings with the team will not be recorded. Consider fewer persons in interview meetings when possible for a more engaged interaction.

*Pro-Tip:* When scheduling meetings for team members, establish ‘passing times’ or 10-15 minute breaks between meetings. Also check your virtual platform on the maximum number of meetings that can be hosted under one account to avoid accidental meeting drops.

C. **Team Meetings** - The team chair shall schedule blocks of time for team discussions, in addition to collective time when team members are working on the report and available to ask questions, seek clarification, and answer questions from their team colleagues. Team meetings should occur during regular working hours (noting different time zones) to ensure team members can fully participate. The team chair shall provide the virtual meeting location. Team meetings will not be recorded.

*Pro-Tip:* Team meetings should not exceed 90-minute periods for continuous discussion. Consider shorter, more frequent and focused meetings to effectively discuss pertinent issues. Also, establish norms for your meetings to ensure each team member has adequate time to share their thoughts. If meetings occur during typical eating times, provide time for team members to prepare their meals.

D. **Open Forums** - The college shall schedule two virtual open forums during the visit, and will provide the virtual location. The forums shall be widely communicated to the college community noting that this is the opportunity for
members of the college community to share their perspectives with the team on the college’s efforts to meet Accreditation Standards.

The team chair shall be present, along with available team members. The team chair may make a few opening remarks on the accreditation process and purpose of the open forum, and will solicit audience comments. The open forums will not be recorded.

The college president, senior staff such as vice presidents, and board members must not attend in order to foster a more open environment for comments from those who may not have had prior opportunity to meet with the visiting team.

Pro-Tips: The team chair and college president must discuss planning for the Open Forum and implement the following measures for an effective meeting:

- Require a security password for admittance into the meeting;
- Require pre-registration for the open forum to enable stronger security measures and to provide notice to the team chair on the number of persons anticipated to attend to effectively manage the meeting. If pre-registration is not possible, the chair must be flexible in extending the time to speak to accommodate participants;
- Decide who will assist with any technical difficulties, and make their contact information available for attendees, and the team;
- Ensure that notifications for the open forum make clear that it is a public forum, everyone from the college community, including students, is welcome;
- Disable chat function so that the team members can focus on listening to the audience members who choose to share their thoughts;
- Establish norms for the participants, for example, raising a virtual hand to ask questions; participants audio should be on mute until called upon;
- If the anticipated number of attendees exceeds the registration limit, add an additional open forum and advertise it widely;
- Decide in advance how the team chair will field questions;
- Team members who participate as listeners need to be present (video on) and stay until the advertised end time of the open forum;
- Consider using the poll function (if large group of attendees) to determine how many participants are faculty, staff, students, community members.

E. Exit Report - The college shall schedule the Exit Report on the last day of the virtual visit in consultation with the team chair. The college shall provide the virtual location and notify the campus community. The Exit Report provides the
opportunity for the team chair to highlight the team’s general findings from the visit. It is not a two-way communication. This meeting will not be recorded and the college must ensure security measures are in place. All team members are required to be present, with cameras on and audio muted, during the Exit Report.

_Pro-Tip:_ The college may wish to use the webinar set-up in Zoom (if available), since this platform enables only the selected panelists (e.g. team chair and team members) to be seen and heard. Please note if you use another platform, you must disable the audio and video function for all participants and viewers, as well as chat and Q&A functions.

### 4. Team Chair Preparation for Virtual Peer Review Visit

The role of the team chair as the leader of the peer review team, representative of ACCJC, and author of the Peer Review Team Report remains unchanged. The process for conducting the visit effectively in the virtual platform will rely heavily upon the team chair’s ability to organize the team in advance of the visit, deliver engaged communications, establish a sense of ‘togetherness’ with the team, and set clear expectations and milestones leading up to the visit and throughout the visit period. The team chair must consider how to use technology effectively to foster a collegial visit and ensure meaningful team deliberations, in addition to planning for and accomplishing a shared and collaborative writing process.

**A. Pre-visit Conference Call** - The team chair and college president, with the ACCJC staff liaison, must set aside some time during the pre-visit meeting to discuss coordination of team logistics and virtual platform preparations. This pre-visit meeting should include a recommendation from the team chair that the college consider technical support for the ALO, and a reminder that communications between the college and team should be streamlined between the president/ALO and the team chair and their team assistant. This pre-visit conference call is also an opportunity to review the protocols for virtual visits, including how to conduct the welcome component of the visit, the organization of the open forums, and expectations for the Exit Report.

**B. Timeline** - The team chair should rely on the _Team Chair Manual_ and resources provided during Team Chair Training and Team Training to ensure the team is organized and prepared to conduct its review of the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report and complete the assignments on time.

Conducting an effective virtual visit will require efficient and effective use of time during meetings. This calls for the team chair to set a schedule early, clearly share expectations in advance of the Team Training, and communicate with the team on goals leading up to the visit. All virtual meetings conducted as part of the review process must be structured, organized, led by the team
chair or a team member, and well-run to ensure the participants’ time is properly spent on the appropriate topic and Standards.

C. Role of the Team Assistant - The team assistant working with the team chair is responsible for coordinating and creating virtual team meetings. The team assistant and team chair should decide on the writing process and collaborative space to house visit-related documents, such as additional evidence, and a collaborative writing space for collating the Team Report, such as Google docs, Dropbox, or Canvas. The team assistant should work with team members in advance of Team Training to ensure they can access such platforms.

D. Team Communications and Assignments - It is critical that the team chair schedule milestones so that the team is able to:

(a) delineate the Standards that are clearly met based on its analysis of the ISER and evidence provided by the college;
(b) identify those areas where further clarification is needed through interviews or additional evidence; and
(c) gain a preliminary sense of potential recommendations and/or commendations pending clarifications.

To that end, the team chair should:

1) Emphasize to the team the necessity of having a draft report that is built upon the framework of Assignment 2 and based on the ISER before the visit so that virtual interviews and virtual team meetings are focused conversations and deliberations.
2) Send a welcoming communication to the team as soon as ACCJC provides the team roster.
3) Send a communication to the team immediately following Chair Training.
   a. Include milestone dates for Assignment 1 and preparation for discussion at Team Training.
   b. Include assigned Standards and milestone dates for Assignment 2.
4) After Team Training, hold at least one virtual team meeting in advance of the visit (after Assignment 2 is completed) to continue to build team camaraderie and discuss initial findings. This will allow the team to practice the virtual meeting platform and to trouble-shoot any problems.

Pro-Tip: The team chair should be judicious in reviewing team member evidence and interview requests before sending them to the college’s ALO to ensure they are relevant to Accreditation Standards and necessary for clarifying what is in the ISER to determine whether Standards are met.

Pro-Tip: When sending requests for evidence or interviews, communicate the topic of discussion with the college; include the specific standard and the
questions the team member is seeking to understand or trying to validate. This helps the college come prepared for the meetings and alleviates potential anxiety concerning the request.

E. **Peer Review Team Report** - In advance of the visit, the team chair and team assistant should decide on a shared collaborative platform to collate and assemble the Peer Review Team Report, as well as a space for repository documents such as instructions, communications, schedules, and additional evidence the ALO may collect. Documents and written work should be backed up and downloaded regularly and consistently. After the team chair submits the completed draft report to ACCJC for the Commission’s review, all other draft documents and team work files must be permanently deleted.

F. **Planning for Multi-College Visit** - The chair of chairs should take an active role to plan and coordinate the district review process in collaboration with all team chairs in a multi-college visit. Advanced planning will help ensure a smooth process.

Prior to Team Training, the chair of chairs should schedule periodic conference calls with the team chairs to:

a. Discuss and delineate roles and responsibilities for the district review process;

b. Establish district review team members and assigned Standards;

c. Make clear the process for writing common district sections of the report and an internal review process for ensuring consistency;

d. Decide on the general schedule for district interviews and district team meetings, as well as a protocol for additional evidence requests.

Immediately following Team Training, the chair of chairs should coordinate a virtual meeting time for the district review team to hold preliminary discussion on findings in the ISER. In addition, the chair of chairs should communicate the schedule for the visit, including time set aside for district team discussions and for district team meetings amongst the chairs to reach consensus on any recommendations and commendations.

Per the virtual interview and meetings protocols, the college district should provide the interview virtual links and specify who will attend; the chair of chairs should establish the links for district team member meetings.
5. Team Member and College Representative Preparation for the Virtual Visit

Team Members - Team members must be committed to ensuring the integrity of the peer review process in the virtual format as specified in the invitation to serve on a virtual peer review visit, described in the Guide for Peer Review Team Members, and noted in this special guide for conducting virtual visits. Before the virtual visit and Team Training, peer reviewers should ensure they have technology in place to participate in the virtual team training, team meetings, and visit, and must attend the mandatory ACCJC training. During the visit, team members must be available and maintain an engaged presence, with audio and video camera on during interviews, team meetings, open forums, and the Exit Report, and be willing to contribute to the report through discussions and writing their assigned sections per the schedule set by the team chair.

College Representatives - College representatives must be committed to ensuring the integrity of the peer review process in the virtual format as specified in this special guide for conducting virtual visits. Before the virtual visit, college representatives should ensure they have technology in place to participate in interviews, requested meetings, open forums, and the Exit Report. During the visit, college representatives must be available and maintain an engaged presence with audio and video camera on during interviews.

6. Additional Items to Review

A. Distance Education - The team and college should follow the Distance Education protocol (See Appendix B). Prior to the visit, the college should provide the team access to a random selection of fully online distance education courses to observe. This sample should constitute 5% (not to exceed a maximum of 50) of the total number of distance education sections that were offered during the semester immediately preceding the semester of the visit. The team will review the selection per the protocol, federal regulations checklist, and the Accreditation Standards.

B. Correspondence Education - The team is not required to address correspondence education IF courses were moved to this modality due to the pandemic. The team should review regular offerings of correspondence education per the federal regulations checklist and the Accreditation Standards.

C. Off Campus Sites - Through team interviews and review of evidence in the ISER, the team must confirm whether the college provides equitable services at off-campus sites and provides adequate oversight. Per the statutory and regulatory requirements, ACCJC will need to conduct a future physical onsite visit.
D. Record of Student Complaints - Through team interviews and review of evidence in the ISER, the team must confirm whether the college’s student complaint files demonstrate accurate implementation of the complaint policies and procedures, as well as identify whether the files may be indicative of the college’s noncompliance with any Accreditation Standards as noted in the Federal Regulations Checklist. If the college does not maintain electronic complaint files, the college must pull a sample and convert them to pdf and send to the team chair.

7. Conclusion

ACCJC is committed to academic quality and supporting the team chairs, team members, and the college to ensure an effective peer review process. While ACCJC recognizes that the format for conducting the virtual visit is different than an on-site visit, ACCJC is dedicated to upholding high standards and the integrity of the peer review process for the benefit of its members and students.

If you have any concerns or questions, or suggestions to improve this process in the future, please contact the college’s assigned staff liaison.
Appendix A: Virtual Team Chair and Team Training Preparation

Before the Virtual Team Chair and Team Training:
Please perform the below task at least 3 days before the training/visit. It is required to use a computer to access/participate in ACCJC Zoom trainings; cell phones are not an adequate form of participation.

- Check your internet bandwidth using an online speed test, by going to these websites: Bandwidth Place, nperf, comparitech, and speedtest. Note that these results are not 100% accurate. However, they will help you predict your online virtual experience.
- While bandwidth plays a major role in your overall virtual or network experience, the health of your computer is important too. Please make sure you are not running, processing, or using memory-intensive applications at the same time as your virtual training/visit.
- Make sure your Zoom software is up-to-date: Zoom provides a pop-up notification when there is a new mandatory or optional update within 24 hours of logging in.
- To check for updates.
  1. Sign in to Zoom desktop client
  2. Click your profile picture/initials at the top right corner of the Zoom program. In the drop down menu, click Check for Updates. If there is a newer version, Zoom will download and install it.
- Test your speakers, microphone, and camera in advance of your virtual Zoom session using the following link (http://zoom.us/test). This video outlines how to configure Zoom audio and video to enable the best training/visit experience.

For Team Members - ACCJC Virtual Training Guidelines:

- Confirm that you are logged into Zoom with the same email address that is on the ACCJC team roster. For the Team Training, we will be creating preassigned virtual breakout rooms using the email address on the team roster.
- Join trainings early with required downloads installed and tested.
- Be flexible and understanding of technological glitches.
- Choose a location that allows for your full participation.
- Attendees must be on camera (video on) in an environment that is free from auditory or visual distractions in order to foster effective learning and interaction.
Appendix B: Distance Education Protocol

In line with ACCJC’s commitment to academic quality and continuous improvement, the review of Distance Education courses will follow the provisions outlined below. “Section 3 Consideration for Recommendations” includes questions related to the effects of the pandemic that peer review teams should take into consideration as part of their deliberations concerning any recommendations. These questions will provide peer review teams a broader context of the college’s planning efforts and current situation and inform the team’s review of the college’s alignment with federal regulations and Standards concerning distance education.

1. Preparation for Comprehensive or Follow-up Peer Review Visit

   • The college should inform distance education faculty that the peer review team will “observe” a randomly selected cadre of distance education classes from the semester prior to the team visit.

   • The college should work with the team chair to provide a random sample of fully online distance education courses to observe. This sample should constitute 5% (not to exceed a maximum of 50) of the total number of distance education sections that were offered during the semester immediately preceding the semester of the visit.

   • The college will provide peer reviewers with access to archived distance education classes from the semester immediately preceding the semester of the visit, affording them the opportunity to observe “regular and substantive” interaction through a full semester, quarter, or shortened term. Review of archived classes also ensures that the reviewers’ presence in the online class will not interfere with instruction or course design.

   • The college should inform the peer review team of instructions for access to the randomly selected classes.

   • In accordance with the Commission Policy on Public Disclosure and Confidentiality in the Accreditation Process, the college should expect that the peer review team will maintain confidentiality of student and instructor information.

2. Guidelines for Peer Reviewers

   • The team chair will appoint one or two team members to observe distance education classes.

   • Peer reviewers should conduct their review of the random selection of courses provided by the college as part of their review of the ISER and evidence prior to the visit.
• Peer reviewers should evaluate the courses using the institution’s own definitions and expectations for regular and substantive interaction.

• Considering the sensitive nature of such observations and acting in accordance with the Commission Policy on Public Disclosure and Confidentiality in the Accreditation Process, the peer reviewers will maintain confidentiality throughout the observations and report writing.

• Peer reviewers should triangulate their findings by confirming their observations through interviews with faculty and students who participate in distance education, and with managers or administrators who oversee distance education, and by using those interviews to uncover the root of deficiencies that they may have found in their observations.

• In keeping with federal policy § 602.17(g), peer reviewers should be able to ensure that effective student verification processes are being employed; that student privacy is protected; and that, if there are any additional charges for these service, the college has written policies that students will be notified of such charges at the time of registration or enrollment.

3. Considerations for Recommendations

Determining if a recommendation is necessary, and the type of recommendation, compliance or improvement, should be based on the careful consideration of several factors. For example, if less than half of the distance education classes observed demonstrated evidence of regular and substantive interaction, the team should explore through its interviews with members of the college community, including faculty, students, and administrators, and review of all evidence, the issues pertaining to the low percentage, before deciding if a recommendation is necessary and the type of recommendation.

The team should also take into consideration the pandemic context in which many courses were transitioned to the distance education modality. Considering the following question will help the team understand how the college has responded to this transition, and their plans for ensuring all distance education courses meet the same academic and professional standards as courses taught in this modality prior to the pandemic.

• How did the college plan for transitioning courses into the distance education modality as a result of the pandemic, and what ongoing plans does the college have for sustaining this transition?

• What professional development has been made available to ensure faculty are aware of policies and procedures related to distance education including understanding of the college’s definition of regular and substantive interaction?
• What provisions does the college have in place to ensure all distance education courses meet academic and professional standards?

• How does the college validate that regular and substantive interaction, as per the college’s definition is being consistently implemented in all distance education courses?

• How has the college made available or expanded student support services to serve the needs of significantly greater distance education students?

• Of those courses transitioned to the distance education modality as a result of the pandemic, what percentage does the college anticipate will remain in this modality once the pandemic is over?

Understanding the broader context of the college’s planning efforts and current situation regarding distance education courses will help the team carefully and thoughtfully document any challenges or issues in its findings, as well as write recommendations appropriate to the severity of the deficiencies.

In considering recommendations, the team will want to clearly identify the Standards in which the institution is deficient or needs to improve. Moreover, the team should ensure that in the discussion of the findings for those Standards, the deficiency in distance education is specifically identified in the Team Report.

In the final Team Report, the team must also ensure that its responses to the checklist questions pertaining to the Policy on Distance Education and on Correspondence Education are consistent with its findings and recommendations in the body of the report.