

EXIT SESSION PROTOCOL FOR COMMISSION VISITS: COMMISSION PROCEDURE

Peer review teams may conduct an exit session at the conclusion of a Higher Learning Commission campus visit. An exit session is an opportunity for the peer review team to thank the institution for its efforts and to share with the institution the team's initial observations about strengths and concerns, as well as information about next steps in the review and decision processes. The peer review process itself extends beyond the time when the team is physically on the campus; after the visit itself is complete, the peer review team continues its work to draft a report via conference calls and email exchanges and often consults with Commission staff. Although rare, a team may ask an institution after the visit is completed (but before submitting its final report) for clarifying information. Because institutions of higher education are complex systems, the process of peer review must be afforded adequate time. Although some peer review teams in the past have been able to provide their recommendation(s) prior to leaving campus, the pace of change in higher education has necessitated a corresponding increase in the attention required, and time needed to conduct, a thorough review. Consequently, teams do not indicate their recommendations or speculate on their recommendations during the exit session because at the conclusion of the site visit, the team's work is not yet complete.

Exit sessions are typically private meetings with the institution's president or senior leadership team. With appropriate notice to the team chair, an institution's leadership may designate the exit session as public if necessary to satisfy institutional mandates or as required by applicable laws, but all in attendance should clearly understand that any comments provided are

unofficial, limited in scope, and do not include the final recommendation of the team. In either case, the Commission's protocols govern the exit session in order to avoid misunderstandings that may arise before the team has completed its work and has articulated a rationale for its recommendation. The team chair may elect to read from a statement prepared by the team, but the team will not invite or respond to questions during the exit session. No written materials will be provided to the institution as part of the exit session and no audio or video recordings of the exit session are permitted to be made. Because the session is not a publicity event, the media should not be expressly invited; however, they may be in attendance to observe an open meeting as defined and permitted by law. In cases involving issues of a highly sensitive nature, the team chair may advise the institution's leadership to host the exit session in a private rather than public fashion. In rare cases with good cause, the team may forego the exit session altogether.

After the team members depart the campus, they continue their review work and spend a great deal of time individually and collectively synthesizing their observations; the eventual result is a final team report, but there are several steps that occur prior to the dissemination of the final team report. Those include a review by the Commission staff followed by an opportunity for the institution to review a draft report to identify errors of fact. The team retains full purview to accept or decline any corrections provided by the institution in reviewing the draft report, and the team retains full ability to revise this draft report, including the draft recommendation. Thus, the final team report may look substantially different than

the draft report both in terms of the text of the report as well as the team's recommendation. Following this stage, the Commission sends the institution the final team report and explains subsequent steps in the decision process, which include an opportunity to provide an institutional response that may contest facts and a second layer of peer-review designed to ensure thoroughness, fairness, and due process. More information about the decision process is available in other documentation from the Commission.

It is important to realize that the final team report itself is not official Commission action. Final action occurs only after the appropriate decision process has concluded and when the Commission issues to the institution its official action letter. The decision process and final action may take several months after the visit depending on the scheduling of events within this stage. The additional review(s) provided in the decision process are not "rubber stamps" and include the possibility of an amended or changed recommendation. To avoid misunderstanding or disappointment, institutions should refrain from publicly disclosing the team's exit session oral comments or recommendation as found in any version of the team report until after final Commission action has taken place; any press releases from the institution should be particularly sensitive to this aspect. Both the team chair and institutional leadership should ensure that all matters surrounding the exit session are discussed no later than the start of the visit so that all parties may prepare appropriately.