



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT

September 20, 2017

Dr. Belle S. Wheelan

President

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges

1866 Southern Lane

Decatur, GA 30033-4097

Dear Dr. Wheelan,

I am writing to inform you of my decision on the renewal of recognition of The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges (SACS COC). U.S. Department of Education (Department) staff and the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) have each made recommendations to me. These recommendations were made under Sections 114 and 496 of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, and pursuant to relevant statutory and regulatory provisions.

The Department staff concluded that SACS COC was out of compliance on three criteria at the time of their formal recommendation. The Department staff recommended that I grant continued recognition, but require the agency to come into compliance within 12 months on each of those criteria. After discussion of those staff findings, the NACIQI voted to recommend that I renew the agency's recognition for a period of five years without condition. I have reviewed the record thoroughly, noting both the Department staff's rationale for their compliance findings and the deliberations by the NACIQI members at the meeting that led to the NACIQI's recommendation to approve renewal notwithstanding those findings.

I acknowledge the concerns of the staff, but believe SACS COC has sufficiently satisfied the requirements of 34 C.F.R. §602.15(a)(2) (Competency of Representatives) and 34 C.F.R. §602.22(a)(1) (Approval of Substantive Changes).

However, I am concerned that SACS COC could not resolve the staff findings related to 34 C.F.R. §602.15(a)(6) (Conflicts of Interest) prior to the final staff report. Demonstrating adherence to these important regulatory requirements for conflicts is essential even if SACS COC can quickly resolve the issues identified in the associated staff findings. Despite the NACIQI's recommendation for simple renewal of recognition, I concur with staff's determination that SACS COC had not demonstrated compliance with §602.15(a)(6) at the time of assessment. While SACS COC outlines clear conflicts of

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interest policies, the record did not evidence its effective application of those policies, specifically for the agency's appeals committee members and site evaluators.

I trust that SACS COC will take steps to resolve the staff findings associated with §602.15(a)(6) if it has not already, but require the agency to come into compliance within 12 months of this letter and submit a compliance report no later than 30 days following the 12-month period.

Please convey my best wishes to the members of SACS COC. We do appreciate the work that SACS COC does to improve the quality and success of U.S. postsecondary education.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Holly L. Ham". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "H".

Holly L. Ham
Assistant Secretary
Office of Management