

MEMORANDUM

DATE: July 26, 2021

SUBJECT: **COVID-19 Update: ACOE Resumption of On-Site Evaluation Visits and Guidance for Follow-up Visits**

TO: Deans and Presidents of Schools and Colleges of Optometry; Directors of Optometric Residencies; Supervisors of Optometric Residencies; Directors of Optometric Technician Programs, ACOE Consultants, AOA BOT, ED, COO, CFO, and GC; any interested party

FROM: Stephanie S. Messner, O.D., ACOE Chair

DIST: ACOE, Ms. Puljak, Ms. Wirth, Ms. Mohr, Ms. Wynn, Ms. Martin

The purpose of this memorandum is to apprise programs of the Accreditation Council on Optometric Education's (ACOE's) plans regarding resumption of on-site visits, including those in follow-up to virtual visits, as required by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE).

The Council continues to be impressed by the resilience displayed by optometric education programs since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and recognizes the unprecedented levels of creativity and flexibility displayed in order to ensure the quality of educational offerings remained high.

The ACOE also appreciates programs' flexibility with respect to meeting accreditation-related requirements. Initially, the ACOE deferred on-site evaluation visits by extending accreditation terms by one year for all accredited programs in good standing and completing virtual site visits in lieu of an on-sites in select cases, both allowable under the COVID-19-related flexibilities afforded by the USDE. As the pandemic persisted, the ACOE determined the need to proceed with more virtual visits, with priority given to programs pursuing initial accreditation. To date, 32 virtual visits have been completed, four with professional optometric degree programs and 28 with optometric residency programs (22 seeking initial accreditation and 6 seeking reaccreditation). Feedback from the virtual visits has been overwhelmingly positive and indicates a high level of confidence in the integrity of accreditation decisions following the virtual visits. The Council is appreciative of the collective flexibility displayed by both program representatives and evaluation team members. As pandemic-related restrictions ease, the Council has evaluated its outlook for the resumption of on-site visits. The following Q&A has been prepared to provide programs clarity on expectations.

When will on-site visits resume?

On-site visits are anticipated to resume in September 2021. If your program's accreditation evaluation visit is scheduled for September 2021 or later, you can anticipate an on-site visit. The ACOE continues to monitor the progression of the pandemic and if the situation warrants adjustments to this plan, the ACOE will coordinate directly with the affected programs.

The ACOE is committed to implementing efficiencies that ease administrative burden; our ability to utilize technology-based solutions for document sharing and collaboration during virtual site visits was successful and the ACOE plans to continue the 'paperless' approach to on-site visits.

What precautions will be taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 with the resumption of on-site visits?

Evaluation visitors volunteering to serve for the ACOE are not required to be vaccinated for the COVID-19 virus. That said, by agreeing to participate in an on-site visit on the ACOE's behalf, volunteers are attesting to either having been fully vaccinated or agreeing to comply with mask wearing and social distancing practices throughout the visit. ACOE staff will coordinate with programs to assure site visitors are aware of and comply with any state, local, or institutional requirements.

What if my program is uncomfortable with an on-site visit? Do I have options?

The USDE flexibilities extend through 180 days past the end of the federal disaster declaration. Until the flexibilities end, the ACOE has the ability to conduct a site visit virtually. Please be reminded, every virtual site visit associated with an accreditation decision must be followed with an on-site visit at a later date. Feel free to discuss any concerns you may have with a member of the ACOE staff.

My program participated in a virtual visit. What can I expect regarding the follow-up visit?

If your program underwent a virtual visit, an on-site follow-up visit will be scheduled. The ACOE affirms the validity of the virtual visit conducted and expresses confidence in the accreditation decision that resulted from that virtual visit. The follow-on visit is not considered a separate evaluation visit distinct from the virtual visit; it is the completion of the site visit process and ensures the ACOE remains in compliance with its statutory obligations as a USDE recognized accrediting agency.

The ACOE recognizes the considerable level of effort programs expended preparing for and hosting virtual visits. The requirements associated with the follow-up visits will be significantly less. A high-level overview of expectations for the follow-up visits is provided below:

For optometric residency programs

- Evaluation team
 - Two O.D.s (same as for virtual, if feasible)
 - Same Council member will serve as liaison
- Documentation requirements
 - Abbreviated update due one month prior to scheduled follow-up visit
 - Brief, no more than two pages, summary of key activities/updates since last submission to Council (e.g., Annual Report)
 - Template to be provided
- General Agenda (anticipated duration – up to one day)
 - Opening
 - Interview with Coordinator
 - Interview with Residency Director (can be virtual)
 - Interview with Resident (can be virtual if a former resident)
 - Tour of the facility
 - Closing
- Scheduling
 - Most follow-up visits slated to be conducted between November 2021 – January 2022
 - Some may be scheduled as late as June 2022

For professional optometric degree programs

- Evaluation team

Visit the ACOE web site at www.theacoe.org.

- Two team members (same as for virtual, if feasible)
- An ACOE staff member
- Documentation requirements
 - Abbreviated update due one month prior to scheduled follow-up visit
 - Brief, no more than four pages, summary of key activities/updates since last submission to Council (e.g., Annual Report)
 - Template to be provided
- General Agenda (anticipated duration one-two days)
 - Opening
 - Interview with Dean/CEO
 - Open meeting with Faculty (no administrators present)
 - Open meeting with Students (no administrators or faculty members present)
 - Tour of the facility
 - Other meetings may be requested based on open meetings, documentation review
 - Closing
- Scheduling
 - Targeting March/April 2022 or September/October 2022

A member of the ACOE staff will be reaching out to you regarding planning for your program's follow-up visit. If during the Council's review of your program's evaluation report specific topics/requests were made for inclusion during the follow-up visit, the ACOE staff member will communicate those to you during the planning process.

If my program received recommendations or suggestions following the virtual visit, should I expect to address them during the follow-up visit?

In general, no.

The Council does not normally expect follow-up from programs related to suggestions. Suggestions are provided as a means to communicate areas where improvements would substantially enhance the potential for excellence

With regard to recommendations, the Council's typical process in cases where recommendations have been issued is to rely on programs to submit a Progress Report for review and consideration by Council in an upcoming meeting. The Council does not intend for the follow-up visits to disrupt that flow and as a result, programs are not required to provide updates on outstanding recommendations as part of the scope of the follow-up visit.

Are virtual visits to externship sites still allowed in lieu of in-person visits under ACOE Professional Optometric Degree Program Standard 2.10.2.1?

Per guidance issued by the ACOE on February 26, 2021 and posted on its website, www.theacoe.org, the allowance for use of virtual visits was extended to align with updated guidance issued by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE). On December 11, 2020, the USDE updated guidance for the timeframe for its flexibilities to be duration of the national emergency declaration and 180 days following the date on which the COVID-19 national emergency declaration is rescinded.

What if I have more questions?

If you have additional questions, feel free to contact an ACOE staff member: Stephanie Puljak, ACOE Director, at spuljak@aoa.org regarding professional optometric degree programs or Kim Mohr, Manager, Residency Programs, at kmohr@aoa.org, regarding optometric residency programs.

Visit the ACOE web site at www.theacoe.org.