

SECTION II

Student Complaints Regarding Degree-Granting Higher Education Institutions Approved by the Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) and the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner (OPC) to Provide Online Courses and Programs as Part of the Rhode Island State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (RI-SARA)

Rhode Island has been accepted as part of the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (NC-SARA) through the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE).

The State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA) is an agreement among member states, D.C., and territories that establishes comparable national standards for interstate offerings of postsecondary distance education courses and programs. It is intended to make it easier for students to take online courses offered by postsecondary institutions based in another state. SARA is overseen by the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) and administered by four regional education compacts, with the NEBHE being the regional entity for Rhode Island.

The Rhode Island Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) and the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner (OPC) are the Rhode Island portal agencies for NC-SARA and have the authority and responsibility to resolve student and other complaints about Rhode Island's SARA approved institutions.

Complaint Resolution

Absent applicable law or policy establishing another remedy, the first step in resolving student or other complaints or grievances is to attempt to resolve the matter directly with the administration of the involved institution under established institution complaint or grievance procedures. Every Rhode Island institution (non-profit private, for-profit, and public) is required to establish, publish, and enforce policies related to redress of complaints and grievances as part of their RI-SARA approved distance learning programs. With limited exceptions, any Rhode Island in-state or out-of-state student or other person who contacts the OPC regarding complaints about RI-SARA institutions will be referred to the specific RI-SARA college or university official(s) responsible for resolving those matters.

In the event that the institutional processes do not result in a successful resolution of a RI-SARA complaint, OPC is responsible for final resolution of any such complaints originating at any RI-SARA participant institution, public or private.

Conversely, if a Rhode Island resident attends a distance education program at a NC-SARA institution in *another state*, s/he will need to begin the grievance process at that institution. In the event that institutional processes do not result in a successful resolution of the complaint, *the NC-SARA portal agency of that state is responsible for final resolution of the complaint in accordance with their state student complaint procedures and regulations.*

With the exception of reporting fraud, waste, or abuse, the OPC does not review anonymous complaints or matters that are or have been in litigation, and does not conduct a judicial investigation or evidentiary hearing. The OPC may conduct a paper review, discuss the matter with the parties, and take other steps as may be appropriate in an attempt to resolve the complaint.

NC-SARA policies and standards, including those for consumer protection and the resolution of complaints, apply to interstate distance education offered by participating NC-SARA institutions to students in other NC-SARA states. *Complaints about a RI-SARA institution's operations are to be resolved under the RI-SARA provisions.*

In addition to dealing with alleged fraudulent activity, the OPC has consumer protection authority among RI-SARA institutions and authorizes OPC to investigate and resolve complaints that an RI-SARA institution is operating a course or program contrary to practices set forth in the *Interregional Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education* when a program or course of study operates in such a way that a student is harmed. Examples of issues that may arise in regard to alleged fraudulent activity or more general complaints include, but are not limited to:

- a. Veracity of recruitment and marketing materials;
- b. Accuracy of job placement data;
- c. Accuracy of information about tuition, fees, and financial aid;
- d. Complete and accurate admission requirements for courses and programs;
- e. Accuracy of information about the institution's accreditation and/or any programmatic/specialized accreditation held by the institution's programs;
- f. Accuracy of information about whether course work meets any relevant professional licensing requirements or the requirements of specialized accrediting bodies;

- g. Accuracy of information about whether the institution's course work will transfer to other institutions; and
- h. Operation of distance education programs consistent with practices expected by institutional accreditors (and, if applicable, programmatic/specialized accreditors) and/or *the Interregional Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education*.

Complaint Resolution Processes

- a. Complaints against an institution operating under RI-SARA are first processed through the institution's own procedures for resolution of grievances. Institutions operating under RI-SARA are required to make their and RI-SARA's complaint resolution policies and procedures readily available to students taking courses under the institution's RI-SARA provisions.
- b. Complaints regarding student grades, examination results, and/or student conduct violations are governed entirely by the institution's policy and are therefore not subject to resolution through RI-SARA procedures.
- c. If a person bringing a complaint is not satisfied with the outcome of the institutional process for handling complaints, the complaint (except for complaints about grades or student conduct violations) may be appealed, within two years of the incident about which the complaint is made, to the Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner (OPC). The resolution of the complaint by the OPC, through its RI-SARA complaint resolution process, will be final.

For submission of a complaint relating to a Rhode Island-based institution participating in the RI-SARA, please contact:

- Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner
560 Jefferson Blvd.
Warwick, Rhode Island 02886-1304
Phone: 401-736-1100
- or online at www.riopc.edu.

After receiving a complaint through our complaint form, the OPC will review the submitted materials and contact the submitter for any required additional information or clarifications. The OPC will then send a copy of the complaint to the RI-SARA institution against which the complaint has been filed and ask for a response within three weeks.

After receiving the college or university's response, the OPC will determine whether the institution's student complaint process has been followed and exhausted and what additional steps or follow-up may be taken. The OPC will inform both parties involved in the complaint.

Students or other individuals with complaints involving an allegation of criminal activity will be referred to their campus police department, their local police department, or the Rhode Island State Police.

If you have additional questions about the complaint process, or want to clarify that your individual complaint is reviewable by the OPC, please feel free to contact the main office at (401) 736-1100 or online at www.riopc.edu.