

DEAC Statement on Aspen University

September 21, 2022

The Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC) continues to monitor the operations and regulatory status of Aspen University (Aspen). Recent actions taken by the Arizona State Board of Private Post-Secondary Education (AZBPPSE) and the September 8, 2022 decision by the Arizona SARA Council to delay consideration of Aspen's application to participate in SARA have curtailed Aspen's ability to offer educational programs in states where it is not independently authorized by the state to do so. The Arizona SARA Council decision caused DEAC to immediately accelerate its efforts to protect the interests of Aspen students whose ability to complete programs with Aspen was jeopardized. As of September 20, 2022, approximately 798 Aspen students (approximately 9% of Aspen's student body) may need to complete their studies at a different institution through a teach out agreement or transfer-of-credit. However, DEAC expects that number to drop as individual states reach agreements with Aspen which will allow Aspen to teach out students in those programs.

The Arizona SARA Council and AZBPPSE actions occurred against a backdrop of ongoing performance challenges experienced by Aspen's BSN pre-nursing program. Those issues had resulted in the execution of a consent agreement between Aspen and the Arizona Board of Nursing (AZBON) and a separate stipulated agreement executed between Aspen and the AZBPPSE. Aspen had been working with an AZBON approved consultant to improve and strengthen its BSN pre-nursing program but despite the consultant's August 31, 2022 report indicating substantial progress being made, Aspen determined that it would be in the best interests of its students to cease enrollments in that program and implement a teach-out for remaining students. In conjunction with that decision, Aspen executed a new consent agreement with AZBON which provides Aspen with two years to teach out students already enrolled in the pre-nursing program subject to ongoing monitoring by AZBON. Aspen would then voluntarily surrender its AZBON provisional program approval. The new consent agreement supersedes the earlier consent agreement and is intended to embody a final disposition of the matter. It is not clear how the new AZBON consent agreement will affect the stipulated agreement previously executed with AZBPPSE.

Because of actions previously taken by DEAC, DEAC does not anticipate significant difficulties in connection with Aspen's teach-out of students currently enrolled in either of the two program components over the next two years. These students will have the benefit of the changes to the program Aspen has been implementing over the past 12 months. However, DEAC will continue to closely monitor the teach-out process.

Apart from the issues which arose in Arizona with the Aspen BSN pre-nursing program, DEAC has not seen evidence which would suggest that the quality of Aspen's other accredited programs or the ability of Aspen to effectively deliver those programs has been impaired or is in jeopardy. However, DEAC will continue to monitor the institution's educational offerings and operations, its financial status, and its state authorizations for compliance with DEAC accreditation standards. Although not directly affected by the loss of Aspen's SARA participation, Aspen's accreditation by DEAC would be immediately withdrawn should it lose AZBPPSE authorization.

"We take the developments at Aspen very seriously." said Dr. Leah Matthews, Executive Director of DEAC. "Our primary focus at this time is to support Aspen in a plan of action that is fair and responsive to Aspen students, while maintaining institutional accountability within the established state and national regulatory framework. More broadly, DEAC remains committed to working with applicable state authorizing and licensing entities to safeguard the integrity of educational programs offered by DEAC institutions and the interests of their students, the public, and associated stakeholders."

Students currently enrolled in Aspen programs who have been adversely affected by the institution's loss of its SARA status may contact DEAC with questions about teach out or transfer-of-credit opportunities at 202-234-5100 or info@deac.org.