



SARA Quick Start Guide

SARA Student Complaints

What is a SARA complaint? What are an institution's obligations regarding managing complaints?

What does the SARA Policy Manual Say?

According to **Section 1. Definitions** a "Complaint" means: a formal assertion in writing that a person, institution, state, agency, or other organization or entity operating under the provisions of the *SARA Policy Manual* has violated the policies set forth in the *SARA Policy Manual* or of laws, standards or regulations incorporated in the *SARA Policy Manual*.

See details in **Section 4. Consumer Protection**. Relevant provisions include:

- Only those complaints resulting from distance education courses, activities, and operations provided by SARA-participating institutions to students in other SARA states come under the coverage of SARA. Complaints about a SARA institution's in-state operations are to be resolved under the state's normal provisions, not those of SARA.
- Complaints against an institution operating under SARA policies go first through the institution's own procedures for resolution of grievances. Allegations of criminal offenses or alleged violations of a state's general-purpose laws may be made directly to the relevant state agencies.
- If a student 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 SARA Portal Entity in the home state of the institution against which the complaint has been lodged.
- **Examples** of issues that may arise in regard to alleged fraudulent activity, violations of SARA policies, or more general complaints about improper activities 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;

About SARA Quick Start Guides: When institutions participate in SARA, they agree to a set of compliance requirements as detailed in the [SARA Policy Manual](#). SARA Quick Start Guides are intended to help institution personnel understand a particular requirement to help them maintain compliance, communicate with colleagues regarding SARA requirements, and explain the requirement to students and other stakeholders. Institutions should always check for any state-specific requirements with their [SARA State Portal Entity](#).

- f. Accuracy of information about whether course work meets any relevant Professional Licensing requirements or the requirements of specialized Accrediting Agencies;
 - 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 C-RAC *Guidelines* for distance education.
- Please be advised per Section 4.4(a):

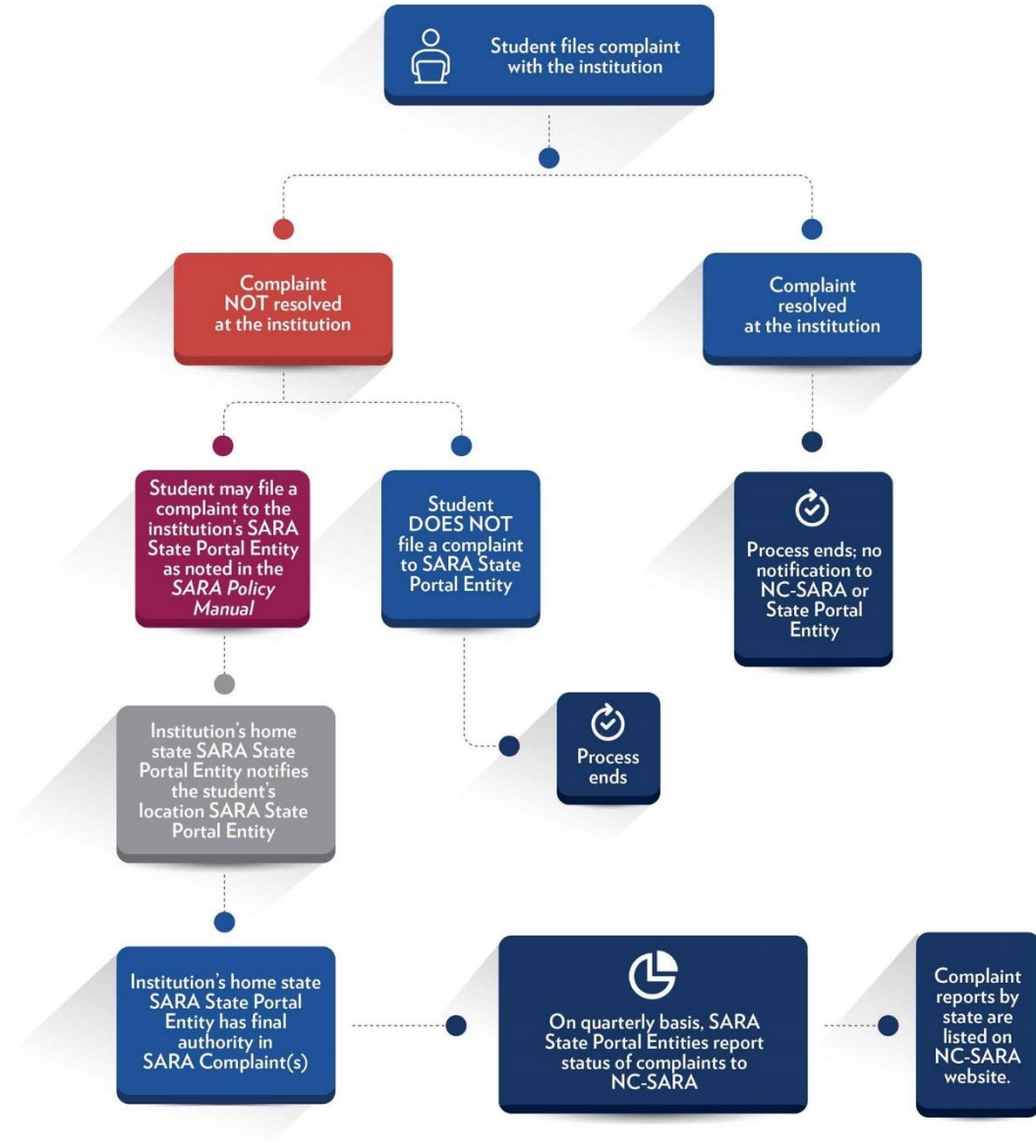
Effective through December 31, 2025: Institutions operating under SARA policies shall provide their and SARA's complaint resolution policies and procedures to all students taking courses under SARA policies.

Effective beginning January 1, 2026: Institutions operating under SARA policies shall provide their and SARA's complaint resolution policies and procedures to all students taking courses under SARA policies on the institution's website and in the institution's catalog or equivalent information provided either in print or electronically to students when they enroll.

Please see Section 4 of the [SARA Policy Manual](#) for more information about SARA-related complaints and participating institutions' responsibilities regarding managing complaints, including important Explanatory Notes.

Below is a graphic representation of the SARA Student Complaint Process.

SARA STUDENT COMPLAINT PROCESS



What is the rationale?

States have the authority to enforce their general-purpose laws against non-domestic, out-of-state institutions (including SARA-participating institutions) providing distance education in the state, including, but not limited to, those laws related to consumer protection and fraudulent activities. Student consumer protection is therefore a very important part of SARA. A student has the right to lodge a complaint or grievance. SARA consumer protection provisions require that if a student complaint is not resolved by the institution, the institution's home state, through its [SARA State Portal Entity](#), investigate and resolve allegations of dishonest or fraudulent activity by the state's SARA-participating institutions, including the provision of false or misleading information.

What does my institution need to do?

- Note that the institution must agree "to work with its Home State's SARA Portal Entity to resolve any complaints arising in SARA states, and to abide by the decisions of that entity regarding resolution of such complaints" on the Application and Approval Form for Institution Participation in SARA (Item 8).
- Establish (or maintain) and make available a complaint policy and process that addresses student consumer complaints. Provide the institution's and SARA's complaint resolution policies and procedures to all students taking courses under SARA policies. **Effective January 1, 2026**, institutions operating under SARA policies shall provide their and SARA's complaint resolution policies and procedures to all students taking courses under SARA policies **on the institution's website and in the institution's catalog or equivalent information provided either in print or electronically to students when they enroll.**
- Take initial responsibility for the investigation and resolution of SARA-related complaints from students.
- Cooperate with the [SARA State Portal Entity](#) (and any other responsible entities in the state) completely during any further consideration of SARA complaints.
- Communicate with the colleges, departments, and/or faculty at your institution about the institution's obligations regarding SARA-related complaints.
- Contact your state's [SARA State Portal Entity](#) for specific guidance or directions regarding this requirement.

Still Have Questions?

1. SARA State Portal Entities have the responsibility and authority to hold institutions in compliance with SARA policy. This information is intended to be general guidance for institutions; institutions should be in regular contact with their [SARA State Portal Entity](#) for specific requirements, directions, and guidance.
2. Feel free to email NC-SARA: info@nc-sara.org

Resources:

- [SARA Policy Manual](#) Section 4. Consumer Protection
- [SARA Student Complaints](#) information available under Students on the NC-SARA website.
- SARA Student Complaints information available under Research & Data on the NC-SARA website.
- SARA Student Consumer Protections Document on the NC-SARA website.
- [SARA Student Complaints Dashboard](#) information on the NC-SARA website.

Last updated 12.18.2024