

The "AAALAC International i-brief" (short for "Issue Brief"), is designed to help clarify specific elements of the accreditation process, and is published as a service to accredited institutions.

Feel free to distribute this i-brief to others at your organization.

The Exit Briefing:

Its purpose, what to expect, and how to respond

AAALAC International accreditation is a multi-step process that includes two major parts: a detailed, internal self-evaluation, and a thorough on-site assessment by a team of AAALAC experts. (See page 3 for a complete list of steps in the accreditation process.) A key component of the site visit is the "Exit Briefing" that occurs at the end of the visit. It is important to understand the role of the Exit Briefing and how it relates to the final accreditation report your institution will receive from AAALAC International's Council on Accreditation.

AAALAC has been conducting site visits and accrediting animal care and use programs since 1965, but the Exit Briefing was not introduced until 1989. Prior to this, the site visit team met with institutional representatives and toured the facility, gathered information from institutional representatives, reviewed paperwork, then they left—the institution was not provided with any immediate feedback. The Exit Briefing was first introduced on a trial basis to improve communication between institutions and the Council, and to provide a way to clarify potential questions or address misunderstandings of the site visit team. The addition of the Exit Briefing was so well received by participating institutions that the Council formally adopted it as part of the site visit process in 1990.

The Exit Briefing is designed to accomplish several important tasks:

- It provides the institution with the preliminary findings and impressions of the site visit team.
- It provides an opportunity for the institution to correct any misperceptions or provide clarification of the site visit team's preliminary findings.
- It allows the site visit team to explain the "Post Site Visit Communication" process to the institution.

It is important to note that the Exit Briefing represents the **preliminary collective opinions of the site visitors**, which are based on their interpretation of the standards used to evaluate animal care and use programs. These preliminary opinions may or may not reflect the final opinion of the Council on Accreditation. The AAALAC International accreditation process consists of multiple layers of peer review. Therefore, while the site visit team conducts a peer review of your institution, their report, in turn, undergoes a peer review by their colleagues on the Council. Occasionally,



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albeit infrequently, when the Council is discussing a site visit report during its deliberations, it may uncover a problem area that was not specifically noted during the Exit Briefing. A final report back to an institution may also include concerns that the site visit team simply did not have time to address during the Exit Briefing—if time is limited and there are a number of concerns, the site visit team may only have the opportunity to discuss the more significant issues. Typically the institutional representatives are aware that this is the case, and that the letter they will receive will contain more specific information.

So while the Exit Briefing is a useful communications “bridge” between the site visit and the final Council report, it should not be considered completely comprehensive or final—it is the preliminary view of the site visit team, which is subject to deliberation by the Council on Accreditation.**

(** See example box on page 3.)

Suggestions for Improvement vs. Mandatory Items

When the site visit team raises an area of concern during the Exit Briefing, they will do their best to give an opinion on whether the issue will likely be categorized as a “Suggestion for Improvement” (SFI) or a “Mandatory Item for Correction” in the final report from the Council. SFIs are feedback from the Council on ways your institution can improve its animal care and use program, and you can choose whether or not you wish to implement them. (For more detail, see AAALAC’s i-brief on Suggestions for Improvement at www.aaalac.org/publications/ibrief.cfm.) Mandatory Items are those that must be corrected before the Council can grant Full Accreditation. Occasionally, there will be a finding for which the site visit team will not provide an opinion on its likely categorization. In these cases, the site visit team will inform the institution that due to the complexity of the issue, they feel that it is more appropriate to let the peer review process and Council deliberations come to completion rather than providing an opinion at the time of the Exit Briefing.

Sometimes it’s not possible for the site visit team to provide a preliminary opinion on the accreditation outcome that will result from the site visit. For example, occasionally an observation made during the site visit is identified as a Mandatory Item for Correction, but the team cannot pre-determine if the Council will decide that the concern warrants Deferred Accreditation or

Probation. In some cases the outcome may depend heavily on the institution’s Post Site Visit Communication (see next section). Other times, the site visit team can indicate during the Exit Briefing whether the concern is likely to be viewed by Council as an SFI or a Mandatory Item, and what the likely outcome will be from the Council’s deliberations.

Post Site Visit Communication

As noted earlier, another function of the Exit Briefing is to provide an opportunity for the institution to correct any misperceptions or errors in the site visit team’s preliminary findings—either through discussions immediately after the Exit Briefing, or through “Post Site Visit Communication” (PSVC). PSVC is a formal letter written by the institution and submitted to AAALAC normally within 10 business days after the site visit. PSVC can be used to correct any misinterpretations made during the Exit Briefing, or to explain any immediate, corrective actions that the institution is taking to address the preliminary findings of the site visit team.

The PSVC provided to AAALAC must be signed by either the Institutional Official (IO) or the official “Unit Contact” who has been appointed to this position by the IO. Thus, when you send PSVC to AAALAC regarding corrective actions your institution plans to complete, be aware that this is viewed as a serious commitment to AAALAC. The Council will follow up to ensure that you have completed those actions. Also be aware that occasionally the Council may determine that an item that the site visit team viewed as a Mandatory Item for Correction is instead a Suggestion for Improvement. In such a case, no action would be required by the institution. This is why AAALAC emphasizes that programs should *not* expend large amounts of money or other resources until they receive their final letter from the Council.

It’s interesting to note that the number of institutions achieving Continued Full Accreditation has risen dramatically over the years—coinciding with the introduction of the Exit Briefing. Prior to 1990, approximately 35-40% of institutions participating in the accreditation program earned “Continued Full Accreditation” (which means that accreditation/reaccreditation is immediately granted and no additional actions are required). Today approximately 85% of institutions are awarded the Continued Full Accreditation distinction after their site visits. AAALAC believes that the Exit Briefing, and the ability for institutions to address concerns and take immediate corrective actions through Post Site Visit Communication, has played a large role in this increase.

Steps in the AAALAC International Accreditation Process

Complete an **application** (new applicants only).

Complete a **“Program Description.”** This is a detailed description of the animal care and use program. This is the “self-evaluation” phase of the process.

Submit the application and/or Program Description to the AAALAC office.

AAALAC assigns a site visit team, and a date for the visit is determined by the lead site visitor and the institution.

The **site visit** is conducted. A typical site visit includes:

- An **Entrance Briefing** during which time members from the institution meet with the site visit team to discuss the accreditation process and plan the visit.
- **Facility tour.**
- **Meeting with members of the institution’s IACUC/ACC/Ethics Committee** (typically during lunch).
- **Review of paperwork.**
- **Executive Session.** The site visit team meets alone to discuss their key observations and their preliminary findings/conclusions.
- **Exit Briefing.** The team shares its key findings and what they intend to recommend to the Council regarding accreditation status.

Opportunity for **Post Site Visit Communication** with the site visit team and AAALAC International.

The site visit team submits its **final report** to the Council on Accreditation.

Council meeting/deliberations. The institution’s report is considered during the first Council meeting that follows the site visit. Council meets three times a year, in January, May and September.

Accreditation status is determined and the institution is notified by letter of that status.

Summary

The Exit Briefing is an important part of the site visit that provides immediate feedback to the institution under review. Every effort is made to ensure that the Exit Briefing is an accurate projection of Council’s judgment. However, the institution must recognize that **the Exit Briefing represents a preliminary evaluation and is the independent opinion of the site visit team. The report back to the institution will reflect the collective judgement and vote of the Council on Accreditation.**

Issues that are raised during the Exit Briefing may not always appear in the final report from the Council—they may be addressed in Post Site Visit Communication, or the Council may disagree that they are of concern. On the other hand, items that are not addressed during the Exit Briefing may appear in the final report—they may be issues that come to light during the Council deliberations, they may be concerns that the site visit team simply did not have time to address during the Exit Briefing, or they may be items that result from the PSVC. Your institution should view the Exit Briefing as the site visit team’s initial impressions (which are subject to change), and as an opportunity to address any misperceptions or communicate how your institution is taking immediate corrective actions.

**For example, a Council member may state during the Exit Briefing that he or she is concerned about the use of commercial charcoal canisters for scavenging of waste anesthetic gases in the surgical suite (since active vacuum scavenging is more reliable). But the Council may determine during deliberations that the canisters were being utilized according to the manufacturer’s recommendations, and that they met the performance standard for scavenging of waste anesthetic gases.



The AAALAC i-brief is distributed to institutions currently accredited by AAALAC International. Issues are available at www.aaalac.org/publications/ibrief.cfm. Comments or suggestions for future AAALAC i-briefs are welcome.

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