Accreditation Overview

Highlands University is fully accredited by and in good standing with the Higher Learning Commission (HLC).

The Higher Learning Commission accredits approximately 1,000 colleges and universities that have a home base in one of 19 states that stretch from West Virginia to Arizona. HLC is a private, nonprofit regional accrediting agency.

HLC’s mission is to assure and advance the quality of higher learning. It is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. The institutions HLC accredits include public, private not-for-profit, and proprietary institutions at degree levels from the associate’s through the doctoral degree level and from small, specialized institutions through large research universities.

HLC Focused Visit: Overview

On July 9, 2018, Highlands University was formally removed from probationary status by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). The entire Highlands community worked together to address the areas of concern specified by the HLC that led to our probationary status. The university now has the opportunity to develop new programs and initiatives to guide us into a new and positive future.

However, in their final report removing the university from probation, the HLC did indicate three areas of continuing concern (see next page). In order to address these three areas of concern, the university will host an HLC Focused Visit on March 30-31, 2020. A Focused Visit basically consists of a small team of peer reviewers who will visit Highlands to determine whether the university has fully and appropriately addressed those three areas of concern. Along with hosting the Focused Visit, the university will be expected to produce an evidence report demonstrating that we have addressed each of the three areas of concern.

It is critical that the university successfully demonstrates compliance with HLC expectations during this Focused Visit. The HLC visiting committee that recommended that HU be taken off probation noted in their concluding remarks: “The Team is recommending that the many remarkable efforts that went into improvements on so many levels should now be focused on the demonstration and clear evidence of improvement on these three areas that are critical to the future of the University. If that cannot be done in two years, the Team is recommending that the school be placed on Notice.” [emphasis added] Clearly we are not out of the woods yet.

In order to prepare for the Focused Visit and to draft the evidence report, we have formed a steering committee to guide the university through the general process. Additionally, we have formed a sub-committee for each of the three areas of concern to ensure that we have provided adequate documentation to address each area.
In their final report removing Highlands University from probation, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) identified three areas of continuing concern, as listed below. The university will be expected to address these three areas of concern for the HLC Focused Visit that will take place on March 30-31, 2020.

**Core Component 4.C:** “The institution demonstrates a commitment to educational improvement through ongoing attention to retention, persistence, and completion rates in its degree and certificate programs.”

**Core Component 5.A:** “The institution’s resource base supports its current educational programs and its plans for maintaining and strengthening their quality in the future.”

**Core Component 5.D:** “The institution works systematically to improve its performance.”

We will discuss each of these three areas of concern in more detail in upcoming newsletters and through other channels of communication. We are working to demonstrate that we have met the HLC concerns in these areas through various channels.

It is critical that we have a high level of campus-wide involvement as we prepare for the Focused Visit.

We encourage all members of the Highlands community to be involved as we prepare for the Focused Visit. Please consider the ways that you can contribute to improvements in these three areas in your own work (see p. 4 of this newsletter for some suggestions).

We will soon be releasing a draft version of the evidence document that we will need to submit to the HLC as part of the Focused Visit process. We invite and encourage you to review this document, to be familiar with its contents (at least at a general level), and to offer any feedback and recommendations to help improve the document.
HLC Annual Conference

Every April, the Higher Learning Commission hosts an annual conference in Chicago. This is a large event (close to 4000 participants) which addresses a wide range of topics related to institutional accreditation. Needless to say, the HLC expects member institutions to participate in this annual event.

So, in early April 2019, a group of representatives from Highlands University attended the 2019 HLC Conference. Our group consisted of faculty, administrators, and one Regent. The conference was quite informative, with a broad range of sessions on numerous topics related in one way or another to the accreditation process.

On this page, Lee Allard, Director of Institutional Effectiveness at Highlands University, reflects on some of his experiences at the conference.

Two sessions that I attended during the conference focused on strategic planning. One of these sessions was conducted by Barbara Gellman-Danley, president of HLC, the other was conducted by a senior executive for SCUP (the Society for College and University Planning). These sessions outlined key elements of an effective strategic plan, as outlined below.

- Mission and Vision
- High level institutional goals (typically 3-5)
- Specific objectives under each goal (typically 3-5 per goal)
- Action plan for each objective (timeline, responsible parties, resource allocations)
- Metrics for assessing progress toward attaining each objective, and assessment plan for measuring and evaluating these metrics

Additionally, the SCUP presentation focused on the importance of developing an integrated planning process that coordinates and aligns all planning activities on campus. This is a critical area, as it touches on 5D (one of the areas of concern for the Focused Visit) and will also be important for the Comprehensive Visit in 2021-22.

Some other key considerations for strategic planning:

- Have a real vision for the future: what will the future look like if the strategic plan is actually achieved?
- Strategic planning should be about collective wisdom, not a top-down or bottom-up approach
- Strategic planning is an organic not a linear process
- HLC requires us to have and use a strategic plan
- The focus of all planning activities is ultimately on student success
- Planning must be informed by data
- Planning process must include a succession plan to adapt to changes of leaderships without scrapping existing plan
- A SWOT analysis or scenario planning should be conducted
- Strategic planning should be distinct from operational planning
- Strategic planning can be used to leverage fund-raising efforts

Submitted by Lee Allard, Director of Institutional Effectiveness
HLC Guiding Values

The Higher Learning Commission’s Criteria for Accreditation reflect a set of guiding values. HLC articulates these guiding values so as to offer a better understanding of the Criteria and the intentions that underlie them. These guiding values are listed below.

- Focus on student learning
- Education as a public purpose
- Education for a diverse, technological, globally connected world
- A culture of continuous improvement
- Evidence-based institutional learning and self-presentation
- Integrity, transparency, and ethical behavior or practice
- Governance for the well-being of the institution
- Planning and management of resources to ensure institutional sustainability
- Mission-centered evaluation
- Accreditation through peer review

Last Word: What Can You Do To Help?

To ensure that we can emerge from the Focused Visit with a clean slate, we need a concerted effort from all members of the HU community. Here are some ways you can help:

- **Join one of the HLC sub-committees:** As noted above these sub-committees will help to ensure that we have assembled adequate and appropriate documentation to demonstrate compliance in each of the three areas of concern. The sub-committees will also help to prepare the written evidence report that will be submitted to the HLC.

- **Be informed!** Try to be as informed as possible about the accreditation process. This helps to ensure that everyone is working towards a common cause and understands the importance of the accreditation process. A great way to stay informed is to attend the HLC Forums, of which there were three in spring 2019 and will be more in fall 2019. Even though we are off probation, there is still an urgency to ensuring that we remain in full compliance with all HLC expectations. **The next time we are sanctioned by HLC (and hopefully there won’t be a next time!) will have far worse consequences than the first time.**

- **Provide support as appropriate in the three areas of concern:** Although we all have our own clearly defined responsibilities at HU, the three areas of concern are fairly general and touch on all aspects of institutional functioning. Any point of contact we make with potential students or with current students can help in our recruitment and enrollment efforts. We can all work together to help ensure fiscal responsibility in all areas of university functioning. Timely and thorough participation in institutional planning and assessment efforts will help with the third area of concern.

- **Communicate:** Please let us know of any concerns, suggestions, or recommendations you may have with respect to the accreditation process. You can contact Lee Allard, the HLC liaison for the university, at lallard@nmhu.edu.