

ADMINISTRATION

Adams State's President Says Her University Is Accreditor's 'Whipping Boy'

By *Eric Kelderman* | MARCH 09, 2016

The president of Adams State University lashed out this week at the institution's accrediting agency after the agency's recent decision to put the university on probation.

The president, Beverlee J. McClure, said in an open letter to the Higher Learning Commission that the Colorado institution was "left feeling like HLC's whipping boy, with none of the benefits of HLC membership."

Adams State came under the accreditor's scrutiny after a 2014 article in *The Chronicle* raised



Beverlee J. McClure is president of Adams State U., in Colorado. In a strongly worded letter this week, she suggests that the Higher Learning Commission's decision to place Adams State on probation, after investigating problems revealed in a Chronicle report, was meant "to make some sort of political statement."

questions about whether some of the university's distance-education courses were not rigorous enough and were being used by athletes at other institutions to raise their grade-point averages.

The accreditor's board decided last month that the university had not met the accrediting standard for institutional integrity and might be violating Education Department rules for correspondence courses and distance education.

But Ms. McClure, who began her tenure as president in July, said in her letter that the accreditor's decision "seems like a calculated move to undermine the university."

"We have obviously been chosen by the HLC to make some sort of political statement," Ms. McClure wrote.

In an interview with *The Chronicle*, Ms. McClure said the accreditor seemed to be taking a hard line on Adams State to make itself look good for the Education Department. Instead, she said, accreditation should be a "two-way street," with the accreditor serving not just as a regulatory agency but also an advocate for its member institutions, helping them to meet the standards.

Troubled History

This isn't the first time the university has gotten attention from its accreditor over online courses. The commission previously inquired about the programs after *The Chronicle* reported in 2012 about compressed courses offered by Adams State; Cloud County Community College, in Kansas; and Western Oklahoma State College.

At the time, the accreditor took no action against Adams State or Cloud, but it placed Western Oklahoma on probation, in April 2013. That sanction was lifted in June 2015, according to information from the commission's website.

After *The Chronicle's* 2014 article was published, Adams State responded by freezing enrollment in its correspondence courses. The accreditor then decided early last year that a team of reviewers should visit the college in September.

While much of the visiting team's report notes progress and actions taken to deal with the threat to academic integrity, the reviewers also found significant problems.

In particular, the site review raised concerns that some of the university's online courses might not meet the Education Department's requirement for "regular and substantive interaction between the student and the instructor."

Looking at more than 60 online courses, the reviewers found that several required only one discussion post from the student, and some had no requirement for posting in an online discussion.

In addition, the reviewers found that many of the online courses were treated by instructors as self-paced, "with no set due dates for assignments."

Several individual sections of online courses enrolled 450 to 600 students each, the reviewers found. "This heavy student-to-faculty loading calls into question the academic integrity of the courses and quality of instruction," the commission wrote.

A January letter from the accreditor after the visit made clear that the university was at risk for some sanction. "Because the team found that one or more core components are not met, the board will consider imposing the sanction of probation," the commission wrote.

Plea for a Meeting

Despite that letter, and the extensive findings by the reviewers, Ms. McClure said she was surprised by the accreditor's decision to put the university on probation, since just a small portion of the institution's courses were in question.

In her letter this week, she went on to list several other reasons she felt the sanction was unfair.

Before the accreditor's reviewers visited the campus, the Colorado Department of Higher Education reviewed the university's practices, as did the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, she noted.

Neither group found any major problems, though neither was charged with ensuring compliance with federal regulations or accreditation standards.

The accreditor also identified problems outside the concerns raised by *The Chronicle's* articles, Ms. McClure said.

The commission, however, made clear in its earlier messages that the on-site review would encompass "all commission criteria for accreditation, assumed practices, and requirements for federal compliance," according to a letter from the commission to the university last June.

Ms. McClure also said much of the accreditor's concerns could have been answered if she had just had an opportunity to discuss the issues with the commission's board or president before the board voted.

Ms. McClure said she had been told she could address the board members for five minutes during their deliberations, then was told she could not meet with them.

John Hausaman, a spokesman for the commission, said in an email that its rules would not have allowed Ms. McClure to "interact or engage in discussion on institutional matters" with board members, as such rules are meant to preserve

the autonomy of the decision-making process. The commission's board meetings allow for public comment only "on matters of policy, procedure, and other potential action items," he wrote.

Finally, Ms. McClure noted in her letter that she had not been at Adams State when the problems were revealed.

Adams State is committed to fixing the problems, she wrote, but the probation "unfairly punishes the new leadership team for findings that occurred prior to their arrival."

The accreditor should review all of the documents that the university has prepared and allow her to talk to the board, Ms. McClure wrote.

"I believe this will lead to a reversal of this onerous decision," she said, "to impact an entire university for concerns that have been corrected for a small percentage of online courses."

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