

Valley Courier

2205 State Ave., Alamosa, CO 81101 • Ph: 719-589-2553 • Fax: 719-589-6573

Lt. governor supports ASU

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ALAMOSA Following the news that the Higher Learning Commission placed Adams State University on probation, Colorado Lt. Governor Joe Garcia pledged his support for Adams.

Garcia, who is also the executive director of the Colorado Department of Higher Education, issued this statement on behalf of the university:

"We are committed to helping our students succeed and to meeting accreditation criteria. Adams State University in Alamosa, Colorado, has been an important part of our state's public higher education system since 1921. It has served generations of students in the San Luis Valley and beyond and has contributed to the economic vitality of Colorado. The Colorado Commission on Higher Education is optimistic that ASU's leadership will be able to work with its regional accrediting body, the Higher Learning Commission, to ensure the quality and rigor of its online course offerings and that it will demonstrate that it has acted quickly to meet all of the HLC's quality assurance requirements. The Colorado Department of Higher Education will continue to offer advice and support to ASU as its administration and governing board moves forward to resolve the issue."

Adams State University has requested that the Board of the Higher Learning Commission, its accrediting agency, reconsider its recent action placing the university on probation.

"I assure you our accreditation remains intact," said Adams State President Beverlee J. McClure.

This action came more than a year after the Chronicle of Higher Education published an article recounting "Confessions of a Fixer," an unidentified person who made a business of cheating to help academically ineligible student athletes at other institutions. He admitted to falsifying information and posing as the athletes to take exams for correspondence course transfer credit through Adams State Extended Studies.

McClure said Adams State immediately began addressing this alleged issue and commissioned reports with recommendations from two external entities, including the Colorado Department of Higher Education. That review, submitted in May, found "no evidence of instances of ignoring guidelines or policies . . . or negligence. In some areas, the institution had already identified procedural changes to address issues related to [student] authentication and academic integrity, and had begun to initiate those changes."

Last September 14-15 , HLC conducted an Advisory Visit on campus to further explore the issue. The university received correspondence regarding the report on January 7. Adams State's response to the report reiterated it had already addressed all of the concerns raised in the initial Chronicle of Higher Education articles, none of which were identified in the advisory team report. The university has also made progress in addressing additional findings from the report.

This week, the HLC notified Adams State it was placed on probation effective February 26, 2016. HLC imposed the sanction immediately , prior to even notifying the institution.

"We are stunned by this action," McClure added. "We have been proactive in identifying and addressing concerns in a manner that demonstrates continuous improvement. It appears the HLC had already determined the outcome of this review and completely disregarded the actions we took to correct the situation. Prior to the HLC action, I made several requests to address the HLC Board directly and to speak with its president. Those requests were ignored. We have requested that HLC review all the information we had submitted, which I believe will lead to a reversal of this onerous decision."

Adams State University has posted the reports referenced above and additional documents on this website: adams.edu/hlc/hlc-inquiryresponse.php.

Clarification Average course size

ASU is committed to ensuring fair labor practices, as well excellent academic quality for students. To this end ASU has added more sections of distance courses in English and mathematics, which have historically high enrollment.

The HLC fails to differentiate between Online Semester-Based courses (OSB) and Correspondence Courses, which are offered both via print and online and allow students one year to complete. A correspondence instructor would not have that number of students at any given time, because students may enroll and finish according to their individual schedules.

In a given two-semester academic year, a faculty member teaching four oncampus courses each semester could have a total of 320 students. If faculty teach overloads (more sections) each term and in the summer , that number could be higher.

The average course enrollment in open enrollment (year-long) mathematics courses dropped from 19.56 in Fall 2014 to 10.38 in Fall 2015. During Fall 2015, only one course had high enrollment (70); whereas in Fall 2014, two sections enrolled 97 students.

In open enrollment (yearlong) English courses, the average course enrollment dropped from 18.77 in Fall 2014 to 12.54 in Fall 2015. Enrollment was better distributed in fall 2015, with no section enrolling more than 36 students, compared to 105 in Fall 2014.

Distinguishing between part and full-time faculty, according to student load, is a national issue that Adams State has been working to address since before the September HLC review team visit. Institutions are required to comply with the Affordable Care Act (ACA) regarding this by January 2017, nearly a year from now.

During fall 2015, Adams State established faculty load policies for both full and part time on-campus faculty. ASU is now assessing data to create a comparable policy for distance faculty.

A policy that complies with ACA and Fair Labor Laws will be established and put into practice by January 2017.