

Valley Courier

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Adams State disputes HLC action

ALAMOSA 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. "We are committed to helping our students succeed and to meeting accreditation criteria."

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. HLC imposed the sanction immediately, prior to even notifying the institution. In its March 3rd letter to Dr. McClure Higher Learning Commission President Barbara Gellman-Danley stated the board is requiring the university to file an Assurance Filing by May 1, 2017 or eight weeks prior to the comprehensive evaluation, providing evidence the university has fixed the problems of noncompliance identified in the notice of probationary action and providing evidence the university meets the Criteria for Accreditation, the Core Components, Federal Compliance Requirements and the Assumed Practices.

The university must also host a comprehensive evaluation no later than August 2017. The HLC board will review the team report and documents at its February 2018 meeting to determine whether ASU has demonstrated it is in compliance and whether probation can be removed or if the university has not demonstrated compliance, accreditation could be withdrawn.

"If the findings of noncompliance and other concerns identified in this action have not been fully ameliorated or if the institution is unable to demonstrate that it fully meets the Criteria for Accreditation and Assumed Practices such that Probation may be removed, the Commission shall withdraw accreditation ," Gellman-Danley stated.

She added the HLC found the university out of compliance with Criterion Two, Core Component 2.A, which requires that an institution operate with integrity and follows fair and ethical policies and processes, specifically in relationship to online courses, which HLC maintained: did not reflect the university's "Hybrid and Online Course Credit Hour Assignment for Undergraduate Courses;" lacked interaction or set due dates and visible student-instructor interaction; placed a heavy student to faculty loading that called into question "the academic integrity of the courses and quality of instruction" ; and did not provide sufficient faculty-staff interaction for its distance education classes to be classified as such, because online courses must have "regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor" to be classified as distance education courses.

In relationship to another criterion, Criterion Two, Core Component 2.E (" the institution's policies and procedures call for responsible acquisition, discovery, and application of knowledge by its faculty, staff, and students") the HLC found that Adams State met that criterion "with concerns," namely that more than 25 percent of online courses the Advisory Team reviewed "deviated substantially from the adopted standards and some courses reviewed ignored the standard elements altogether." The HLC added, "A smaller number of courses were egregiously out of compliance, and the sheer number of documented non-compliant courses is evidence of a pervasive lack of policy communication, understanding , or enforcement."

In a January 7 letter to Dr. McClure, Gellman-Danley shared the report from the Advisory Team's fall 2015 visit and indicated the HLC board might consider imposing the sanction of probation.

McClure wrote to Gellman-Danley in January explaining why she did not believe ASU should be placed on probation but should undergo continued monitoring or be put on notice.

She reminded Gellman-Danley that she had only been president of ASU for six months but in that time had taken an active role in reviewing and resolving compliance issues. She told the HLC president ASU has many new policies and practices that have been established that would address the HLC concerns.

"We have not been given the opportunity to prove the effectiveness of these measures," Dr. McClure stated. She asked the HLC to reconsider placing ASU on probation. She said by imposing sanctions such as probation at this time "simply adds stress to the institution faculty and staff at a time when they are working hard to provide evidence that all aspects of our operations , not just those of Extended Studies, meet HLC criteria."

McClure told Gellman-Danley ASU has historically and in this most recent incident taken proactive measures to address concerns as quickly as possible, and after the "Chronicle" article came out, the university took immediate action to strengthen the identity verification and proctoring practices that were at issue in the article. The fact the review team did not note those concerns during its recent visit attested to ASU's successful efforts to address them, McClure added.

"ASU has demonstrated a consistent effort to meet HLC's expectation of continuous improvement and has addressed issues as they are identified and all areas addressed in the report have already been addressed or are in the progress with the intent of full resolution by fall 2016," McClure stated.

On Tuesday, McClure said, "We are stunned by this action . 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."