



March 7, 2016

Open Letter to the Board of the Higher Learning Commission:

I received President Gellman-Danley's letter on March 3, 2016, notifying Adams State University that we had been placed on probation by the Higher Learning Commission Board of Trustees at its February 25 meeting, effective February 26, 2016. We are stunned that all our academic programs are placed on probation for a very small percentage of online courses of concern. Concerns that, in fact, have all been addressed.

Just as surprising is that The Colorado Department of Higher Education and the U.S. Department of Education were notified simultaneously, as were our program accrediting agencies. There was no opportunity for the President to notify the Board of Trustees appropriately, nor to inform the campus, or to do outreach of any kind. This seems like a very calculated move to undermine the integrity of the University.

As president, I requested the chance to address the HLC Board about this issue. I was denied that opportunity. I have requested several times to be able to speak to President Gellman-Danley and have also been denied even a five-minute phone conversation. Again, it seems like HLC had already determined the outcome of this review and has completely disregarded any and all actions by the University to correct the situation. We have obviously been chosen by the HLC to make some sort of political statement.

HLC's mission and role as articulated in its 'Strategic Directions: Continuous Improvement' cite Value to Members, Innovation, Student Success, Thought Leadership and Advocacy as the horizon to which HLC aspires. While we had been forewarned that probation was a possible and likely outcome of the Advisory visit, there are multiple aspects of the action and notification that are very disturbing. HLC's Action letter is the antithesis of its mission: *"serving the common good by assuring and advancing the quality of higher learning."*

While the Action letter follows HLC policy to the letter, it does not reflect HLC's mission or strategic directions. Despite the fact that Adams State University is a member institution of the Higher Learning Commission and should benefit from advocacy on the part of HLC, the Commission's action and approach have been nothing but detrimental to the institution. There are four aspects of the Action letter which are the antithesis of advocacy for member institutions.

First, Adams State University is committed to student success and to meeting accreditation criteria. Our response demonstrated how Adams State had already addressed all of the concerns raised in the initial *Chronicle of Higher Education* articles. None of these were identified in the report by the review team. The findings cited in the Action letter come directly from the review team's report, which identified aspects of compliance that had not come from the *Chronicle* articles. We have made significant progress in correcting all of these additional findings, as well.

The January Action letter came four months after the review team's visit. As the Adams State response indicated, enrollment had already been reduced below the levels cited by the review team. However the Action letter does not acknowledge any of the corrections made in our response to the team report, nor the progress made during those four months. Rather than acknowledge Adams State's efforts towards continuous improvement, HLC refers only to the team report, and this implies that our response was not considered. Failure to consider or allow any response does not demonstrate 'Value to Members,' nor does it recognize our University's effort to address 'Student Success,' nor is it 'Advocacy' by HLC on the part of its member institutions. It again suggests that the outcome of this review was pre-determined.

Second, Adams State University is scheduled for a comprehensive visit in April of 2017. However, the Action letter specifies that an Assurance filing must be submitted by May 2017, and a comprehensive visit scheduled no later than August 2017. These dates occur AFTER our already scheduled visit. This is very confusing information and suggests that HLC didn't even bother to look at when our comprehensive visit was scheduled before imposing deadlines. 'Value to Members' is not demonstrated by a lack of attention to detail such as this.

Third, HLC chose to impose the sanction of probation immediately, prior to even notifying the institution. Additionally, when the institution was notified, HLC also notified the U.S. Department of Education, the Colorado Department of Higher Education, outside accrediting agencies, etc. While it is understandable that these entities be notified, doing so simultaneously with the institution resulted solely in negative publicity, which hardly strengthens Adams State's ability to address these concerns in a proactive and positive manner that promotes student success. This again suggests that this action is a political statement on the part of HLC.

'Student Success' is negatively impacted when a small, rural Hispanic-Serving Institution like Adams State is targeted for what appears to be political purposes. Adams State serves a diverse, low-income population in our on-campus programs. To sanction all of our programs for concerns with a limited number of online programs is unfair to these students. This action also diminishes opportunities for Adams State to grow, to increase partnerships, and to identify alternative revenue streams that help these students succeed.

Finally, HLC has chosen to assign us to another Liaison. While there may be logical reasons for the reassignment, none of them were disclosed to Adams State. This action seems as arbitrary as the other actions and indicates that our University is being unfairly targeted.

HLC expects that member institutions represent themselves clearly and completely to their students, however Adams State's experience has been one in which HLC's own processes are


ever-changing and far from clear and complete. We are left feeling like HLC's whipping boy, with none of the benefits of HLC membership.

Adams State is also under almost entirely new leadership. I began as President in July 2015, after the date for the Advisory visit had been set. A new Vice President for Administration and Finance began in October 2015, and a search for a new Vice President for Academic Affairs is underway.

Adams State is committed to correcting its failing in regards to the review team findings. However, it firmly believes that HLC's imposition of probation unfairly punishes the new leadership team for findings that occurred prior to their arrival. We are left wondering whether HLC is a regulatory body or an advocacy group for students and higher education.

I respectfully ask that the HLC Board review all the information submitted by Adams State University and allow me to address the Board about any concerns. I believe this will lead to a reversal of this onerous decision to impact an entire University for concerns that have been corrected for a small percentage of on-line courses.

Sincerely,



Dr. Beverlee J. McClure
President

cc: Lt. Governor Joe Garcia, Colorado Commission on Higher Education
Ian Macgillivray, PhD, Colorado Commission on Higher Education
Barbara Gellman-Danley, Higher Learning Commission
Adams State University Board of Trustees