

# Staff Authority

## Policy Change Adopted on Second Reading

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The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Board of Trustees (“the Board”) adopted this policy on second reading at its meeting on February 29, 2024.

### Background

These policy changes clarify when HLC staff have the authority to take certain actions with respect to an institution and, conversely, when HLC staff may recommend certain actions to an HLC decision-making body, most commonly the Institutional Actions Council (IAC). The policy changes also clarify when an institutional response is available to an institution in each of these instances.

HLC circulated these policy changes to the membership and other interested parties after the Board’s November 2023 meeting. No comments were received warranting changes in language. However, staff made minor edits to further clarify aspects of the policy.

In connection with the changes made to the Routine Monitoring and Data Collection policy, HLC also updated its [Monitoring Recommendations: Considerations for Peer Review](#) document to clarify guidance for peer reviewers.

### Implementation

This policy is effective immediately.

### Adopted Policy Change

Wording that was deleted or revised is shown as strikethrough (~~old wording~~); new language, whether through addition or revision, is shown in bold (**new wording**). Wording that was moved is shown with a double underline in its new location (moved to) and a double strikethrough in its previous location (~~~~moved from~~~~). Changes between first and second reading, other than minor editing, are indicated in bold italics (*new wording*). These revisions have been made on HLC’s website at [hlcommission.org/policies](https://hlcommission.org/policies).

Monitoring shall be appropriate in circumstances where HLC has concluded that it should review the institution's progress in addressing a serious issue at the institution, the resolution of which is relevant to the institution's compliance with, or improvement regarding, HLC requirements.

Monitoring on Pathways. An institution on the Standard or Open Pathway may be required to file one or more interim reports. An institution on the Standard Pathway may be required to host one or more focused visits. ~~Such monitoring shall be appropriate in circumstances where the team has concluded that HLC should review the institution's progress in addressing a serious issue at the institution, the resolution of which is relevant to the institution's future compliance with, or improvement regarding, the Criteria for Accreditation or other HLC requirements.~~ Other than a focused visit following an approved Change of Control, Structure or Organization, an institution on the Open Pathway that is assigned a focused visit will be moved to the Standard Pathway.

~~Other Monitoring. An institution, regardless of its pathway, is always subject to monitoring in the form of interim reports or focused evaluations related to review by HLC of the following: financial and non-financial indicators; a change of control, structure or organization transaction; substantive change; complaints; compliance with other HLC requirements, including the Federal Compliance Requirements and the Assumed Practices; or other HLC investigation or review.~~

Process for Requiring Monitoring. An evaluation team or HLC staff may recommend that an institution be ~~required to file an~~ **assigned monitoring in the form of filing one or more** interim reports or ~~hosting one or more a~~ **focused on-site evaluation on visits** related to one or more ~~topics~~ **HLC requirements**. The President may also act to require routine monitoring in a manner consistent with policy on Staff Authority ~~COMM.B.10.020~~. Following review of ~~routine monitoring~~ **the recommendation, and any institutional response, if applicable**, an appropriate decision-making body, or HLC staff where allowed by HLC policy, shall determine whether the monitoring is appropriate for the institution, and, if so, shall act to ~~approve~~ **assign** such monitoring.

**The President may also otherwise act to require monitoring as consistent with HLC policies.**

Interim Reports. An institution shall submit ~~any~~ **required** interim report(s) according to the due date(s) established in the action calling for the interim report(s). **Prior to the institution submitting the interim report(s), HLC staff may act to expand the focus of the report(s) to review additional related topics or HLC staff may recommend to a decision-making body that the focus of the interim report(s) be expanded to add new topics.**

HLC may designate staff to review and prepare a written analysis of ~~all reports~~ **an interim report**. Upon ~~review of an interim report~~, **HLC staff may either (1) and to act on behalf of HLC to accept the report or require one or more additional interim report(s) on the same or related topic; or (2) may recommend to that an HLC's decision-making bodies body that require further monitoring, including new one or more additional interim reports on different topics, or one or more focused visits on the same, related or new topics, as appropriate to the institution's pathway assignment, be required on the same topics identified in the action or on other topics.**

**Focused Visits.** An institution that is assigned a focused visit shall host such focused visit according to the date established in the action calling for the focused visit. The institution shall submit a focused report to HLC ~~prior to the evaluation~~ on the topics identified in that action prior to the focused visit. **Prior to the focused visit, HLC staff may, with reasonable notice to the institution, act to expand the focus of the evaluation focused visit where appropriate to review additional related topics or new topics of concern to HLC.**

The focused visit shall be conducted by a team of HLC peer reviewers ~~appointed by HLC staff~~. The length of the focused visit shall **typically** be one and ~~one-a~~ half days, ~~but HLC may lengthen or shorten~~ **adjust the length of the visit or require that team members conduct additional on-site visits to the institution's facilities to examine specific issues.**

The focused visit team will prepare a written report addressing the topics ~~of concern~~ identified in the actions calling for the focused visit, ~~and any areas of concern~~ **additional related topics or new topics** raised by HLC staff, **or other topics identified by the team and identifying deficiencies, if any, at the institution.** The focused visit team report shall include a recommendation for HLC action either accepting the institution's focused report or calling for additional monitoring, sanction, Show-Cause Order or withdrawal of accreditation. The institution shall have the opportunity to file a written response to the focused visit report prior to a decision-making body acting on the report. ~~Focused visit reports will be considered through HLC's regular review and decision-making processes.~~

### Data Reporting From Member Institutions

All member institutions will complete data reports for HLC; such reporting will occur annually as well as periodically. HLC, with oversight as appropriate from the Board of Trustees, will determine the contents of this reporting to assure that it addresses potential or developing problems with an institution's compliance with accrediting requirements and institutional stability, as well as solicits updated information on the scope of activities of each member institution. Data required from each institution will include, at minimum, annual financial information, headcount and enrollment, measures related to student achievement, and

other indicators. The data reporting will provide HLC with sufficient information to understand and respond to significant shifts in an institution's capacity and/or scope of educational activities.

#### Institutional Contact for Data Reporting

To assure that the institution provides accurate and consistent information, each member institution identifies an Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO) who will bear administrative responsibility for submitting the report in a timely manner. HLC training will be available for those liaisons.

#### HLC Follow-Up to Institutional Data

In reviewing and analyzing institutional data, HLC will look at relationships among a variety of indicators and other information in any given year or over several years. If those relationships suggest that the institution may be experiencing problems meeting HLC requirements or very rapid change, HLC will ask the institution to submit an explanation of the data. In particular, HLC will ask institutions it identifies through review of information about student achievement to provide information about their strategy for improvement. HLC staff may ~~forward~~ **require that** institutional data, and any explanation or other information provided by the institution, **be forwarded** to a peer review panel for further review. Such panel may conduct its review in a scheduled meeting or by any means that allows for synchronous or asynchronous communication. **Upon review, the peer review panel or HLC staff may accept the report.**

If data submitted by an institution, particularly enrollment information, financial indicators based on financial ratios, or any other additional information required by a peer review panel, are indicative of problems meeting HLC requirements, rapid change, significant growth, or otherwise require validation, ~~such the peer review panel or HLC staff may call for an on-site evaluation as soon as possible; require that an institution address concerns arising from these data in the next evaluation process; or recommend to the Institutional Actions Council additional institutional monitoring through any process provided for in HLC policy and procedure~~ **recommend additional monitoring to an HLC decision-making body or the President may otherwise assign monitoring as consistent with HLC policy.**

#### Monitoring of Student Enrollment Growth

HLC will monitor enrollment growth through institutional annual data reporting and will monitor on an ongoing basis growth in enrollment at those institutions that experience significant enrollment growth as defined in HLC procedures or appear to have significant shifts in enrollment based on instructional modalities. HLC will ask institutions that have been identified through the annual data reporting process as having significant enrollment growth to provide information about enrollment growth at the program level. HLC may take follow-up action.

## Surveying of Students

HLC may survey students of an institution to gather information about their experience at the institution prior to a comprehensive evaluation at the institution scheduled by HLC. HLC will provide aggregate data resulting from the survey to the institution under review and the evaluation team prior to the comprehensive evaluation. The institution will have an opportunity to provide additional information or other data in response to the student survey data to the evaluation team and HLC prior to the comprehensive evaluation.

### Policy Number Key

*Section INST: Institutional Processes*

*Chapter F: Monitoring*

*Part 10: Routine Monitoring*

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*Last Revised: February 2024*

*First Adopted: November 1999, February 2003, February 2007*

*Revision History: February 2001, February 2007, February 2009, February 2010, November 2010, June 2012, November 2012, April 2013, February 2014, June 2014, November 2018, June 2020, November 2020, February 2021, February 2022, June 2022, February 2024*

*Notes: Policies combined November 2012 – 3.6, 3.6(a), 1.3, 1.3(a), 1.3(b), 1.3(c). In February 2021, references to the Higher Learning Commission as “the Commission” were replaced with the term “HLC.”*

*Related Policies:*

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**Policy Title:** Staff Authority  
**Number:** COMM.B.10.020

Staff Authority for ~~Minor Changes~~ **Certain Activities Actions** Related to an Institution’s Relationship With HLC

HLC staff **have authority to *take the following actions:*** ~~may act to change an institution’s Statement of Accreditation Status or recommend directly to the Institutional Actions Council that a change in the Statement of Accreditation Status be approved.~~

~~Staff may act to approve the following changes:~~

- ~~editing of the~~ **Make non-substantive changes to an institution’s record, including an institution’s Statement of Accreditation Status with non-substantive amendments;**

2. **Change an institution's stipulations in a manner consistent with changes that have been approved by an HLC decision-making body.**
- ~~2.~~ ~~3.~~ **Change the due date of an institution's upcoming evaluations or filing of reports by no more than one year and not to exceed the maximum timeframe for evaluation visits provided in HLC policy;**
4. **Expand the focus of an assigned interim report to include additional related topics.**
5. **Expand the focus of an assigned focused visit to include additional related topics or new topics.**
- ~~3.~~ ~~6.~~ **Accept interim reports or require follow-up interim reports on the same topic or related topics; and.**
7. **Accept reports regarding institutional data.**
- 8. Accept evaluations from monitoring of substantive change.*
- 9. Accept Open Pathway Year 4 Assurance Reviews.*
- ~~4.~~ ~~8.~~ ~~10.~~ **Remove or remove an institution from the Notification Program for approval of Additional Locations.**
- ~~9.~~ ***Require that an institution submit a Provisional Plan, including, if applicable, Teach-Out Agreements, in accordance with HLC policy.***

~~Staff may recommend to the Institutional Actions Council for review and action the following: substantive amendments to the Statement of Accreditation Status including modifications to the Stipulations section; changing the date of upcoming evaluations or filing of reports by more than one year or beyond the maximum ten years required for a comprehensive evaluation; and new requirements for monitoring.~~

#### ~~Staff Authority to Approve Substantive Changes~~

- ~~10.~~ ~~11.~~ **Staff may act, without first seeking approval of the Institutional Actions Council, to approve the addition of a permanent location at a site at which the institution is conducting a teach-out for students of another institution that has ceased operating before all students have completed their program of study.**

#### ~~Staff Authority to Approve Teach-Out Receiving Institutions~~

- ~~11. 12.~~ HLC staff may act to ~~a~~ Approve the participation of additional teach-out receiving institutions in a teach-out arrangement after IAC approval has approved of the subject the institution's Provisional Plan~~5, or~~.
- ~~12. 13.~~ Approve the participation of an HLC member as a teach-out receiving institution in a teach-out arrangement required by a non-HLC institution.

### **Staff Authority to Recommend Actions to an HLC Decision-Making Body**

HLC staff may recommend the following *actions* to an HLC decision-making body, typically the Institutional Actions Council (IAC):

1. Make substantive changes to an institution's record, including an institution's Statement of Accreditation Status and stipulations.
2. Change the date of an institution's upcoming evaluations or filing of reports by more than one year or beyond the maximum ten years required for a comprehensive evaluation.
3. Add new requirements for interim monitoring, other than as provided above.

An institution is provided an opportunity to submit an institutional response prior to the recommended action being considered by the decision-making body.

#### President's Authority

The HLC President of the ~~Higher Learning Commission~~ has additional authority beyond that afforded other HLC staff under these policies as delineated by the Board. The President of HLC may act to terminate, postpone or cancel a visit in extraordinary circumstances. The President may approve the presence of observers on an evaluation team or other HLC activity. The President may make a recommendation to the ~~Institutional Actions Council~~ IAC for routine monitoring following HLC policies for these actions. The President may schedule Special Monitoring for an institution consistent with HLC policy and may act, without first seeking approval of the ~~Institutional Actions Council~~ IAC, to require routine monitoring immediately following the conclusion of any related process conducted under policies related to Special Monitoring. ***The President may impose and remove Administrative Probation in accordance with HLC policies.*** The President may make a recommendation to the Board for the imposition of a sanction, the extension of a sanction, the issuance of a Show-Cause Order, or withdrawal of candidacy or accreditation based on ~~verified~~ evidence supporting such recommendations under these policies. Finally, the President's authority may be temporarily expanded by the Board under extraordinary circumstances in a manner consistent with these policies and federal regulations.

Policy Number Key

Section COMM: HLC Obligations

Chapter B: HLC Staff

Part 10: General

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Last Revised: February 2024

First Adopted: June 2011

Revision History: November 2012, June 2020, February 2021, February 2024

Notes: Former policy number 2.2(h). In February 2021, references to the Higher Learning Commission as “the Commission” were replaced with the term “HLC.”

Related Policies: COMM.B.10.040 Non-Substantive Changes in the Accreditation Relationship Between an Institution and HLC, INST.E.00.000 Sanctions, Adverse Actions, and Appeals

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**Policy Title:** ~~Non-substantive Changes in the Accreditation Relationship Between an Institution and HLC~~

**Number:** ~~COMM.B.10.040~~

~~HLC may request or HLC staff may initiate non-substantive changes in the terms of HLC’s relationship with the institution as outlined in the Statement of Accreditation Status. HLC approval is required to change the terms of the accreditation relationship with an institution in any of the following ways:~~

- ~~1. Change existing stipulations in a manner consistent with a proposed change requiring prior approval by a decision-making body of HLC.~~
- ~~2. Change the date of the next comprehensive evaluation or Assurance Review:
  - ~~○ Changes of no more than one year from the date set by the last action following an evaluation process. (HLC staff may approve the change unless the one-year extension places an institution’s comprehensive evaluation beyond the ten years required by HLC policy.~~
  - ~~○ Changes of more than one year from the date set by the last action following an evaluation process or beyond the ten-year maximum for comprehensive evaluations. Extensions of more than one year and extensions beyond ten years may be granted only for good cause. (Institutional Actions Council must act to approve all such changes.)~~~~



- ~~3. Change the date of other visits or required reports or other HLC monitoring or interaction previously scheduled for the institution, including accepting required progress or monitoring reports or scheduling follow-up reports on the same or related topics. (HLC staff may approve the change).~~
- ~~4. Require new monitoring be added to the Statement of Accreditation Status. (HLC staff may make a recommendation for action to the Institutional Actions Council to approve the change, except that the President may act, without first seeking approval of the Institutional Actions Council, to require routine monitoring immediately following the conclusion of any special monitoring process conducted under INST.F.20.010 Special Monitoring.)~~
- ~~5. Suspend or remove an institution from the Notification Program for Additional Locations. (HLC staff may approve removal.)~~

### Process for Initiating a Non-substantive Change in the Relationship With HLC

The institution may file a written application seeking a change in its relationship with HLC in any of the ways defined above. Alternatively, HLC staff may propose such a change and will provide the proposed action or recommendation in writing to the institution for comment. The institution will be provided an opportunity to respond in writing to any change in relationship with HLC arising from its own application or at the initiative of HLC. Where such action is unfavorable to the institution, HLC will consider the institution's response prior to completing any staff action or action by the IAC.

### Policy Number Key

*Section COMM: HLC Obligations*

*Chapter B: HLC Staff*

*Part 10: General*

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*Last Revised: June 2022*

*First Adopted: November 1999, June 2010*

*Revision History: November 1999, June 2009, June 2011, June 2012, February 2021, June 2022*

*Notes: Policies combined November 2012—3.1, 3.1(a). In February 2021, references to the Higher Learning Commission as “the Commission” were replaced with the term “HLC.” Policy renumbered in June 2023 (former policy number INST.F.20.030).*

*Related Policies: INST.D.30.010 Effective Date of Accreditation Actions*