



November 8, 2021

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Dr. Jonathan Gering, President
Bethel College
300 E. 27th St.
North Newton, KS 67117

Dear President Gering:

This letter is formal notification of action taken by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Board of Trustees (“the Board”) concerning Bethel College (“the Institution”). This action is effective as of the date the Board acted, November 4, 2021. In taking this action, the Board considered materials from the recent Notice visit, including, but not limited to: the Notice report the Institution submitted, the report from the Notice visit team, the report of the Institutional Actions Council Committee, and the institutional responses to these reports.

Summary of the Action: The Board determined that the Institution is no longer at risk of noncompliance with the Criteria for Accreditation and removed the Institution from Notice. The Institution meets Core Component 5.B and 5.C with concerns. The Institution is required to submit an embedded Interim Report with its next Assurance Filing as outlined below.

Board Rationale

The Board based its action on the following findings made with regard to the Institution as well as the entire record before the Board:

The Institution now meets without concerns Criterion Four, Core Component 4.B, “the institution engages in ongoing assessment of student learning as part of its commitment to the educational outcomes of its students,” for the following reasons:

- The Institution's Assessment Committee has been active for ten years and its annual Assessment Day has been in place for most of that time. Topics engaged on Assessment Day have included general education, writing across the curriculum, and co-curricular assessment.
- Programs that hold specialized accreditation, such as Nursing or Social Work, have been engaged in assessment as part of their accreditation reviews.
- The Assessment Plan is inclusive of all academic areas, with clear learning outcomes and metrics. Assessment reports are complete and data-driven.

- The Institution has made changes to some programs due to assessment results, including changes in rubrics in writing across the curriculum and shifting more assessment to sophomore- and junior-level courses rather than a sole focus on senior-level assessment.
- The Institution recently devoted its Assessment Day to co-curricular assessment and had those administrative units that are already focused on assessment (e.g., Athletics and Library) share best practices with their colleagues. All student-related units, such as Student Life, Library, Diversity/Equity/Inclusion, and others, have set learning outcomes in their assessment plans, and have clear metrics to assess progress.

The Institution continues to meet, but with concerns, Criterion Five, Core Component 5.B, “the institution’s resource base supports its educational offerings and its plans for maintaining and strengthening their quality in the future,” for the following reasons:

- Many of the key issues focusing on organizational leadership at the board and senior staff level that originally resulted in the Institution being placed on Notice are now resolved. Some of the concrete improvements include the creation of a Board Contingency Fund outside of the endowment to reduce the need to draw from the endowment fund’s corpus, an increase in unrestricted net assets, a contingency budget if projected incoming students are higher than actual, and a growing endowment fund balance.
- While the Institution has made some progress in the fiscal landscape, the situation is complicated by COVID-19 funds. The Institution utilized a unique revenue offset in the resources made available through COVID-19 funds provided at the federal and state levels. It utilized those resources as allowed by the funding sources and was able to offset adverse financial impacts of the COVID-19 crisis to remain on target with its budget. However, that funding was unique, not ongoing.
- The Institution has a high discount rate (61.2% for FY 2021) that continues to be monitored by its board and leadership. However, the practice of deeply discounting tuition could result in a need to revert to drawing on endowment funds to offset reduced revenues due to the high discount rate. In addition, there is not a clearly demonstrated correlation between increased enrollment and discounted tuitions. This raises concerns about the Institution’s continued ability to maintain the current budget based on its current revenue trends.

The Institution continues to meet, but with concerns, Criterion Five, Core Component 5.C, “the institution engages in systematic and integrated planning and improvement,” for the following reasons:

- The Institution has been operating under a strategic plan that was originally created for the period 2015-2020. Under the new president, who took office in January 2018, a revision of mission, vision and values occurred. The Institution has made progress in completing the 2015-2020 plan.
- While a majority of the initiatives were completed, the Institution viewed the plan as a “wish list” and not a strategic document with priorities to move the Institution forward.
- The Executive Committee of the Board of Directors has asked the president to produce the Institution’s next Strategic Plan. A planning committee comprised of members of various stakeholder groups was formed in February 2021.

- The new plan is expected to be focused on themes intended to strategically move the Institution forward. Part of the plan will focus on the Work College model, the Institution's plan to become a federally designated work college. A pilot of the Work College is expected to begin in fall 2021. In addition to an already committed estate gift, the Institution is actively seeking additional external funding to support this initiative.
- The Institution shows some instances of allocating resources in alignment with its mission and priorities, and of linking its processes for assessment, evaluation, planning and budgeting, but more work in this area is needed.

The Board of Trustees of the Higher Learning Commission has determined based on the preceding findings and evidence in the record that the Institution has otherwise demonstrated that it is in compliance with the Criteria for Accreditation, Assumed Practices, and Federal Compliance Requirements and is not at risk of noncompliance with the Criteria, and thus should be removed from Notice.

Next Steps in the HLC Review Process

Interim Report: The Board required that the Institution submit an embedded Interim Report regarding Core Components 5.B and 5.C with its next Assurance Filing.

Comprehensive Evaluation: The Board maintained the Institution on the Standard Pathway with its next comprehensive evaluation (Year 4) in 2023-24.

HLC Disclosure Obligations

The Board action resulted in changes that will be reflected in the Institution's Statement of Accreditation Status as well as the Institutional Status and Requirements Report. The Statement of Accreditation Status, including the dates of the last and next comprehensive evaluation visits, will be posted to the HLC website.

In accordance with HLC policy,¹ information about this action is provided to members of the public and to other constituents in several ways. This Action Letter and the enclosed Public Disclosure Notice will be posted to HLC's website not more than one business day after this letter is sent to the Institution. Additionally, a summary of Board actions will be sent to appropriate state and federal agencies and accrediting associations. This summary also will be published on HLC's website. The summary will include this HLC action regarding the Institution.

On behalf of the Board of Trustees, thank you in advance for your cooperation. If you have questions about any of the information in this letter, please contact your HLC Staff Liaison, Dr. Gigi Fansler.

¹ COMM.A.10.010, Notice of Accreditation Actions, HLC Public Notices and Public Statements

President Gering, November 8, 2021 4

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barbara Gellman-Danley".

Barbara Gellman-Danley
President

Enc: Public Disclosure Notice

Cc: Chair of the Board of Trustees, Bethel College
Robert Milliman, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Bethel College
Evaluation Team Chair
A. Gigi Fansler, Vice President of Accreditation Relations, Higher Learning Commission
Anthea Sweeney, Vice President of Legal and Regulatory Affairs, Higher Learning
Commission