



June 30, 2022

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Dr. Karl Solibakke, President
Northland College
1411 Ellis Ave.
Ashland, WI 54806-3999

Dear President Solibakke:

This letter is formal notification of action taken by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Board of Trustees (“the Board”) concerning Northland College (“the Institution”). This action is effective as of the date the Board acted, June 23, 2022. In taking this action, the Board considered materials from the most recent comprehensive evaluation, including, but not limited to: the Assurance Filing the Institution submitted, the report from the comprehensive evaluation team, the report of the Institutional Actions Council (IAC) Hearing Committee, and the institutional responses to these reports.

Summary of the Action: The Board reaffirmed the accreditation of the Institution. The Institution meets Core Components 1.C, 4.B, 5.B, and 5.C with concerns. The Institution is required to host a Focused Visit, as outlined below, no later than June 2024.

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:

Northland College (“Northland” or “the Institution”) meets, but with concerns, Criterion One, Core Component 1.C, “the institution provides opportunities for civic engagement in a diverse, multicultural society and globally connected world, as appropriate within its mission and for the constituencies it serves,” for the following reasons:

- Northland was founded in 1892 to provide educational opportunities to “students of both sexes and all races,” and although the Institution is addressing gender issues, it currently lacks systemic diversity, equity and inclusion efforts and is not succeeding in supporting “all races.” There is no formal plan for how Northland will address the lack of racial diversity, while it still supports and continues to grow other forms of diversity on campus.
- The Institution is located in an area populated by indigenous tribes but struggles to provide educational connections with them in any substantial manner.

- There is a genuine lack of diversity in the Northland community when it comes to people of color being employed or enrolled at the college. The faculty and staff are almost entirely white/non-Hispanic and the student population, except for those students recruited to participate in collegiate sports, are also non-diverse. Other aspects of diversity do appear to be represented on campus, including LGBTQ, gender, and first-generation students.
- Retention of students, especially students of color, remains a concern in terms of the impact on the Institution's student education success metric and its financial challenges. Retention rates for students of color are inconsistent and lower than those for white students in most years.
- There is no indication that faculty will be required to address the hiring of appropriately credentialed people of color or to recruit applicants through techniques that would broaden the applicant pool.
- The current Indigenous Cultures Advisor will be given the collateral role of Special Assistant for Inclusive Excellence. Crucial to the Institution's efforts to enhance diversity, this new role will be charged to assess, support, and contest any prevailing concerns about implementing a Strategic Plan for Diversity.
- Over the past two fiscal years, Northland has secured \$250,000 in restricted gifts to fund the renovation and establishment of a Diversity House contiguous to campus and to support diversity initiatives. Further funding is needed in the next five years to support diverse spaces and programming and the President is currently applying for grant funding or soliciting donor gifts to meet these needs.
- In January 2022, a new Dean of Students and a new Director of Residential Life assumed their respective duties at the Institution. Both professionals bring expertise and previous experience with the implementation of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Sense of Belonging (DEIS) strategies. They have already refocused the student conduct process to prioritize restorative justice and didactic rehabilitation, rather than reverting to punitive actions and monetary fines, which disproportionately harm students without privilege or resources.
- The Northland Board issued a charge to the Institution in February 2022 to assess the campus climate and develop a new and comprehensive DEIS plan. The Board's charge challenges the Institution to conduct a comprehensive DEIS study among all members of the campus community, along with several other initiatives.

The Institution meets, but with 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 has made improvements to student learning informed by course-level assessment data. These improvements include pedagogical revisions and assignment modifications.
- Faculty members participate in the assessment of General Education and program outcomes at the course level. Examples of assessment methods include use of rubrics, embedded assessments, class activities with benchmarks for success, and averaging grades with identification of levels of achievement. Changes and improvements to

courses that are not based on data assessment are also made as a result of discussions among department faculty.

- Aggregation of data over time that would facilitate comparative analysis and the identification of trends is not consistently part of the assessment process. The Institution has compiled some trend data with program learning outcomes. However, the Institution only makes course-based improvements during the review of assessment data. Although significant data are gathered from courses, consistency is lacking. Overall, the Institution does not use trending longitudinal data in its assessment of programs, general education, and co-curricular assessment.
- The Institution has been working to establish ongoing assessment of learning outcomes for several years. There has been some improvement in the process, such as faculty and committee involvement. However, solid practices are not consistently in place to provide effective and efficient assessment of learning outcomes.

The Institution meets, 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:

- The Institution faces significant challenges to its resource base and its overall financial stability and future. The President and the Board are very aware of the issues, and, because of the President's transparency, employees are also aware of the issues.
- While overall facilities are quite good, the Institution has a great deal of deferred maintenance issues, totaling \$17.3 million.
- The Institution has had a substantial decline in enrollment over the last several years, with fall FTE enrollment declining by 14.8% from 2017 to 2021 and headcount declining by 16.5% during the same period. The number of continuing or returning students remained stable during that four-year period; the decline in enrollment is largely attributable to a decline in the number of new students.
- The fall 2022 recruiting season is underway and applications and admits have increased since the prior year, although it is still too early to determine if new student enrollment will rebound.
- The Institution heavily subsidizes student tuition, with the discount rate reported as 64.14% in FY 2021, although it is projected to decline to 62.33% in FY 2022. Since 2016, the discount rate has ranged between approximately 59% (FY 2019) and 64.14% (FY 2021), with a mean discount rate of 62.24% between FY 2016 and FY 2021.
- Retention of current students remains a significant issue.
- In order to meet financial challenges, the Institution leveraged and liquidated a substantial portion of its endowment between FY 2015 and FY 2020, reducing the endowment from \$30 million to approximately \$18 million. The Institution has prioritized its inter-fund loan, which currently stands at \$7.1 million, and has instituted reductions in salaries and staffing levels.
- The Institution reported cash balances for the rest of the fiscal year as \$812,018 for December 2021, \$2,868,513 for February 2022, and \$1,013,037 in June 2022.

- The Institution was financially solvent in FY 2021 after negative changes in net assets from FY 2018 to FY 2020, indicating that more realistic financial modeling is now being utilized.

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

- Northland has engaged in a great deal of planning since its last reaffirmation visit, but this has not resulted in positive results.
- Following the expiration of the 2013-2020 Strategic Plan, the strategic planning process was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most recently, the Institution adopted an Interim Operating Plan for 2021-2026, and the process for developing a new comprehensive strategic plan has just begun.
- The Interim Operating Plan is an improvement over past planning efforts, although many objectives lack key metrics. The Institution is aware of this and is planning to develop additional metrics.
- Increasing enrollment is important for the Institution to remain financially viable. Northland recently adopted new enrollment strategies, including aggressive lead purchases in Wisconsin and tertiary recruitment areas such as Florida and California where the Institution believes students might be particularly interested in its environmental mission.

The Board of Trustees of the Higher Learning Commission has determined that, the Institution is not at risk of being out of compliance with the Criteria for Accreditation and is in compliance with the Federal Compliance requirements.

Next Steps in the HLC Review Process

Focused Visit: The Board required that the Institution host a Focused Visit regarding Core Components 1.C, 4.B, 5.B, and 5.C no later than June 2024.

Comprehensive Evaluation: The Institution has been maintained on the Standard Pathway with its next comprehensive evaluation (Year 4) in 2025-26.

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.

HLC policy¹ requires that a summary of Board actions be sent to appropriate state and federal agencies and accrediting associations. It also will be published on HLC's website. The summary will include this HLC action regarding the Institution.

At this time, HLC will reassign the Institution from its HLC Staff Liaison, Dr. Gigi Fansler, to Dr. Jamie Stanesa. Please be assured that Dr. Fansler will work with Dr. Stanesa to create a smooth transition.

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 Dr. Stanesa.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Barbara Gellman-Danley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Barbara Gellman-Danley
President

Cc: Alan Brew, Vice President for Academic Affairs & Dean of the Faculty, Northland College
Evaluation Team Chair
IAC Hearing Committee Chair
A. Gigi Fansler, Vice President of Accreditation Relations, Higher Learning Commission
Jamie Stanesa, Vice President of Accreditation Relations, Higher Learning Commission
Anthea Sweeney, Vice President of Legal and Regulatory Affairs, Higher Learning
Commission

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