

November 8, 2023

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Dr. Rick Melson
President
Southwest Baptist University
1600 University Ave.
Bolivar, MO 65613-2597

Dear President Melson:

This letter is formal notification of action taken by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Board of Trustees (“the Board”) concerning Southwest Baptist University (“the Institution”). This action is effective as of the date the Board acted, November 2, 2023. 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 determined that the Institution is no longer out of compliance with the Criteria for Accreditation and removed the Institution from Probation. This action also resulted in a reaffirmation of the Institution’s accreditation.

Substantive Change: HLC policy¹ states an institution removed from Probation shall be subject to additional requirements for substantive change for three (3) years following the removal of Probation.²

Notification Program: HLC policy³ states that the Institution remains ineligible for the Notification Program for Additional Locations until it has completed three (3) years in good standing as required for access.

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:

Southwest Baptist University (“the Institution”) now meets Criterion Two, Core

¹ INST.E.20.010, Probation.

² INST.F.20.040, Substantive Change.

³ INST.E.20.010, Probation.

Component 2.C, “the governing board of the institution is autonomous to make decisions in the best interest of the institution in compliance with board policies and to ensure the institution’s integrity,” for the following reasons:

- The Institution’s Board and the new President have clarified the relationship between the Missouri Baptist Convention relative to the autonomy of the Board and rescinded the changes to its charter that would have given control to the Missouri Baptist Convention.
- The Institution’s Board has taken steps to ensure it operates independently and autonomously in its decision-making, including the adoption of an updated conflict of interest policy that stresses independence and autonomy, and the implementation of robust board orientation and training.

The Institution now meets Criterion Two, Core Component 2.D, “the institution is committed to academic freedom and freedom of expression in the pursuit of truth in teaching and learning,” for the following reasons:

- The Institution has clarified its expectations relative to academic freedom within the context of its faith-based mission, identifying the centrality of a single statement of faith instead of three, which resulted in a new Statement on Academic Freedom that was approved by the Institution’s Faculty Senate and Board.
- The Institution’s Faculty Senate and Board approved and implemented changes to the Institution’s promotion and tenure processes to reconcile the previous lack of clarity and consistent practice in these areas.

The Institution now meets Criterion Five, Core Component 5.A, “through its administrative structures and collaborative processes, the institution’s leadership demonstrates that it is effective and enables the institution to fulfill its mission,” for the following reasons:

- The Institution’s Board has revised its Board Policy Manual; approved a new shared governance statement developed by the Faculty Senate and senior leadership; and engaged faculty in the creation, review, and endorsement of key institutional documents.

The Board of Trustees of the Higher Learning Commission has determined based on the preceding findings and evidence in the record that the Institution is in compliance with the Criteria for Accreditation and Federal Compliance requirements.

Next Steps in the HLC Review Process

Comprehensive Evaluation: The Institution has been placed on the Standard Pathway with its next comprehensive evaluation for reaffirmation of accreditation in 2027-2028.

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,⁴ 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. Andrew Lootens-White.

Sincerely,



Barbara Gellman-Danley
President

Enc: Public Disclosure Notice

Cc: Chair of the Board of Trustees, Southwest Baptist University
Levi Fox, Director of Institutional Effectiveness, Southwest Baptist University
Evaluation Team Chair
IAC Hearing Committee Chair
Andrew Lootens-White, Vice President of Accreditation Relations, Higher Learning
Commission
Marla Morgen, Vice President and General Counsel, Higher Learning Commission
Samantha Dickey, Interim Assistant Commissioner of Postsecondary Policy, Missouri
Department of Higher Education

⁴ COMMA.10.010, Notice of Accreditation Actions, HLC Public Notices and Public Statements