

Questions about HLC Accreditation and Changes in Institutional Practice

Given the circumstances we face—including the need for institutions to act quickly to ensure continuity of educational activities (including online delivery, extended partnerships, and new/temporary consortial arrangements—it is helpful to understand the basics on how the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) operates. This includes how institutions should proceed with reporting changes to various practices to HLC.

(Note that not all postsecondary institutions in Colorado are accredited by HLC. Institutions should consult their individual accreditor(s) for guidance during these times. Guidance should also be sought from any program-specific accreditors or professional organizations that accredit individual academic programs. This includes programs that include required clinical or field experiences, such as educator preparation, nursing, and the like.)

The Higher Learning Commission has stated that “if an institution needs to adjust its business operations in substantial ways (for example, reducing or suspending face-to-face class sessions), an institution should notify HLC of the adjustment, including the steps it takes to ensure quality and continuity in its instructional activity.” Various resources for institutions, and a link to the form to report changes in business operations, can be found [here](#).

The foundation of HLC’s regulatory framework is its collection of “[Assumed Practices](#)” on the organization, structure, finance, governance, and operation of institutions of higher education. Related to teaching and learning, these Assumed Practices include guidance on academic program length (e.g., 120 credits for a bachelor’s degree), residency (at least 25% of a program’s credits should be awarded by the institution granting the degree), requirements for general education and the academic major, the use of online delivery/remote instruction, faculty qualifications, and the like.

Following from the Assumed Practices, HLC has processes in place for institutions to either ***notify*** HLC when they have made a “[substantive change](#)” to a practice or in operations, or to ***request approval*** from HLC to implement a particular change. Some changes require prior approval, and others simply require notification. Examples in our current situation that require either notification or prior approval include:

- 1) reducing the amount of clock time required for completion of an academic program by 10% or more (this includes ending an academic term earlier than scheduled)
- 2) reducing the length of an academic term for 25% or more of the courses in an academic program
- 3) expansion of distance education offerings (including moving programs online for the first time);
- 4) any new or temporary consortial arrangements whereby a partner institution provides 25% or more of the courses/credits in a program

One of the Assumed Practices is that institutions have clear and transparent policies and expectations for students on a variety of matters, including on the assignment of grades, and standards for maintaining satisfactory academic progress. HLC has no “rules” on the use of pass/fail grading, or on the percentage of courses in a program that can use a pass/fail option. Institutions can develop their own policies related to pass/fail grading, and these policies must be publicized to students in a clear, transparent manner. Likewise, if the institution implements a change in its pass/fail grading policy, this change must be communicated to students in a clear, transparent manner. There is nothing to prevent an institution from changing its grading scale from A-F to P/F. Institutions that make this change should consider the impact on other policies—including calculation of GPA—and how this change will be noted on transcripts (so as to not disadvantage students with future employers or with graduate schools).

Additional questions related to accreditation can be addressed to Dr. Chris Rasmussen, Director of Academic Affairs, at chris.rasmussen@dhe.state.co.us or 303-862-3008. The Higher Learning Commission can be reached at info@hlcommission.org or 800-621-7440.