



Higher Learning Commission

230 South LaSalle Street, Suite 7-500
Chicago, IL 60604
312.263.0456 | 800.621.7440
Fax: 312.263.7462 | hlcommission.org

July 2, 2024

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Dr. Darrin Martin
Interim President
Bluefield State University
219 Rock Street
Bluefield, WV 24701

Dear President Martin:

This letter is formal notification of action taken by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Board of Trustees (“the Board”) concerning Bluefield State University (“the Institution”). This action is effective as of the date the Board acted, June 27, 2024. In taking this action, the Board considered materials from the most recent Focused Visit, including, but not limited to: the Focused Visit report the institution submitted, the report from the Focused Visit team, the report of the Institutional Actions Council (IAC) Hearing Committee, and the institutional responses to these reports.

Summary of the Action: The Board continued the accreditation of the Institution. The institution meets Core Components 2.A, 2.C, 4.A, 4.B, and 5.A with concerns. The Institution is required to host a Focused Visit, as outlined below, no later than April 2025.

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:

Bluefield State University (“the Institution”) meets, but with concerns, Criterion Two, Core Component 2.A, “the institution establishes and follows policies and processes to ensure fair and ethical behavior on the part of its governing board, administration, faculty and staff,” for the following reason:

- The Institution is actively rebuilding structures and processes to ensure faculty and staff participation in policy development and decision-making. New hires now undergo a formal search process, standing committees have been reinstated, and the Institution’s Board of Governors has adopted a more participatory meeting agenda. However, these structures and processes are new, and the impact is untested.

The Institution meets, but with concerns, Criterion Two, Core 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 has made progress in addressing issues such as the Board of Governors not making decisions in the best interests of the institution; not being trained appropriately regarding policies and best practices for shared governance; not being unduly influenced by the Institution's President; and previously adopting policies that curtailed the ability of the faculty to oversee the development and implementation of the curriculum and other academic activities.
- The Institution, including the Board of Governors, leadership team, and faculty leaders have expressed a strong commitment to a sustainable and transparent process to ensure compliance with internal and external oversight.
- The Institution has taken proactive steps towards establishing sustainable and transparent processes, including reinstating more collaborative decision-making processes, such as several Faculty Assembly Committees to oversee academic functions; and engaging an external consultant for governance training to enhance Board effectiveness.
- Additional work is needed to ensure that the Board of Governors of the Institution is autonomous to make decisions in the best interest of the Institution including its ability to create and implement policies and processes for monitoring ethical behavior in the governance structure and throughout the Institution.

The Institution meets, but with concerns, Criterion Four, Core Component 4.A, "the institution ensures the quality of its educational offerings," for the following reason:

- The Institution has reinstated faculty committees through the Faculty Assembly, including the Academic Affairs Committee, which will provide oversight to the program review process. The new shared governance structure and the work of the Academic Affairs Committee needs time to be fully restored.

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 reinstated faculty committees through the Faculty Assembly, including the Assessment Committee. The Assessment Committee will review and revise the assessment process, including with recommended modifications. Additional work is required by the Institution to ensure that the new structure and the full cycle of assessment and resulting action is functional and effective.
- The Institution is reinstating a General Studies Task Force to revise and confirm the General Studies Curriculum and Institutional Learning Outcomes.
- Assessment of student learning at the Institution continued in 2023, although the formal process of review and recommendations for improvement was not functional.

The Institution meets, but with concerns, 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 has reestablished the Faculty Assembly and the University Council. This governance structure will ensure faculty engagement in academic activities.
- The Institution has demonstrated in action, communications, and direct policy implementation a commitment to restoring the shared governance model. Faculty and administration have already begun to work together to restore a collaborative and collegial culture. However, the Institution needs time to move towards a fully functional shared governance model.

Next Steps in the HLC Review Process

Focused Visit: The Board required that the Institution host a Focused Visit regarding Core Components 2.A, 2.C, 4.A, 4.B, and 5.A no later than April 2025.

Comprehensive Evaluation: The Institution has been maintained on the Standard Pathway with its next comprehensive evaluation (Year 4) in April 2026.

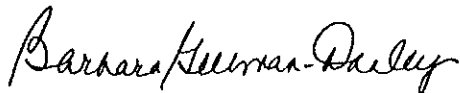
HLC Disclosure Obligations

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.

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. Thomas Bordenkircher.

Sincerely,



Barbara Gellman-Danley
President

Cc: Sarita Rhonemus, Interim Provost, Bluefield State University
Evaluation Team Chair
IAC Hearing Committee Chair
Thomas Bordenkircher, Vice President of Accreditation Relations, Higher Learning Commission
Marla Morgen, Vice President and General Counsel, Higher Learning Commission

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