

# A Primer on HLC Accreditation



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## Overview

- The North Central Association was founded in 1885.
- An association of colleges and schools in 19 states.
- Higher Learning Commission accredits degree granting institutions of higher education.
- HLC is recognized by the US Department of Education and the Council on Higher Education Accreditation and allows Cornell to participate in federally funded programs including Title IV student financial aid.
- Membership in HLC is voluntary.
- Cornell has been continuously accredited by the North Central Association since 1913.



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## Maintaining Accreditation

- Traditionally, accreditation through HLC was a once every ten year review called The Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality (PEAQ).
- Several years ago a new program, The Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) was started as an alternative to PEAQ in which institutions had ongoing accreditation projects rather than an every 10 year review.
- Cornell College has been in the PEAQ program and was last evaluated in 2002 and was expecting another PEAQ review in 2012.
- During an accreditation review, the institution must show that it meets the Five Criteria for Accreditation of the HLC.



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## The Criteria for Accreditation

- **Criterion One: Mission and Integrity.** The organization operates with integrity to ensure the fulfillment of its mission through structures and processes that involve the board, administration, faculty, staff, and students.



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- **Criterion Two: Preparing for the Future.** The organization's allocation of resources and its processes for evaluation and planning demonstrate its capacity to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its education, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.



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- **Criterion Three: Student Learning and Effective Teaching.** The organization provides evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness that demonstrates it is fulfilling its educational mission.



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- **Criterion Four: Acquisition, Discovery, and Application of Knowledge.** The organization promotes a life of learning for its faculty, administration, staff, and students by fostering and supporting inquiry, creativity, practice, and social responsibility in ways consistent with its mission.



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- **Criterion Five: Engagement and Service.** As called for by its mission, the organization identifies its constituencies and serves them in ways both value.



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## HLC Pathways

- In 2009 HLC introduced a new plan for accreditation called Pathways which, in some ways, is a combination of PEAQ and AQIP.
- Fourteen institutions were chosen to “pioneer” the new process of accreditation. Cornell College is one of those “pioneer” schools.
- Pathways, although still under development, will have two sections:
  - The Assurance Process
  - The Quality Improvement Process
- Through Pathways, accreditation will become an ongoing relationship with HLC rather than an every 10 year review.



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## Assurance Process

- The intent is to collect data and analysis from the institution that gives evidence that the college meets the Five Criteria for Accreditation, all general institutional requirements, and federal requirements through the Department of Education.
- Cornell College will submit a wide variety of data, into an electronic portfolio, to HLC each year. In addition, the college will submit an institutional analysis of the data demonstrating that the college meets the Five Criteria.
- HLC has not yet finalized the exact data required, the parameters for the analysis document, or the exact method of electronic submission.



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## The Improvement Process

- Each institution will develop a “quality initiative project” that will be an ongoing process on a focused improvement.
- Cornell College has developed an initiative entitled “Comprehensive Growth: Purpose, Principles, and Process” related to the strategic goal of the college to grow the student population over the next few years.
- Cornell’s initiative was approved by HLC last spring and is currently ongoing.
- The college will need to make periodic reports to HLC about progress on the project and may have visits from an HLC consultant/evaluator at some point.



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## The Federal Government Enters the Picture

- The Department of Education under both the Bush and Obama administrations has been critical of regional accrediting agencies including HLC related to their criteria and methods of accreditation.
- The Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE) of the U.S. Department of Education required HLC to file a compliance report for a corrective action plan by August 2, 2010.
- The DOE has created a list of “minimum expectations” that all institutions must demonstrate compliance. These include items related to fiduciary responsibility, public information, programs and instruction, the faculty, student support services, and resources.



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## **The Feds Continued....**

- Institutions must demonstrate they meet the “minimum expectations” or risk losing access to federal funds.
- Federal funding includes various grant programs, but most importantly for Cornell College, student financial aid funding.
- Cornell College is taking the steps necessary to demonstrate compliance.
- The DOE involvement has made the new Pathways method of reaccreditation to be constantly evolving and as a “pioneer” institution Cornell has yet to see exactly how the process will work .



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## **Summary of Strengths Identified by HLC in 2002**

- Clear mission and goals permeating all sectors of the college
- Strong Board of Trustees and shared governance at the college
- Strong, dedicated faculty and administrative staff
- Significant improvements to the physical plant and IT
- Strong student life and athletic programs
- Strong institutional integrity



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### **Summary of Challenges Identified by HLC in 2002**

- Lack of resources for academics, facility, IT, library, etc.
- Unsustainably high tuition discount rate
- Student retention
- Endowment draws in excess of internal policy and national norms
- Lack of a culture of assessment of student learning across campus
- Overall college planning lacks focus
- Although progress made in attracting more women to the faculty, overall faculty diversity is an issue



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### **Cornell College Reaccreditation Team**

- Administrative Oversight: Becki Elkins and Joe Dieker
- Committee Co-Chairs: Tony Plaut and Dianne Timm
- Committee members: Sue Astley, Michelle Mouton, Craig Teague, Steve DeVries, Heidi Levine, Karen Mercer, Todd White, Jessica Johanningmeier, John Cochrane
- C-SC HLC Liason: Bob Appleson



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## Conclusions

- Accreditation is much more than an academic concern—all college constituents need to be involved
- Finances, discount rate, and retention will continue to be concerns of HLC
- Faculty diversity will continue to be a concern of HLC
- Assessment of student learning is much improved since 2002
- College-wide planning efforts are much stronger than 2002
- We have made good progress in many areas of concern cited in 2002
- HLC has expressed good confidence in the quality of Cornell College by choosing us to be a “pioneer” in the new Pathways accreditation system



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