



A SPACE TO INNOVATE

RECOMMENDATION FROM HLC'S INNOVATION ZONE

Introduction

The Higher Learning Commission's (HLC's) Innovation Zone launched its work in June 2017. At the outset, the participants identified the barriers to innovation within the current policies and processes at HLC. Rapid changes in the workforce require institutions to be nimble, to respond to new fields of study and new modalities in a timely manner. The Innovation Zone participants propose an experimental zone ("HLC Zone") where colleges and universities work in partnership with HLC to create, test and implement new ideas. The HLC Zone is not intended to avoid accountability or to reduce the need for quality measures. Instead, the proposed model would ensure that HLC is both aware and participative in the process of experimentation at member institutions. Innovation Zone participants propose a set of minimum requirements, explore the role of peer review, outline potential monitoring processes and identify critical outcomes to determine whether performance objectives were met in order to continue or change course.

Share Feedback

HLC is asking institutional representatives and peer reviewers to share your thoughts about this proposal as well as the opportunities and challenges envisioned with the potential implementation. Please provide [comments](#) to HLC on this proposal.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Innovations in technology, andragogy (or pedagogy) and business models are driving rapid change in the way knowledge and skills are acquired by traditional and non-traditional students in a variety of settings. The demands on workforce talent development—high-velocity acquisition of knowledge and skills in specific domains combined with developing the ability to engage actively in lifelong learning—often necessitate the delivery of educational programs and activities in ways that may not fit the traditional delivery models that exist in post-secondary institutions. In addition, the compelling motivation for the HLC Zone is the proliferation of models by alternative providers that are unconstrained by accreditation. If institutions in good accreditation standing were free to innovate as alternative providers are, where the only essential measure of success is learning, was coupled with the quality assurance of accreditation, then institutions would have the ability to focus their efforts on exploring new models.

Institutions may wish to rethink the very definition of partnerships, degrees and credentials. These opportunities have the potential to advance goals such as more flexible and personalized learning, high-quality student outcomes, reduced student costs and/or institutional expenses, and allow institutions to be more nimble in responding to market needs.

The HLC Zone would be a space in which an institution in good standing with HLC could test new models of teaching and learning which may combine traditional and non-traditional approaches (such as intensive short-term programs, online or blended approaches, or personalized/adaptive learning) that do not lend themselves to be measured well through conventional metrics such as credit hours or clock hours. The HLC Zone would be for truly innovative modes of delivery and acquisition of knowledge and skills leading to a credential (degree/certificate/other) to which the standards of accreditation remain applied to assure quality of learning, demonstrate the ability to meet learning outcomes and help students to achieve their educational goals over a multi-year process. For example, the total number of credits required to earn degrees is arbitrary and antiquated; a learner-based outcomes model might challenge these definitions. In addition, the awarding of credit for alternative credentials, based on assessed knowledge instead of time in the classroom, could be a viable project. The HLC Zone should be a place to experiment, learn and improve new and innovative learning models, capture substantial learning in meaningful and transparent ways that can be

translated for students' benefit and allow for the rapid prototyping of improved learning opportunities.

The framework of the U.S. Department of Education's Experimental Sites Initiatives (ESI) was considered. The process of applying for ESI is similar as the institution is required to submit a detailed application outlining their desired projects and outcomes. Following acceptance, the U.S. Department of Education requires quarterly updates. However, the ESI system is not designed for qualitative feedback or for ongoing improvement, in part because quality improvement is not the traditional role of the Department.

In contrast, the HLC Zone might offer mentor or scholars from HLC institutions who can offer guidance, similar to the current HLC Academies, where there is quarterly and ongoing feedback alongside an expectation to respond to past challenges and document improvements.

Historically, HLC initiatives are not subject to dramatic changes in direction, which differs from the U.S. Department of Education as seen with the transition following the 2016 election. The HLC Zone could provide a consistent framework for experimentation to occur over a multi-year period.

There are more than 10 ESIs with 40 HLC institutions involved. Many of these institutions may be instrumental in helping to build the HLC Zone, following the same strategies used to develop other HLC initiatives such as the Open Pathway.

HLC would need to request and gain approval from the U.S. Department of Education to organize and coordinate the process to allow for experimentation if Title IV funds are to be accessed for the enrolled students. On the other hand, institutions may elect to forego the use of federal funds for the students, which would allow freedom from regulations that may inhibit experimentation.

Peer Review

Peer review remains a viable, feasible, and scalable way to vet and support applications for change and innovation. In the HLC Zone, the peer review focus would be on two essential requirements: (1) Evaluating the strength of the application and making a recommendation to approve or deny, and (2) helping to improve the quality, defined as fitness to purpose, of the proposed innovation.

This section describes the infrastructure needed to recruit, train, and assign a cluster of specialized peer reviewers, and expands on the two requirements.

The decision to approve or deny an application for change often rests on peer reviewers' interpretation and judgment. As such, peer reviewers provide important inputs to the decision-making process that institutions depend on to improve, grow, and expand their institutions.

For the HLC Zone initiatives, peer reviewers should not only document evidence supporting a recommendation to approve or deny an application, but should also improve the clarity of the idea to solve a problem or capitalize on an opportunity and refine the intentions and program design to fulfill them.

"Peers" in the context of the HLC Zone are from schools exploring the similar innovations. This can be leveraged to the advantage of each school in the HLC Zone. For example, if all schools trying to figure out adaptive learning together serve as each other's peers, the group will have a synergy of innovation. As such, peer reviewers should have a developed expertise, or transferable expertise, in the innovations under consideration as well as innovation frameworks to ask the institution the right questions, draw out automatic assumptions, and challenge approaches.

(Feedback could be shared in an environment similar to what the HLC Academies' Collaboration Network.)

Peer reviewers also should have concomitant mindsets that hold institutions accountable to requirements while boldly

supporting the desire to innovate. These peer reviewers should provide clear and unambiguous evaluative statements followed by constructive comments to encourage the strongest innovation possible. Peer reviewers with these dually-held mindsets could be identified by referrals and an application process.

Training for peer review of the HLC Zone should include evaluation techniques and consulting intentions specifically designed for this experiment. With sample applications, training could provide emphasis on the diversity of ways institutions may demonstrate the ability to meet the thresholds necessary to participate in the initiative. Sample feedback reports could be used to assess inter-rater reliability, face validity, and content validity of the application and the feedback, including the constructiveness of feedback comments.¹

After assignments are made, peer reviewers and institutional representatives would meet to create shared expectations of the review and consulting experience. This meeting would cover personal introductions, process reviews and decision criteria used by the peer reviewer, as well as their consulting framework.

Besides clear and mutual understanding of the process, the goal of this first meeting would be to establish mutual trust in a context of "bold support" where the peer reviewer makes judgments regarding the quality of the proposed innovation and its implementation.

One viable disposition decision of the peer reviewer must be a recommendation of "deny/stop" if he or she truly believes the institution has not offered a viable proposal or has not implemented the innovation with integrity or effectiveness. An important and explicit feedback loop for both the peer reviewer and the institution is the opportunity to mutually provide feedback on the quality of the proposal, review, consulting, and responsiveness. The peer review and consultancy continues through the innovation implementation where the institution reports to HLC on their success measures and the decision to stop or scale the innovation as appropriate. It may be necessary for an experimental initiative to end, either by determination made by the institution and/or peer reviewers. Recognizing the experimental nature of the program, safety guards must be in place to provide options for students to continue their education in a different program either at the institution or through teach out.

¹Van Rooyen, S., Black, N., and Godlee, F. (1999). Development of the Review Quality Instrument (RQI) for assessing peer review manuscripts. *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology*, 52(7), 625-629.

Elements of the Initiative

The proposed initiative would be a revised substantive change process which recognizes the changing nature of higher education by modifying the application and monitoring processes currently being followed.

1 Step One: Application

At various points in time, HLC will call for applications around a specific initiative. This will provide institutions the opportunity to prepare applications and, if accepted into a cohort, work and learn from the collective group.

The applying institution will be asked to:

- Describe the nature of the innovation.
- Define the target student (who will benefit).
- Define the learning outcomes that will be of value to other schools or employers.
- Outline the timeframe needed to move students from matriculation to completion.
- Explain the planning, resources and support services allocated for this initiative.
- Define measures along the way to test for implementation success, midpoint review and final assessment.
- Determine how to accommodate students that leave the initiative (teach out).

Institutions eligible to participate in the HLC Zone must be in good standing with HLC. The applying institution needs to outline a clear path for students—who will benefit and how the institution will document that

learning has occurred and translate it to other institutions (schools or employers). The proposal needs to demonstrate the planning, human and technical resources, definition of goals and ability to measure those goals. Transparent measures should define what may demonstrate early engagement success and the value to the students.

The steps for evaluating the applications include:

- Develop a cluster of peer reviewers familiar with launching innovative programs,
- Utilize rubric for review of the applications,
- Develop selection criteria and determine what is a manageable number of students to be affected in case of teach out, and
- Preferably at least one peer reviewer(s) assigned for the length of the initiative.

It is hoped that as HLC processes the application, peer reviewers can guide and bring to the project a dialogue that assists applicants in planning their project in a way that maximizes transparency, clarity of outcomes and ability for the institution and other institutions to learn. Transparency and clarity are critical to the success of the students at the institution and also for peer institutions to learn and define innovation together.

2 Step Two: Implementation

Essential for the HLC Zone is the documentation before, during, and after implementation of the major measures to be used and to focus on measurable outcomes of student learning.

Once approval is granted and agreed to by the institution and HLC, the institution can begin to market the initiative. An overview report should be generated early in the implementation process. Participating institutions will complete an executive summary within six months of enrollment of the first cohort of students.

An executive summary of metrics including:

- Number of students enrolled.

- Engagement of those students and judgment on likely persistence to the midpoint and/or end of the program of study.
- Early feedback from faculty about curricular and student progress according to plan.

Peer review evaluation of the implementation:

- Suggestions for improvement.
- Feedback on requests to change the project.
- If necessary, recommend teach out of students.

3 Step Three: Monitoring

Midterm Report: The review at this stage would be more substantial than the Implementation Check.

Institutions should provide:

- Number of students enrolled.
- Engagement of those students and judgment on likely persistence at the midpoint and end of the program of study.
- Progression and departure statistics.
- Methods utilized to increase ability of students to meet personal goals.
- Early feedback from faculty about curricular and student progress according to plan.
- Documentation of expected and actual learning outcomes achieved to date.
- Lessons learned.

It is anticipated that a number of these initiatives would be short-term programs (possibly 6-18 months) that may

lead to externally-recognized certifications or employment opportunities. However, there may be longer initiatives, such as those involved in competency-based education programs, that would last 3-5 years.

The midterm check would occur for reflection, course correction or possible growth. As with other HLC initiatives that incorporate learning opportunities, providing feedback on the midterm report will be vital for the membership and encourage the development of good practice among institutions.

Peer review evaluation of the midterm would include:

- Suggestions for improvement.
- Feedback on institutional requests to change the initiative.
- Determination of expansion the program.
- If necessary, recommend teach out of students.

4 Step Four: Completion

The HLC Zone ultimately would develop knowledge and practices to increase the modes of delivery available to institutions, creating value to students. The final stage would identify lessons learned that focus on what doesn't work and what promising practices to encourage. HLC institutions value innovation and shared learning. Therefore, the Final Review should provide feedback on the project going forward and identify best practices to share.

The final report should evaluate the overall engagement, student progress and completion of the initiative.

Institutions should report:

- Numbers of current students in each phase.
- Documentation of expected and actual learning outcomes.

- Feedback from students, faculty and administrators on the successes or failures of the program.
- The identification of best practices and lessons learned.
- Consideration of a request for continuing initiative with more students.
- Request to teach out current students in the initiative (if necessary).

Peer review of the final report would include:

- Feedback on plan for growth and sharing of promising practices.
- Suggestions for improvement.
- If necessary, recommend teach-out of students if initiative is not to continue.

Outcomes of the HLC Zone

The outcomes of the HLC Zone will be measured by the development of programming that increases access, learning outcomes and system innovation. It will support those that want to innovate within an encouraging peer group with a willingness to learn and improve. With the innovation that many of the institutions accredited by HLC have begun, the time is right for an HLC Zone. The development of new models based on outcomes and the process for sharing the lessons along the way are vital. The enhancements available to institutions that want to learn from each other and increase their offerings based on lessons learned is an important outcome. Ultimately the goal will be to create access for all institutions that want to enhance their offerings with the knowledge and expertise of what has been learned in the HLC Zone.

Conclusion

It is important to note that HLC followed the same type of process proposed here when building the pathways. More than 60 institutions were involved in the development of HLC's pathways, and those representatives in turn served as part of the initial peer review teams to evaluate the institution's ability to meet the Criteria for Accreditation, as well as to provide advice regarding elements of the Pathways, such as the peer review team size and visit length, technology to be utilized, and eligibility factors for participation. The development of the HLC Zone as described above would allow for the development of new ideas while ensuring that academic quality and student outcomes remain integral to innovation. Participating institutions value the process of peer review and continuous improvement. In addition, institutions that apply are committed to reporting checkpoints that would inform their own college or university, HLC and the field.





ABOUT THE AUTHORS

HLC was awarded a \$500,000 Lumina Foundation grant in 2016 for programming to cultivate industry leading practices within the higher education accreditation process. One initiative resulting from the grant is the development of HLC's Innovation Zone. It is comprised of 10 representatives from institutions in HLC's region that are focused on innovative practices at the institutional level. This group met repeatedly in the last two years and identified two main areas in which HLC might be able to foster innovation:

- HLC substantive change process.
- A defined structure for institutions to test innovative practices.

HLC thanks the Innovation Zone participants, listed below, for their work to help HLC foster innovation in higher education.

- **Tawnie Cortez**, Senior Vice President for External and College Relations, Rasmussen College
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About the Higher Learning Commission: The Higher Learning Commission (hlcommission.org) accredits approximately 1,000 colleges and universities that have a home base in one of 19 states that stretch from West Virginia to Arizona. HLC is a private, nonprofit regional accrediting agency. HLC's mission is to assure and advance the quality of higher learning.

About Lumina Foundation: Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. We envision a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation's need for talent through a broad range of credentials. Our goal is to prepare people for informed citizenship and for success in a global economy.

