

The 2025 Strategic Plan

EVOLVE



HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION



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EVOLVE

Evolve: To develop gradually, especially from a simple to a more complicated form.

—Oxford Dictionaries

In 2017, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) presented its strategic plan, *Beyond the Horizon*, with five tenets: Value to Membership, Innovation, Student Success, Thought Leadership and Advocacy (VISTA). Several new ideas emerged from that plan, and ultimately all strategic goals were met. Stakeholder meetings were held in Washington, D.C., and Chicago to gather input on the recommendations and outcomes of the plan, as well as to identify potential next steps and integrate continuing projects into any subsequent strategic initiatives.

In 2019, efforts began to develop the sequel to VISTA, including member surveys, listening sessions at the Annual Conference and extensive Board engagement through the Committee on Strategy. After initial meetings, six themes emerged: Equity, Vision, Outcomes, Leadership, Value and Engagement (EVOLVE). These themes became the basis of the current plan and the six staff committees working on them.

It was determined that both the Mission and Vision Statements of HLC would be updated in ways to reflect the future directions of the organization. These statements are included in this document. Further, extensive work was conducted on trends in higher education and internal trends at HLC. Due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, a reset was put in place to assure that the pandemic impacts were included in the trends analysis. None of us involved in the planning process could have imagined such a sudden shift in higher education and the long-term effects of the pandemic and the economy. To add to this constantly moving environment, social

unrest came to the forefront through many salient events, circumstances and behaviors. All of these trends are included, with implications for higher education and, by association, accreditation.

In July 2020, new federal regulations came into play and the “regional” accrediting bodies were changed to “institutional.” This significant regulatory shift allowed HLC to consider expanding its geographic area beyond 19 states. Subsequently, the Board moved to change the bylaws to accommodate this change, and the changing landscape for accreditation is reflected in EVOLVE.

During the planning process, it was determined that Equity had to be the first strategic direction, reflecting HLC’s sensitivity to the related issues of access and student success. The Vision section addresses the new mission, the overall vision and 12 specific directions and actions to realize them. Outcomes addresses the importance of student success and related metrics, building a bridge from the previous plan. Leadership includes two parts: institutional leadership and HLC thought leadership. Value includes a continuation of value to members and the value proposition of higher education. Engagement has three parts: outreach, civic engagement and advocacy.

EVOLVE is a membership plan, written with extensive inclusion of all stakeholders. It will provide direction for HLC through 2025. We look forward to working with our institutions as the evolution unfolds. Thank you to everyone who participated in this important initiative. We pledge to keep you involved.

Barbara Gellman-Danley
President, HLC



TRENDS

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) compiles an annual list of higher education trends. This year the trends inform HLC’s strategic plan, EVOLVE. The information gathered provides insight into one of the most dynamic years in world history, as well as a lens into the future of postsecondary education. The evolving information about the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with growing social unrest and a momentous demographic shift in the traditional student population, will impact higher education forever. Changes in the White House and Congress will also shift some federal policy and financial support related to higher education. HLC member input contributed to the trends identified through surveys, conversations and submissions for a video for the HLC 125th anniversary time capsule. Despite the many challenges identified, the resilience of higher education remains remarkable during these times of crisis.

FINANCE

- Colleges and universities are facing significant resource challenges, which can result in mergers, affiliations, acquisitions and closures. Cuts in state funding and philanthropic donations and contraction of other revenue sources are leading to cash-flow concerns.
- Programs are being eliminated, often in the liberal arts. At the same time, new programs are being developed.
- Students are increasingly choosing a gap year after high school in response to limitations of on-site offerings, extracurricular activities and support services due to the pandemic.
- There is a rise in “mega universities,” many already well-prepared for remote learning.
- The cost of pandemic adaptations, coupled with health and wellness expenses, are placing increased pressures on budgets.
- Tuition is being adjusted and/or challenged during the pivot to online learning.
- The increased safety demands of social distancing and related requirements have resulted in threats to the current residential model, which are expected to continue after the pandemic ends.
- State and local investment in higher education, while relatively stable, has not reverted to levels seen before the 2008 recession. Increased expenses related to the pandemic have further constricted support.
- Public-private partnerships are increasing.
- Luxury amenities, a growing trend in the past two decades, are now under increased scrutiny, yet are still a part of the competitive environment.
- The high cost of new technology infrastructures and software adds to financial pressures.
- There is growing public pressure about the cost of college and the resultant return on investment (ROI), which is creating increased demands for transparency of operations and evidence of the value of higher education.

- Colleges and universities will need to make a stronger case regarding the value proposition of higher education.
- A quality education with measurable outcomes will continue to affirm the lifelong impact of earning a degree. The challenge will be balancing the ability for job placement and the importance of critical thinking. They are not mutually exclusive.

TEACHING, LEARNING AND ENROLLMENT

- Higher education continues to see a rise in the number of adult learners, with an accompanying decline in the 18- to 22-year-old demographic.
- The on-campus model is threatened by remote online learning and a hybrid of both on-campus and online. The move to these methods during the pandemic unveils the opportunities of choice, for both students and their institutions. It will permanently change higher education, although the level of impact is unknown.
- The “edifice complex” (adding new buildings) is challenged by the growth in remote online learning.
- The rise of credentials creates a dichotomy of choice, with students able to follow an expedited path to job placement and promotion. Credentials can lead to a degree, yet in many cases they stand alone, offered within or outside of higher education institutions.
- Displaced workers who normally turn to college courses and programs to improve their economic status are sometimes unable to pay tuition and fees as a result of the pandemic. Some do not have access to basic needs and cannot pay for gas to drive to a campus. Access to the internet and technology is a limiting factor for low-income students.
- The pandemic impacts access to clinicals, internships and apprenticeships aligned with programs due to increased health and safety compliance requirements.
- The rise of “in loco parentis” is apparent on campuses, sometimes putting faculty on the frontline of identifying pressures on students.
- The pivot from traditional teaching and learning methods is a culture shift on most campuses, challenging age-old traditions and the role of faculty.
- Faculty have been adding increased training for online learning to their workloads, essentially “drinking from the fire hose” during the first few semesters of the pandemic. However, the potential long-term shifts

to online learning allow more strategic preparation for institutions.

- The public is demanding student success outcomes data. The Biden administration, Congress and other stakeholders will place higher expectations for accountability on colleges and universities. Assessment is critical to assure positive learner outcomes.
- Research can be limited by the pandemic, with a concomitant impact on scholarship.
- Faculty are under increased stress, which has an overall impact on teaching and learning for students.
- Despite all the challenges, resilience and creativity are emerging that will permanently change the higher education landscape in positive ways.

LEADERSHIP IN A TIME OF CRISIS

- Crisis leadership training is imperative. Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) must be prepared for crises, both those that are predictable and others that were never imagined.
- Collaborative leadership of governing boards and CEOs is critical in face of growing health and social crises that impact their students, staff and the local community.
- Strategic visioning is critical to all institutions. The most successful plans include metrics (Key Performance Indicators) to measure success and directly tie to budget decisions. The lessons learned from the pandemic will impact any existing plan, requiring adaptability and agility.
- A new role is emerging for Chief Transformation Officers (CTOs). These new positions are dedicated to innovation.
- Resilience is a critical skill set for leaders.
- Transparency in a time of crisis, coupled with effective social and emotional intelligence, has been demonstrated by successful leaders.
- Partnering with external stakeholders remains central to the credibility and success of leaders.
- During times of crisis, leaders tend to take care of others. They also need to tend to their own emotional health and wellness.
- Over the past few decades, the role of the college president has become increasingly difficult; the pandemic adds exponential pressure on those in charge.
- With the turnover in leadership in higher education, preparation for those in the pipeline is imperative.

- Overall, higher education’s resilience during times of crisis reflects the strength and adaptability of leadership. There are many success stories for which leaders should be proud and applauded.

COMMUNITY, CULTURE AND ENGAGEMENT

- The meaning of “community” and town-gown relationships is shifting during the pandemic. While there are stresses on decision makers during crises, the importance of partnerships continues to be critical.
- The natural inclination of students to gather is threatened by health crises and likely cannot be fully controlled. The tension to be with others while facing limitations is palpable.
- During moments of social justice unrest in history, higher education has been a place for all voices to be heard. Free speech is still being challenged on some fronts.
- The efforts of institutions to help during the pandemic (food banks, vaccine sites, etc.) demonstrate the heart of higher education and the concern for community engagement.

SOCIAL EQUITY AND OUTRAGE

- Equity in a time of crisis is a great concern. The social divide is heightened as a result of the pandemic and its economic impact. Colleges have a critical role in maintaining the momentum toward equity.
- An emphasis on the common good is timely, highlighting the need for the higher education community to continue to serve as thought leaders for change.
- Racism, anti-Semitism and other forms of hate will have long-term impacts on movements toward diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).
- Vitriol and fear are stimulating many to make their voices heard, which is seen on campuses in many ways.
- Assaults on democracy signal the importance of civic learning. Many higher education associations are supporting and advocating for social justice issues related to immigration, equity and other similar issues.
- Civic learning and engagement is mission-specific to colleges and universities, and each is responding in its own unique way.

- Low-income students are suffering the most as a result of the pandemic. Institutions will need to adapt to serve their needs.
- Colleges and universities have a great opportunity to “take advantage of a crisis” and adapt their culture, teaching and learning to reflect the need for societal changes that will impact equity.

STUDENTS, FACULTY AND BROKEN TRADITIONS

- Tenure and union contracts are at risk at some institutions, even without declaring fiscal exigency.
- Shifts in the residential model are seen at many institutions.
- The new remote learning environment impacts the overall culture of community on campuses.
- In the future, faculty office hours may not be held solely on campus.
- Productivity measurements will challenge current practices and hold the potential to strengthen outcomes, but many faculty members are not prepared for the likely pressures that will continue from the public, elected officials and the U.S. Department of Education.
- There is a critical need to focus on the unique mission of each institution in setting student success metrics, while not impairing students’ ability to transfer.
- Campus-affiliated daycare centers closed during the pandemic; their future is unknown.
- Doctoral programs are being disrupted by the pandemic.
- There is an increasing need for transfer options both now and in the future.
- The traditional model of students enrolling in courses and programs from one institution at a time is fading, as students increasingly take courses from multiple institutions simultaneously. This will lead to a heightened need for a national “learner record.”
- Credentials and micro-credentials are increasing, while degree completion remains a concern. The two do not need to be mutually exclusive.
- Extracurricular activities may return post-pandemic after “herd immunity” is attained through vaccination. However, questions remain about new levels of participation.

- A year after remote work was suddenly forced upon many, it is highly unlikely that higher education workplaces will remain the same. The long pandemic has heightened the awareness of the ability to be effective from a distance, part-time or full-time, in some job positions. A dispersed workforce will be implemented in many industries.

MENTAL HEALTH AND TRAUMA

- Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is front and center—safety and security first.
- A large percentage of students are experiencing depression and other mental health challenges.
- Faculty and staff are also under extreme stress from the pandemic and other pressures.
- CEOs are facing very difficult decisions, as well as opportunities for innovation. Both can cause stress.
- Awareness and fear are now part of the “normal” way of thinking; medical experts predict there will be more pandemics in the future.
- Many express the concern that remote work and learning is causing “Zoom fatigue.”
- Employees are working more hours, not less.
- Institutional health centers are not fully prepared | to meet all these needs.

- The current crises are an opportunity for institutions to respond in ways that can improve mental health for students, staff and other stakeholders.

ACCREDITATION AND THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE

- The above trends impact all member institutions, serving to inform HLC’s decisions, policies and practices.
- As a result of recent changes to federal regulations, historically regional accreditors are no longer bound to a specific geographic area, and HLC is now categorized as an institutional accreditor. The HLC Board of Trustees moved to change its bylaws to consider applications from colleges and universities from all 50 states.
- HLC continues to work closely with other members of the Triad (the states, the federal government and accreditors) to advance an advocacy agenda for higher education.
- The EVOLVE plan, adopted by the HLC Board in February 2021, will be in effect through the year 2025. As with all plans, HLC will continue to address dynamic changing issues in higher education.

HLC would like to thank the higher education press and national higher education associations for their diligent work in following the pandemic and social crises of the past year.







E Equity

The role of equity in accreditation and quality assurance is critical; the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the inequities existing in and endemic to higher education. To that end, an equity framework should permeate not only all levels of institutions (e.g., students, staff, faculty and governing boards) but also their accreditors (e.g., the Peer Corps and review process). These goals focus on HLC's commitment to modeling fairness, quality and access for all learners and institutions; they also emphasize the importance of all students having equitable access to higher education.

1. HLC will ensure that concepts of equity, diversity, access and inclusion are demonstrated in its mission and other foundational statements.

Action Steps

- Develop HLC definitions of equity, diversity, access and inclusion.
- Test the definitions against HLC's mission, vision and values. Assure consistency of interpretation by all staff and peer reviewers.
- Review HLC's Principles of Operation to assure they address equity, diversity, access and inclusion.
- Work to assure that the open access agenda in higher education is not compromised.

2. HLC will actively promote an understanding of and sensitivity to equity principles in its interactions with institutions and other stakeholders.

Action Steps

- Regularly identify potential trends regarding inequities relative to accreditation policies and processes by disaggregating and analyzing evaluation data (e.g., identification of institutional types that flag consistently on particular Core Components, sanctions or Show-Cause Orders).
- Explore various approaches to differential accreditation.
- Work with the Peer Corps Diversity Committee to provide additional training to peer reviewers on promising practices for evaluating equity, diversity, access and inclusion at institutions.
- Strengthen evaluations and training to improve interactions among peer review team members in order to reduce micro-aggressions and other forms of unconsciously discriminatory behaviors.
- Review (and, if necessary, revise) the Criteria for Accreditation to include equity principles. Hold a focus group and a symposium.





3. HLC will assess and address equity in relation to its operational policies and related procedures.

Action Steps

- Develop a process and schedule to review alignment to equity of current internal operating policies and related procedures.
- Evaluate the developed processes one year after implementation and then bi-annually.
- Collect, review, and share Equal Employment Opportunity information with HLC employees.
- Provide “just-in-time” training regarding implicit bias when seeking new employees.
- Focus on building the diversity of HLC’s Board of Trustees and employees.
- Provide annual training to all internal stakeholders, including the HLC Board of Trustees, regarding understanding of and sensitivity to equity and access.

4. HLC will provide information to the public regarding issues that are impacted by equity considerations, for example educational attainment and high-quality credentials.

Action Steps

- Determine specific external events or organizations with which to partner in order to provide information on quality credentials to fit student needs and expectations.
- Work as a convener to develop resources for the public, thereby expanding HLC’s Student Resources.
- Host events for state and local officials, education administrators, and advocates to discuss the landscape in which education intersects with governmental policies and social/economic dynamics related to equity.





Vision

The Mission and Vision statements of the Higher Learning Commission reflect the changing higher education and accreditation landscape. They also illustrate the Higher Learning Commission's critical role in the higher education ecosystem.

MISSION STATEMENT

(Effective April 2021. Will be reviewed annually at the June Board of Trustees meeting.)

Advance the common good through quality assurance of higher education as the leader in equitable, transformative and trusted accreditation in the service of students and member institutions.

VISION STATEMENT

(Effective April 2021. Will be reviewed annually at the June Board of Trustees meeting.)

HLC will be the champion of quality higher education by working proactively in support of students, institutions and their communities

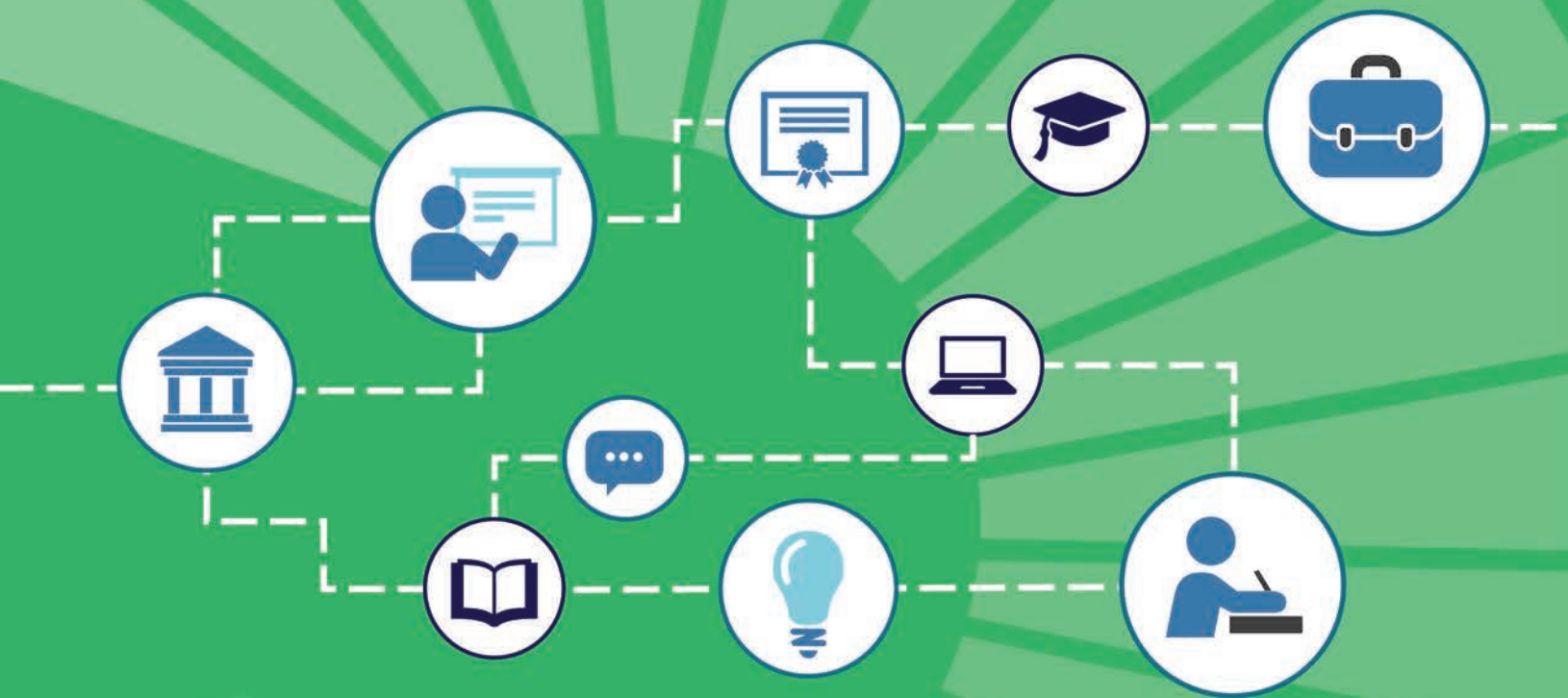
HLC will do so by:

1. Focusing on students first as the most critical stakeholder in higher education and institutional accreditation.
2. Exemplifying a commitment to equity in its operations and policies, service to members, Criteria for Accreditation and all other standards.
3. Emphasizing the importance of outcomes that lead to student success in academics, the workforce, engaged citizenry and social responsibility as they relate to institutional mission.

4. Providing leadership and advocacy in higher education and accreditation at the state and federal levels.
5. Demonstrating HLC's respect for the role of diversity and inclusion in higher education institutions and missions.
6. Exploring new business models which include an expansion of membership, including the wider higher education and postsecondary ecosystem.
7. Demonstrating agility in thought leadership to promote innovation.
8. Enhancing the value of higher education through accreditation and peer review.
9. Promoting and displaying civil discourse and engagement.
10. Fostering collaboration and member development through timely and informed educational opportunities.
11. Expanding and refining the use of technology and other services for the benefit of members engaging in accreditation activities as well as HLC's educational programs.

Continuously exploring new means and opportunities for achieving operational excellence in service to its membership.





Outcomes

Outcomes demonstrate success and opportunity—for students and their institutions. HLC has traditionally underscored its commitment to quality improvement around outcomes through criteria that call for evidence-based institutional commitment to goals, infrastructure, support services, strategies, assessment, and evaluation to support student learning and student success. Building on this tradition, HLC will continue its dedication to Outcomes through EVOLVE by focusing on clarity, transparency, collaboration, innovation, and, most importantly, a heightened sensitivity to institutional context during institutional evaluations and in the delivery of programs to support members.

1. Develop and implement standard definitions of learning outcomes/student success as well as an evaluative framework that links quality assurance and student success.

Action Steps

- Convene an external advisory committee to assist with proposing definitions for adoption and a guidance statement related to student success, based on the papers published by HLC in 2019 focused on student success and innovation.
- Modify and adapt Core Component 4.C to reflect agreed-upon definitions and expectations.
- Develop a framework for institutions to disaggregate student data, based on documented authentic learner intent, in order to provide a heightened level of awareness of how differing populations of students are being served in terms of access and attainment.
- Develop processes that position institutions to accept the credibility of quality assurance within the HLC membership for transfer purposes, ultimately determined at the institutional level.

2. Provide support to institutions in exploring alternative ways to measure and advance student success that are appropriate to their institutional context.

Action Steps

- Continue to demonstrate prominence and leadership in the higher education ecosystem by convening a national advisory committee, inclusive of non-traditional collaborators (e.g., business entities and peer non-profit organizations), to provide insight and advice regarding the changing credentials infrastructure and evolving needs of today's workforce.
- Building upon the strengths of the HLC Academies and the scholar network, develop a best practices series on institutional effectiveness and student success.
- Explore innovative practices and emerging education models that occurred due to unforeseen crises (e.g., state reductions in funding, natural and health disasters) and how institutional planning was impacted.
- Provide ongoing emphasis on the need for adequate resources to support student learning and outcomes (reflecting concerns about the effect of budget cuts on quality educational experiences).
- Work with various agencies and national organizations (e.g., National Student Clearinghouse) to improve data tracking and exchange.





3. Ensure that all member institutions have access to resources and expertise at HLC that support equitable outcomes for students.

Action Steps

- Study the impact of COVID-19 on each institution's ability to equitably meet student needs through crisis management planning. Document ongoing effects of the pandemic with special attention to the differences in response and effect by institutional type.
- Develop plans for advanced peer reviewer training on issues related to access and attainment so they can evaluate institutions based on the revised Criteria and guidance statements, with sensitivity to institutional mission and the changes made to peer review processes (i.e., comprehensive evaluations with a mostly virtual peer review team).
- Launch a communications strategy that helps institutions access the most current information and resources independently or by engaging in HLC events.
- Transition/develop online webinars, seminars, and workshops to increase access to support for quality improvement in the areas of greatest need.
- Create COVID/Crisis management focus groups to study how students were (and will continue to be) supported during the crisis in order to learn how HLC can assist institutions. The intent is to serve students not only during the pandemic but also during other unknown crises that might unfold in the future.
- Regularly evaluate fees for HLC's elective programming to assure equitable participation by members.

4. Develop and implement standard expectations of institutions' tracking and improvement of student learning outcomes to assure academic quality.

Action Steps

- Cultivate the work of the Assessment Taskforce to seek understanding regarding ongoing assessment and student learning challenges, to be used in identifying training and communication needs.
- Commit to taking a deeper look at available data to determine what information must be provided by and to institutions as they present evidence demonstrating they have met the Criteria and Core Components related to student learning outcomes.
- Clarify what peer reviewers should require when developing recommendations for monitoring related to student learning outcomes. Establish guidelines for reasonable timeframes for institutions to complete the work. Include consideration of what to review during periods of intense change to ensure that learning continues to occur even if the reporting mechanisms are modified.
- Convene an external advisory committee to assist with proposing definitions and a guidance statement related to measuring and analyzing learning outcomes.
- Explore HLC's potential role in assuring the quality of any non-traditional or non-credit credentials.



Leadership

Leadership strengths are critically important to the success of HLC's member institutions, including their boards and chief executive officers. They are also important for members of HLC's Board of Trustees and HLC leaders. Goals include the thought leadership role of HLC in higher education and all related processes: accreditation, student borrowing, student success, equity, state support etc., all of which are currently undergoing an unprecedented level of public scrutiny. The enhancement of leadership skills at educational institutions and organizations must become an organizational priority to successfully restore public confidence in higher education.

1. Develop independently and in collaboration with appropriate partner organizations, strategic research addressing key leadership issues, including student success and institutional effectiveness, that leverage HLC's unique position within higher education.

Action Steps

- Research and identify issues of importance to member institutions.
- Review HLC organizational capacity toward meeting this goal.
- Decide on the appropriate form and frequency for this communication. Develop, design and distribute the message.
- Determine timing of implementation based on HLC capacity and institutional needs.

2. Review HLC's professional development practices to ensure the currency of knowledge and skills needed for staff responsiveness in adapting policies and procedures to effectively serve member institutions in a dynamic higher education environment.

Action Steps

- Align HLC's professional development program to provide the skills needed by employees to address the changing landscape of higher education.
- Adopt professional development pathways appropriate to each employee's work responsibilities in light of changes in higher education and HLC's strategic priorities.
- Implement consistency of staff practices with HLC process changes in a timely fashion. Review annually.





3. Conduct a feasibility study on offering a mid- and/or executive-level leadership development program for institutional leaders focused on leading in a time of transformation.

Action Steps

- Survey institutions regarding their interest in/need for leadership programming on contemporary issues such as crisis management, finance, equity/student success and restoring public confidence in higher education.
- Develop leadership programs based on assessments of internal and external constituents and stakeholders.

4. Implement an annual process for highlighting professional contributions by HLC staff to underscore HLC’s commitment to thought leadership and advocacy.

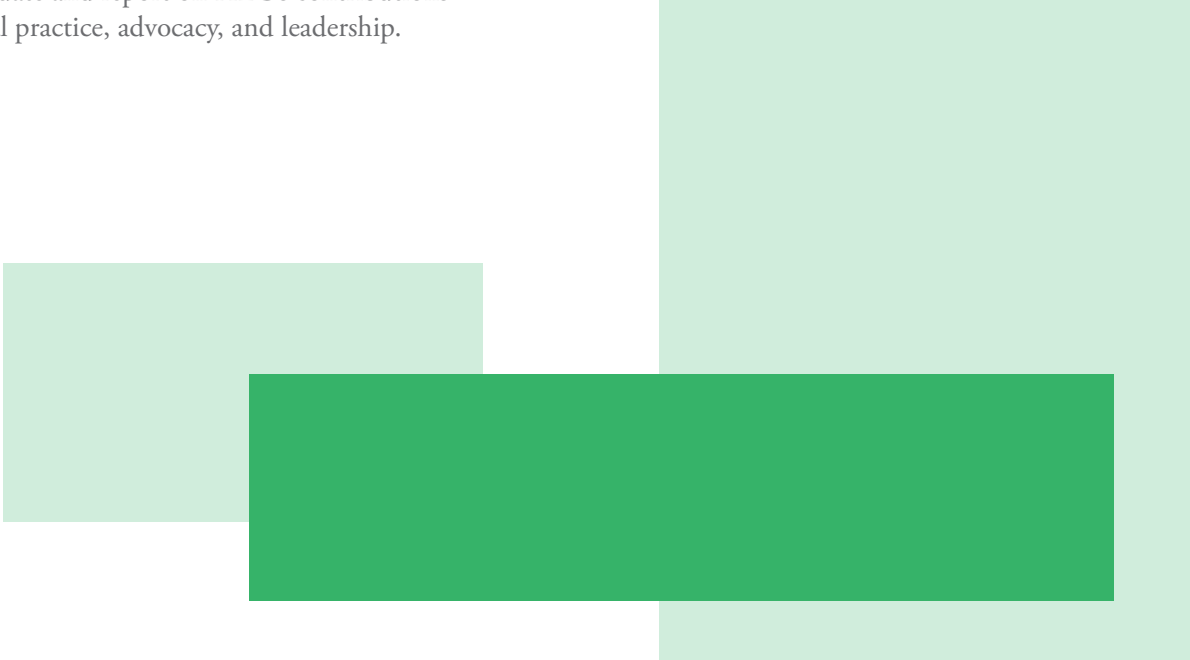
Action Steps

- Utilize results from HLC member surveys, processes, and other sources of feedback to track ongoing and emerging trends in higher education and encourage staff scholarship on selected topics.
- Support staff members’ completion of appropriate publications, presentations, and other professional contributions to promote thought leadership and advocacy.
- Annually evaluate and report on HLC’s contributions to professional practice, advocacy, and leadership.

5. In response to this period of transformative change, execute a regularized plan for improving selected HLC processes to ensure that HLC remains a leader in the field of accreditation and higher education in general.

Action Steps

- Convene conversations with member institutions, state agencies, and others to identify opportunities for process improvements.
- Review feedback from institutions, particularly from Accreditation Liaison Officers (ALOs), on the effectiveness of current processes and needed improvements.
- Establish “Process Improvements” as an area of focus in HLC’s regular communications with member institutions and periodically publish details of HLC process improvements.





V Value

HLC will continue to strengthen its value to members, ensuring the importance of accreditation and quality assurance. It will also address HLC's role in impacting public perception about the value of higher education and its lifelong return on investment (ROI).

1. Reconcile and address gaps between the diversity of HLC member institutions and existing HLC policies and processes intended to serve them.

Action Steps

- Establish a cycle of evaluation of the Pathway model to ensure it meets the needs of institutions assigned to each Pathway (with an equity lens).
- Review and update the factors for Pathway eligibility based on the characteristics of the institution.
- Conduct an inventory of all data HLC collects from member institutions, identify gaps and redundancies, and determine how best to aggregate the data in order to engage in data-informed organizational decision-making.
- Utilizing HLC's emerging institutional research capacity, provide trend and other comparative data to institutions to aid in the quality assurance process.
- Explore various approaches to differential accreditation, defining trends in relation to an appropriate metric.

2. Foster an infrastructure and ethos that serves member institutions by strengthening ongoing efforts to increase value of membership. HLC seeks to improve member benefits by providing cost-conscious support, self-service features linked to HLC processes, and consistent, clear and timely responses in all interactions with member institutions.

Action Steps

- In preparation for intensified financial challenges at member institutions, HLC will identify and implement options (e.g., scholarships, modality, revised cost structure) to help the growing number of resource-strapped institutions participate in HLC professional development opportunities.
- Continue to develop training and support for Accreditation Liaison Officers (ALOs), better define their role and create an ALO resource center.
- Expand and formalize the cycle of routine evaluation of internal processes, policies and practices.
- Implement new technology to streamline processes and better serve institutions; review Substantive Change process and materials to add automation, clarity and consistency when needed and possible; and explore expansion of SparQ for training purposes.
- Develop processes that enable institutions to receive needed information quickly, and establish internal expectations for institutional service and responsiveness.





3. Foster a more complete understanding of student success (particularly from a learner perspective) to focus all stakeholders on the workforce, civic, social and other benefits of higher education.

Action Steps

- Look after students' interests through HLC's consumer protection policies and ongoing interactions with institutions (student guide, student opinion survey, complaints, etc.).
- Communicate an understanding of HLC's focus on student learning and achievement. Share findings from HLC's Quality Awareness Initiatives and EVOLVE Outcomes Committee through such mechanisms as the Leaflet newsletter.
- Embed student intent in discussions of student success/retention methodologies and HLC's institutional accountability measures.
- Actively promote an understanding of and sensitivity to equity principles in HLC's interactions with institutions.

4. Reinforce the value of higher education by upholding, safeguarding and promoting widespread understanding about the role of accreditation in measuring quality and encouraging institutional improvement.

Action Steps

- Ensure rigor and consistency in peer review.
- Work with other higher education agencies to identify gaps that may exist in HLC's training offerings. Explore potential collaborations and include any identified gaps into future trainings.
- Foster the ability to create and support various communities of practice (e.g., student success, assessment, civic engagement, higher education research, etc.).
- In order to further clarify the knowledge of the general public about quality in higher education, develop appropriate materials for a variety of audiences.
- Leverage existing committees (e.g., the Assessment Task Force) and other ongoing process/policy review teams to identify opportunities for HLC to demonstrate and communicate the value of accreditation.





E Engagement

As an active member of the higher education ecosystem, HLC will seek opportunities for engagement with member institutions, governmental bodies, students and other stakeholders. Engagement includes outreach efforts, advocacy and civic engagement.

OUTREACH

1. Expand and strengthen collaboration with the Triad (state agencies, federal government and accreditors), K-12, associations and the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) to more strategically support improved equity in access and attainment in HLC's region.

Action Steps

- Continually cultivate new contacts and new audiences for HLC to connect with based on specific criteria and implement a regular schedule of convenings.
- Convene a group of stakeholders to work on a consumer guide(s) that increases awareness of the uses and value of accreditation information in the college choice process and a companion resource guide for high school guidance counselors and other institutional agents to use in advising on college and career options.
- Distribute newly developed resources to ensure accessibility to information.
- Survey new audiences regarding use of the guide(s) and provide recommendations going forward.
- In collaboration with the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) and the National Governors Association (NGA), develop a research initiative that will study states' performance-based funding models and disinvestment in higher education as they relate to the potential impact on student equity in outcomes and an institution's ability to meet the Criteria for Accreditation.
- Explore the opportunities for a taskforce with SHEEOs, the U.S. Department of Education and/or institutional/specialized/programmatic accreditors to study the potential utilization of agencies' data and dashboards to develop a commonly agreed-upon data structure, which will identify institutions that are succeeding in their efforts for access and attainment (and those requiring improvement).
- Strengthen relationships with state agencies and systems to build structures around information sharing and collaboration to support state-level initiatives to increase access and success in higher education.
- Provide presentations and attend relevant organizational conferences.
- Work with interested states to identify overlaps between HLC and state approval efforts and processes.
- Work with the U.S. Department of Education and the states to promote consistent (even if not identical) positions on student success; develop language that defines and legitimizes the various types of student success.
- Work with statewide systems to clarify their role in accreditation.



2. Invite the membership to include HLC as one avenue for telling their stories. Reinforce HLC's commitment to advancing quality by augmenting the voice of HLC's membership in publications and celebrating institutional exemplars.

Action Steps

- Ask institutions for their stories about responding to major changes affecting their experience of accreditation, including HLC's revised Criteria for Accreditation, revised federal regulations effective July 1, 2020, and related changes in HLC policies and procedures. Include institutions' responses to COVID-19 and their perspective as to how accreditation will need to adapt to be more effective during similar crises. Document ways institutions handled the fast-changing landscape. Identify the myriad of challenges institutions face as they continue to navigate accreditation adaptations during crises.
- Spotlight these stories in Leaflet, thereby sharing them with institutional members and other subscribers.

ADVOCACY

3. Complete one or more collaborative projects with states and the U.S. Department of Education. Coordinate a coalition of representatives from states, the U.S. Department of Education and institutional accreditors to execute a project recommended in the 2019 thought paper "Relationship to the Triad & Beyond," while demonstrating sensitivity to topical issues revealed by COVID-19.

Action Steps

- Invite representatives from states and the U.S. Department of Education to be part of a pilot implementation group to choose at least one project or subproject identified in the Triad thought paper, or a modified or new collaborative project (issues related to COVID-19, for example).
- Hold at least one convening on the project. Allow additional projects to evolve as the group continues to convene.
- Begin quarterly convenings to develop a project plan and implementation schedule through the years covered by EVOLVE 2025.

- Review the chosen project deliverables with external audiences to assess outcomes and results.
- Assess any deliverables/impact as each project is completed.

4. Develop and execute a long-term strategy and business plan to build HLC's brand nationally as a prominent and trusted institutional accreditor while remaining mindful of antitrust principles. Expand the understanding of HLC and its history as a leading quality assurance organization for the colleges and universities within its membership, dedicated to providing important validations for all higher education stakeholders.

Action Steps

- Invite accreditation champions drawn from up to 25 presidents, Accreditation Liaison Officers, state higher education officials and elected officials or staff to participate in discussion and training related to accreditation advocacy with elected officials on an as-needed basis.
- Convene and discuss ideas, next steps and development of resources. Update on an annual basis.
- Design training and develop resources.
- As relevant, ask participants to serve as advocates.

5. Enhance communications with specialized accreditors to better inform HLC's evaluations. Build relationships with specialized accreditors and enhance awareness of synergies within the higher education ecosystem.

Action Steps

- Survey specialized accreditors to identify areas of convergence and divergence in standards, with the stated purpose of identifying potential challenges for institutions.
- Convene a webinar twice annually consisting of institutional representatives and selected specialized accreditor(s) to brainstorm potential solutions and/or build awareness.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

6. Examine how Core Component 1.C is being implemented by institutions and reviewed by peer reviewers by evaluating team reports and assurance arguments against a rubric, then analyzing results and reporting findings to HLC leaders. Demonstrate responsiveness, fairness and continuous improvement by taking into account feedback that improves the language of Core Component 1.C within HLC's Criteria for Accreditation.

Action Steps

- Develop a rubric for evaluating team reports and Assurance Arguments with respect to Core Component 1.C; test the rubric and revise as needed.
- Analyze findings and submit recommendations to HLC leadership teams.
- Provide preliminary findings to the HLC Board for feedback on potential revisions to Core Component 1.C.
- Present findings and host listening sessions at the Annual Conference. Provide new training to peer reviewers on evaluating civic engagement activities.

7. Using findings from the evaluation of Core Component 1.C, provide additional training (webinars and conference sessions) for institutions and peer reviewers, and work toward adjusting the language in the Criteria for Accreditation as necessary. Potentially shift language related to Core Component 1.C during the next revision of the Criteria for Accreditation or earlier, based on feedback.

Action Steps

- Draft new language for Core Component 1.C for consideration by the HLC Board, integrating feedback from staff and input from institutions and peer reviewers at the Annual Conference.
- Offer new webinar trainings and Annual Conference sessions.

8. Strive to participate in the public dialog about civic engagement by speaking at national conferences and writing thought papers.

Action Steps

- Reach out to the higher education ecosystem by aligning HLC with institutional advocates for civic engagement: Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U); American Democracy Project at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU); Institute for Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE); Students Learn Students Vote Coalition (SLSV); American Political Science Association (APSA); Civic Nation; and Campus Compact.
- Develop a thought paper on civic engagement.



