

Civic Engagement, Regional Accreditation, and the Public Good

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“Every educational institution serves a public purpose.”

—The Higher Learning Commission’s Guiding Values

Emphasizing the public role of colleges and universities has long been a key mission of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the largest of the regional accreditors in the United States. In February 2019, the commission made this undertaking an explicit standard of academic quality when we revised and updated the Criteria for Accreditation. The new standard affirms the consent of our 981 member institutions to demonstrate their commitment to civic engagement, not just in theory but also in practice. This broad agreement is expressed in the new Core Component 1.C., which states, “The institution provides opportunities for civic engagement in a diverse, multicultural society and globally connected world, as appropriate within its mission and for the constituencies it serves” (Higher Learning Commission 2019).

When this provision takes effect in September 2020, colleges and universities in HLC’s nineteen-state region will be expected to provide material evidence that establishes their commitment to civic learning in accordance with their own articulated missions, student bodies, and communities. However they might choose to prepare students to participate as informed citizens or encourage their engagement in civic projects, member institutions will write narratives that demonstrate how they promote civic participation as a reflection of their commitment to the public good, and how they foster a climate of

respect internally and externally, promoting civic responsibility across their sphere of influence.

As we formulated the new expectations, HLC surveyed member institutions, conducted a rigorous internal analysis of the survey results, and solicited feedback from peer reviewers. The feedback we received from our entire membership helped us clarify our intent and refine our language, reflecting the commission’s commitment to group process, collaboration, and peer review. Members confirmed that the new core component actually reinforces their existing commitments to uphold the diverse public purposes of their enterprises. HLC’s new strategic plan, EVOLVE, underscores the importance of civic engagement to the commission. (For an introduction to EVOLVE, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTu4SRcUPeI>.)

The new expectations will affect all our member institutions, from small independent colleges to the largest state universities. It applies equally to single-focus academies, Bible colleges, public community colleges, and research institutions. Therefore, HLC will encourage institutions to embrace civic projects and opportunities that conform to their own values, needs, and commitments. The core component will be broadly inclusive, recognizing the value of focused seminars and colloquia, projects led by volunteers and interns, and service learning and experiential learning, as well as broadly conceived “town-gown” interactions.

Over the coming months, peer reviewers and HLC’s staff will help colleges and universities identify ways to recognize and document their commitment to civic learning and will provide

training opportunities to facilitate the review process. Some of these opportunities will build upon the existing activities of the Open Pathway (one of the commission’s two principal means for institutions to maintain accreditation), which had already developed partnerships with the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), Campus Compact, and the American Political Science Association (APSA) to promote civic engagement. Through these connections, HLC already offers its members access to these organizations’ resources on civic engagement, global learning, and cooperative development.

In a climate where “innovation” in higher education is defined by programs that focus narrowly on skills development or meeting employer needs, HLC’s commitment to civic engagement and democratic processes emerges as broadly applicable to help meet today’s pressing demands to change the social fabric, including recent calls to work for racial justice, to combat economic inequality, and to improve equity and access to higher education. It encourages institutions to engage with their communities rather than retreat into the ivory tower. It inspires them to acquire and cultivate a broad base of employee talent from a wide community base. It empowers faculty experts to work across physical and disciplinary boundaries and apply problem-solving approaches to address social concerns. It helps students learn to connect with others whose backgrounds might be different from their own and to learn the perspectives of others while working in teams. And it provides a model for institutions to embrace diversity and dialogue as priorities in educating students for a globally connected world. 📍

REFERENCE

HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION. 2019. “Criteria for Accreditation.” <https://www.hlcommission.org/Policies/criteria-and-core-components.html>.