

March 5, 2024

BY CERTIFIED MAIL

Dr. Allen Moss
Interim President
Mesalands Community College
911 South Tenth Street
Tucumcari, NM 88401

Dear President Moss:

This letter is formal notification of action taken by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Board of Trustees (“the Board”) concerning Mesalands Community College (“the Institution”). This action is effective as of the date the Board acted, February 29, 2024. In taking this action, the Board considered materials from the recent Advisory Visit, including, but not limited to the report from the peer review team and the institutional response to this report.

Summary of the Action: The Institution has been placed on Probation because it is out of compliance with the Criteria for Accreditation. The Institution meets Core Components 2.A, 2.C, 5.A and 5.B with concerns. The Institution does not meet Core Component 3.C and Assumed Practice D.3. The Institution is required to host a comprehensive evaluation no later than September 2025 to determine whether the Institution has ameliorated the findings that led to the imposition of the sanction.

Institutional Disclosure Obligation: HLC policy¹ requires that an institution inform its constituencies, including Board members, administrators, faculty, staff, students, prospective students, and any other constituencies about the sanction and how to contact HLC for further information. The policy also requires that an institution on sanction disclose this status whenever it refers to its HLC accreditation. HLC will monitor these disclosures to ensure they are accurate and in keeping with HLC policy. The Institution must submit drafts of its planned disclosures to these various audiences to its HLC Staff Liaison in advance of transmission and provide its Staff Liaison with a link to relevant information on its website. At a minimum, an institution must: i) provide a copy of this Action Letter to its governing board, administration, and faculty, ii) provide a copy of the enclosed Public Disclosure Notice to its currently enrolled students, and iii) prominently display the Mark of Accreditation Status where accreditation status is described on its website. Once disclosures have been made, the Institution must submit copies of its disclosure documents as a single .pdf file to www.hlcommission.org/upload (by selecting “Information about Institutional Disclosures”) no later than seven (7) business days following receipt of this Action Letter. HLC will retain this information as part of the Institution’s record.

¹ INST.E.20.010, Probation.

Provisional Plan: HLC policy also requires that the Institution file a Provisional Plan with HLC for review and approval by the Institutional Actions Council (IAC) according to HLC’s substantive change procedures. This Provisional Plan must comport with HLC’s requirements for Provisional Plans.² The Institution previously submitted a Provisional Plan for IAC approval but must update the Provisional Plan for HLC’s records within 90 calendar days of this letter.

Substantive Change: HLC policy³ states that while an institution may file one or more applications for substantive change during the probationary period, such applications will be subject to strict scrutiny and are likely to be denied or deferred until after the probationary period. HLC policy also requires that an institution placed on Probation be subject to additional requirements for substantive change during the probationary period and for three (3) years following the removal of Probation.⁴

Notification Program: HLC policy⁵ states that an institution placed on Probation is ineligible for the Notification Program for Additional Locations for three (3) years following the removal of Probation, even if other requirements for the Notification Program are met.

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:

Mesalands Community College (“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 reasons:

- The Institution has recently updated its Administrative and Personnel Handbooks. However, some of the Institution’s policies and processes ensuring fair and ethical behavior on the part of the governing board, administration, faculty, and staff are recently implemented and must be further communicated to campus and board constituents and otherwise implemented.
- Many of the Institution’s senior leaders are new to their roles, and current policies do not reflect the oversight responsibilities inherent in those roles.

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:

- Under new leadership, the board of the Institution appears to be functioning currently in line with its documented policies and processes. For example, the board is now meeting in person for regular and special topic meetings, with more frequent

² FDCR.B.10.010, HLC Approval of Institutional Teach-Out Arrangements.

³ INST.E.20.010, Probation.

⁴ INST.F.20.040, Substantive Change.

⁵ INST.E.20.010, Probation.

presence on campus and more visible support for the Institution's improvement efforts. However, the current board chair has only been in the role for a short time, during a period of leadership turmoil and financial distress.

- Until recently, the board of the Institution has not expressed sufficient commitment toward consistent and specific annual training for existing and new board members on its fiduciary duties.

The Institution does not meet Criterion Three, Core Component 3.C, "the institution has the faculty and staff needed for effective, high-quality programs and student services," for the following reasons:

- The Institution has implemented extreme budgetary restrictions while working to meet financial obligations and complete audits, which has resulted in significant reductions in staffing as a mechanism to address the budget shortfall.
- Current staffing levels at the Institution are not sufficient for the Institution to fulfill its mission and serve students into the future.
- The Institution has recently hired at least one new faculty member and two new staff members. However, the Institution has approximately 15 open positions posted on its website, with several positions remaining unfilled at this time.
- Staff knowledge and training are not equally strong across departments at the Institution. As such, there are gaps in some key positions that do not possess the knowledge and process documentation to execute current work and ensure ongoing continuity.

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's singular focus on finances to stabilize the Institution has precluded forward strategic planning or projection.
- The Institution has focused on key functions and operations, but has not engaged in sufficient future planning to ensure its long-term success.
- The Institution has completed financial audits for FY 2021 and 2022, and its FY 2023 audit is underway. With this increased stability, the Institution should now be able to commence long-term planning efforts in the coming year. However, these efforts have yet to commence.

The Institution meets, but with concerns, Criterion Five, Core Component 5.B, "the institution's resource base supports its educational offerings and its plans for maintaining and strengthening their quality in the future," for the following reasons:

- Staff reductions and limited trained personnel pose challenges to the Institution's operational and planning capacity.
- The recent CFO, who had an essential role in the institution's financial, structural, and system reforms, departed the Institution.

- The Institution has contracted with a consulting CFO who has overseen the completion of delayed financial audits.
- The Institution reimplemented its financial system, providing staff training to ensure proper usage and monitor financial oversight of spending against budget.
- The Institution’s Strategic Enrollment Management Plan, which forecasts increased student enrollment, seems ambitious and unsustainable given current challenges, though fall 2023 enrollment supports the Plan’s forecast. Increased enrollment demands more resources, which may strain the Institution's finances, since tuition does not significantly contribute to its revenue.

The Institution does not meet Assumed Practice D.3, “the institution has future financial projections addressing its long-term financial sustainability,” for the following reasons:

- The Institution is currently without future financial projections, primarily due to the absence of current unaudited financial statements.
- The Institution’s financial audit for FY 2022 is complete, and FY 2023 is underway. This will set this stage for future financial planning. However, these efforts have yet to commence.

The Board of Trustees of the Higher Learning Commission has determined based on the preceding findings and evidence in the record that the Institution is not in compliance with the Criteria for Accreditation and other HLC requirements and should therefore be placed on Probation.

Next Steps in the HLC Review Process

Assurance Filing: The Board required that the Institution submit an Assurance Filing no later than July 1, 2025, or at least eight weeks prior to the comprehensive evaluation, providing evidence that the Institution has ameliorated the findings of noncompliance identified in this action that resulted in the imposition of Probation and the findings of Met with Concerns, and providing evidence that the Institution meets the Criteria for Accreditation, Federal Compliance Requirements, and any cited Assumed Practices.

Comprehensive Evaluation: The Institution will host a comprehensive evaluation no later than September 2025 to enable a team of peer reviewers to determine whether the Institution has ameliorated the findings of noncompliance that led to the imposition of Probation and whether the Institution otherwise meets the Criteria for Accreditation, and to make a recommendation about whether the Board should remove Probation or take other action.

Board Review: The Board will review the documents associated with the evaluation at its February 2026 meeting to determine whether Probation shall be removed, or if the Institution has not provided sufficient evidence of amelioration as noted above, whether other action should be taken, up to and including withdrawal of accreditation.

Institutional Designation: The Institution was assigned the Institutional Designation of “Financial Distress” in March 2023. The purpose of the designation was to signal to the public

and others that HLC was aware of the Institution's financial circumstances, and that HLC would be conducting a further review of the Institution. As the evaluation that led to this action afforded an opportunity for HLC to thoroughly review the Institution's ongoing compliance with Core Component 5.B, the Institutional Designation is no longer necessary. Therefore, the designation is removed effective as of the date of the HLC Board's action.

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.

In accordance with HLC policy,⁶ information about this action is provided to members of the public and to other constituents in several ways. This Action Letter and the enclosed Public Disclosure Notice will be posted to HLC's website not more than one business day after this letter is sent to the Institution. Additionally, a summary of Board actions will be sent to appropriate state and federal agencies and accrediting associations. This summary 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. Jamie Stanesa.

Sincerely,



Barbara Gellman-Danley
President

Enc: Public Disclosure Notice

Cc: Chair of the Board of Trustees, Mesalands Community College
Denise Hackett, Chief Institutional Research and Accreditation Officer, Mesalands
Community College
Advisory Visit Team Chair
Stephanie Rodriguez, Cabinet Secretary, New Mexico Higher Education Department
Herman Bounds, Director, Accreditation Group, Office of Postsecondary Education,
U.S. Department of Education
Marla Morgen, Vice President and General Counsel, Higher Learning Commission
Jamie Stanesa, Vice President of Accreditation Relations, Higher Learning Commission

⁶ COMMA.10.010, Notice of Accreditation Actions, HLC Public Notices and Public Statements