

## HLC Conference 2021 Takeaways by Attendees

A number of faculty, staff, and administrators attended the 2021 HLC conference. Below are interesting insights they gained for UND's consideration.

### Trends in Higher Education

- The highest drop rates of online students occur during the first two semesters – thus, it is critical for faculty to know which students are in their first semesters of study. It is suggested that faculty reach out to students who miss an assignment within 24 hours of the due date. They should encourage completion and frame questions positively (e.g. “How can I support you in completing your work?” “How can I help remove/reduce obstacles?”). It is important to have an outreach strategy to students who have passed a “last access date” threshold. Use text, email to reach out in a positive tone, “How can I help?” Not, “Why isn't this done?”
- Today's students are more racially diverse and older. Nine percent of college students are first-generation immigrant and 42% of college students are students of color. Today's students support themselves and others, juggling many responsibilities: 64% of students work, 40% of them work full time, 49% of students are financially independent from their parents; 24% of students have children or other dependents. Today's students face homelessness, food insecurity, and poverty: 31% of students come from families at or below the Federal Poverty Guideline, 9% of students reported being homeless in the past year, 36% of students reported not knowing where their next meal was coming from. Quality assurance plays a key role in designing for equity. There is a need to audit for practices that exacerbate inequities.
- There are several tips on how faculty can provide equitable teaching:
  - Schools can offer different programs for first gen students to come to campus to acclimate. How can we do the same to help students? Not just for first generation students, but what about others, such as underrepresented minorities and what could this look like for online students?
  - Changes to higher education should be made with consideration to all, and there needs to be representation within the institution. The mission and vision should be mindful of the groups that it wants to serve.
- Higher education has always been an industry slow to change and has even been seen as change resistant. COVID challenged higher education and it responded rapidly and effectively. “Transformation versus incremental improvement is required to address challenges facing higher education.” I think it would be helpful to examine what parts of higher education (UND specifically) are in need of transformation versus small improvements, and what that could look like. This is leading some universities to hire new positions, such as a Chief Transformation Officer. Chief Transformation Officers are in charge of overseeing large-scale change processes and can be found at institutions like Arizona State University.
- COVID has taught us the importance of availability and human interaction. Regardless of how we “return” post-pandemic, we have to remember to be/remain available and responsive to students.
- There is a need for institutions to help students with workforce readiness. There is a gap in how employers (and Americans in general) view this (e.g., 95% of institutions say they

are preparing students for the workplace, but only 33% of employers and 39% of Americans feel that institutions are doing this). So as an institution, how can we fill this gap? Providing students with 'Occupational Insight' was discussed as a way to do just that. It seems like UND is positioned well to build with the ever growing Power BI data resources available to us (in addition, we have the UND Career Services Center).

## **Accreditation**

- It was stated by HLC representatives that all programs (degree and certificate granting) must complete an Inquiry Form for Changes to Existing Degree Programs whenever changes are made to the number of program credit hours, program content, name of program, delivery of program, and/or the addition of competency based education. Changes of more than 25% of content or credit hours at one time will require a substantive change application. This 25% can be an aggregate change. This is a Department of Education requirement for financial aid services. It also helps UND maintain a record of program changes, which is also required by HLC. Because most changes will require an additional form to HLC, please work with Tim Burrows on which form is appropriate and VPAA will consider ways to integrate the form into our curricular CourseLeaf process so there is no delay in offering programs.
- The HLC extra COVID questions regarding campus response to COVID are set to be removed after next year, which means we should not have to worry about addressing these specific items. We will still need to address the pandemic period in our Assurance Argument, but in our own way.
- "A truthful picture will be complex." As we write the assurance argument and collect evidence, we should include our weaknesses as well as our strengths. If someone from the re-affirmation team asks you for information, make sure it includes all the relevant complexities; do not try to hide the weaknesses.
- Having policies and referencing them is one appreciated factor in the accreditation process, but anything we have to show the policy in motion, like processes or training for faculty/staff are good too.
- Evidence does not have to go on forever--a few good pieces seem to be appreciated, but enough evidence to show the criterion is being met.
- Individuals may find it noteworthy that student outcome data must be published and easily accessible to the public. Further, if an institution uses student placement rates in marketing or recruitment materials, it must disclose the data from which the claims to have been derived.
- One takeaway was related to evaluation of adjunct/PT faculty. UND should have clear processes for evaluating such faculty.
- "Assurance mean Compliance," the review process is no longer a, "self-study," but rather an argument with evidence required to support the claims of meeting the Criteria for Accreditation.
- The reaccreditation process is a time to highlight institutional strengths and to plan for addressing areas of improvement. As an institution, we should focus on presenting evidence to drive the narrative on what we do well, and also in the areas in which we are growing and developing. This balanced approach underscores an institutional commitment to educational quality and continuous improvement.

## Assessment

- General Education “Essential Studies” needs key performance indicators to demonstrate why we have chosen the path we have in regards to our general education program. Where are we excelling and where do we need to improve? How are we able to take these data and use them to help better serve our students?
- The following question was asked, that I think it really gets at the heart of what we, as an institutional institution should be thinking about, “How do we best position the institution to continue preparing our students for the future while in the face of tough economic decisions”. Key ideas related to this question were:
  - Ensure alignment of in-demand skills to your course curriculum.
  - Assess and recognize the learning outcomes and skill attainment of your learners. Because while in some cases the assessment is happening, the recognition portion may not be happening. The presenter talked about things like digital badging and showcasing.
  - Enable students to identify skills they have gained in and outside the classroom. We need to be doing more than just teaching students the skills...we have to teach the students how to recognize they have the skill in order for them to really maximize it.
  - With limited or shrinking funds, assessment can inform future programmatic investment opportunities.
  - Assessment of data to understand trends in our demographic – are we staying the same or changing and if so what does that changing population look like and how do we transform to meet that population
  - Engage in data-informed reflective practice. Take advantage of opportunities to engage in informative assessment of student learning in your virtual learning environment. Then, take time to reflect on what you come to know about students’ learning and be intentional in taking action, or making changes to your virtual learning environment (and to students’ virtual learning experiences) based on the assessment data that you collected

## Distance Education

- As of January 2021, HLC member institutions have access to webinars in partnership with the Online Learning Consortium that are available to support efforts of administrators and educators. These include, Flipped Classroom, Increasing Interaction and Engagement, and Focusing on Equitable Treatment of Students, to name a few. These trainings can be found at [ALO Training Resources | Programs-Events](https://www.hlcommission.org/ALO-Training-Resources-Programs-Events) ([hlcommission.org](https://www.hlcommission.org)).
- Clarification was provided on defining distance education with the HLC regulations that went into effect on July 1, 2020. Distance education means 75% or more of content is offered by distance methods and requires substantive interaction. Substantive interaction requires meeting at least two or more of the following: direct instruction, providing feedback on coursework, responding to questions about the course or competency, or facilitating a group discussion. The substantive interaction also has to be regular, predictable and on a scheduled basis. Further, distance education requires the instructor monitor the student’s success and engagement with prompt and proactive engagement from the instructor. Another key point this session emphasized is assessment to learning

outcomes of online courses and programs is essential and required, just like our face-to-face courses and programs. Further, our distance education needs to be integrated into the assurance argument. Below are additional responses to questions raised about distance education:

- Question: How do definitions of hybrid, online and hyflex play into this definition?  
Answer: It is all about the percentages. 75% of the course if at distance is distance. Hybrid can be either depending on how it is structured. The percentage guides the discussion. From the HLC glossary - DISTANCE DELIVERED COURSES: Courses in which at least 75% of the instruction and interaction occurs via electronic communication, correspondence or equivalent mechanisms, with the faculty and students physically separated from each other. DISTANCE DELIVERED PROGRAMS Certificate or degree programs in which 50% or more of the required courses may be taken as distance-delivered courses.
- Question: Would virtual office hours apply toward the interaction requirement?  
Answer: Depends on whether those hours are teaching, or advising, student support. I've seen a professor count at least one of his office hours since that is when the student was being assessed and they had to come prepared for that event. Recall at least 2 of the following activities must occur: Providing direct instruction; Assessing or providing feedback on a student's coursework; Providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency; Facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency; or, Other instructional activities approved by the institution's or program's accrediting agency.
- Question: If students are on campus, but in a spill-over room connected by closed circuit TV, does that count as 'distance'?  
Answer: The actual course if offered face to face but the institution doesn't have the room. Spill over occasionally doesn't appear to be a distance course. That is another issue all together.
- Question: Does direct instruction include re-recorded videos/lectures or do these have to be in real-time?  
Answer: The content could be pre-recorded with the interaction focused on the information that the students had reviewed. Much like a flipped classroom.
- The criteria and the basis for HLC's evaluation of distance education is the same as that for any other program, and includes considerations like:
  - Does the institution have the capacity to deliver high-quality distance programs, and does it have plans to handle future growth?
  - Are there institutional supports for faculty teaching distance courses?
  - Is there consistency across delivery methods? In other words, are face-to-face and distance courses educational equivalent?
  - Is support for students equitable, allowing distance students to have similar support structures as face-to-face students?
  - Are mechanisms in place for effective planning, evaluation, and improvement of distance courses and programs?
  - Is there a reasonable system for maintaining academic integrity and verifying student identities?

- In regards to remote learning:
  - Are we serving everyone? When we offer resources for everyone and are they actually working and connecting to everyone? Just because something works for on-campus students, does not mean that it applies to the online population.
  - Tools – are we utilizing BlackBoard to its fullest extent, especially as a retention tool for online and on campus students? An example of this is the retention center. Can it send out automated notices when student participation decreases?
- I attended several sessions that focused on ways to promote and enhance educational quality for students at our institutions. One of the most informative sessions on this topic was by Bettyjo Bouchey and Joe Levy (National Louis University). They offered tips on minimizing the challenges of teaching (and learning) in virtual learning environments:
  - Emphasize professional development on online teaching practices: Focus on a commitment to high-impact, evidence-based instructional practice that includes a balanced presence and interactions around teaching, and is occurring in a learning environment that is accessible to all.
  - Incorporate key aspects of humanizing online, culturally responsive pedagogy, and personalization:
    - Examples of humanizing a virtual experience include utilizing a liquid syllabus, positioning students as collaborators/activate student agency, and commit to bring your whole selves to the course (as the instructor) and to the learning environment (generally speaking)
    - Examples of engaging a culturally responsive pedagogy: Use names, pronouns, nicknames; honor the backgrounds, stories, narratives, and lived experiences of your students
    - Examples of personalization: create 1:1 interactions as much as possible in discussion boards, through feedback on assignments, etc.
    - Examples of ensuring quality in online teaching: adopt an established framework such as Quality Matters to guide your work
  - Incorporate a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous activities: Incorporate a mix of ‘live’ online sessions (doable even for an asynchronous course through recording and posting lectures, for example) with discussions and assignments that occur asynchronously. Also, check in with your students! Send emails to see how they are doing, offer extra help (office hours, drop-in sessions, etc.) as needed.

### **Competency Based Education**

- A session reviewed quality standards for credit for prior learning (CPL) policies with an emphasis on equity illustrated by research from the California Community College System and example from Minnesota’s states credit for prior learning assessment network. CPL is a set of well-established, researched and validated methods for assessing non-collegiate learning for college credit. Essentially, it is a process that allows learners to demonstrate knowledge and skill in particular field or fields and have that learning evaluated for college credit. CPL is particularly important for our adult learners who bring in prior learning and helps fosters completion, saves students money, and helps recruit adult learners. UND already does this through third party evaluations like CLEP, AP, DSST credit by exam (this is one we don’t have in our NDUS policy), ACE

Credit Review. UND could consider individualized portfolios and an institutional process for doing this more extensively for individual student evaluations beyond these third party evaluations. Data from California revealed that students of color have lower prior learning assessment than white counterparts; the key reason for this disparity appears to be how students learn about CPL options (not extensive enough communication across all groups.) Minnesota State has created broader policies (see <https://www.minnstate.edu/board/policy/335.html>) with a goal to eliminate the educational equity gaps at every Minnesota State college and university by 2030; provided mini grants to support initiatives to broaden view of CPL; Minnesota State's c-plan has an advisory council, professional development and workgroups.

- Might the NDUS system launch a CPL initiative with appropriate support for campuses
- UND could consider expanding our CPL given the extensive research and use at other institutions
- CPL is an important consideration given our enrollment trends and the potential to serve a broader adult population who have some college but no college degree

## **Budget & Finances**

- Revenue vs cost-reduction - Cutting programs and rightsizing universities to promote financial health and fully supported student learning is difficult but can be done well and successfully. Examples of criteria that have worked at other state institutions for teaching-out programs include financial sustainability, research, diversity, community engagement, enrollment, retention, graduation, and placement for programs. Other ideas for revenue generation/cost reduction include downsizing sports, wage-based tuition (tuition will be based on the expected earning potential of the degree), central systems to reduce operating costs, enhanced communication across departments to reduce redundancy, and contractual relationships, such as providing educational opportunities in prisons.
- Evidence on economic stability is not only financial statement review, but also, do our decisions center on enrollment, programs, strengths, mission, and resources? (MISSION) Do we know who we serve and what services we provide, and do they align with our core purpose? (STRUCTURE) Do policy and procedures support our structure, does it support collaboration, look at outsourcing, and help eliminate barriers. (STRENGTHS) Are we looking at new curriculums such as badging or nano-degrees? (RESOURCES) Not only financial, our resources include branding, effective use of data analytics, KPI's, review of enrollment by program, HR turnaround, technology, and physical infrastructure. (SL)
- To be successful in the future, we need to be able to diversify economic modes for our institution. When one segment of revenue goes down, another could grow without losing revenue.

## **Health**

- A quote I will remember was from Dr. Sanjay Gupta: "If practice makes perfect, then it is change that builds resilience." I think that sentence is applicable in so many ways from this past year and will continue to be applicable in how UND moves forward after the pandemic and looks towards the future of higher education.