



**Northern Illinois
University**

Higher Learning Commission Accreditation Updates

Academic Affairs Leadership Meeting
March 7, 2023

Topics for Today



- NIU's institutional accreditation status
- HLC Quality Initiative
- Timeline and Preparations for HLC Visit
- HLC Criteria and evidence responsibilities
- Assurance Argument preparation
- Campus communication plan



Background

Institutional Accreditation



NIU is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). Institutional accreditation validates the quality of an institution as a whole and evaluates multiple aspects of an institution, including:

- Academic offerings
- Governance and administration
- Mission
- Finances
- Resources



Why Accreditation is Important



- Meeting accreditation criteria directly influences our **credibility, brand, Title IV funding, transfer agreements, certifications and licensure efforts**, and **reduces liability insurance costs**, amongst others
- Highlights alignment of institutional priorities across the university
- Demonstrates our commitment to quality assurance and continuous improvement efforts for academic and co-curricular programs, and institutional functions

Accreditation Status



The university was reaccredited by HLC for 10 years (until 2024), the maximum period possible. Following that process in 2014, NIU transitioned into the least restrictive HLC pathway, called the open pathway, for maintaining accreditation.

The **Open Pathway** is unique in that its improvement component, the Quality Initiative, affords institutions the opportunity to pursue improvement projects that meet their current needs and aspirations.

Open Pathway Timeline



NIU is currently within the quality initiative phase of the open pathway timeline, being completed during years 5-9 of the open pathway cycle.

July 2014: Reaffirmation of Institutional Accreditation		Reaffirmation of Accreditation in 2023-2024	
Years 1-3: Annual Assurance Updates	Year 4: Assurance Review; Interim Monitoring Report	Years 5-9: Quality Initiative	Year 10: Assurance Review + Site Visit
2017-2017	June 2018	2018-2023	2023-2024
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribute documents to Evidence File annually • Multi-location site visit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assurance Argument and Evidence File • Assurance Review – no site visit • Interim Report on Budgeting and Planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • File Quality Initiative (QI) Proposal • Implement QI • Report QI results to HLC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assurance Argument and Evidence File • Federal Compliance Requirements • Assurance Review • Comprehensive Evaluation with site visit



Quality Initiative

Initiative Goals



1. **Identify and redesign gateway courses** with low success rates or high equity gaps.
2. **Assess and deploy support** for course transformation or other improvements in the identified courses to enhance student success.
3. **Monitor data from and engage in continuous quality improvement** of identified courses to enhance student success in courses and beyond (e.g., retention and graduation).

Targeted Gateway Course Criteria



- Gateway Courses with **DFUW rates of 20% or greater and at least 25 enrolled students** in the 2018-2019 and 2020-2021 academic years, and/or
- Course with at least a **10% Equity Gap that impacted at least 10 students** in the 2018-2019 and 2020-2021 academic years

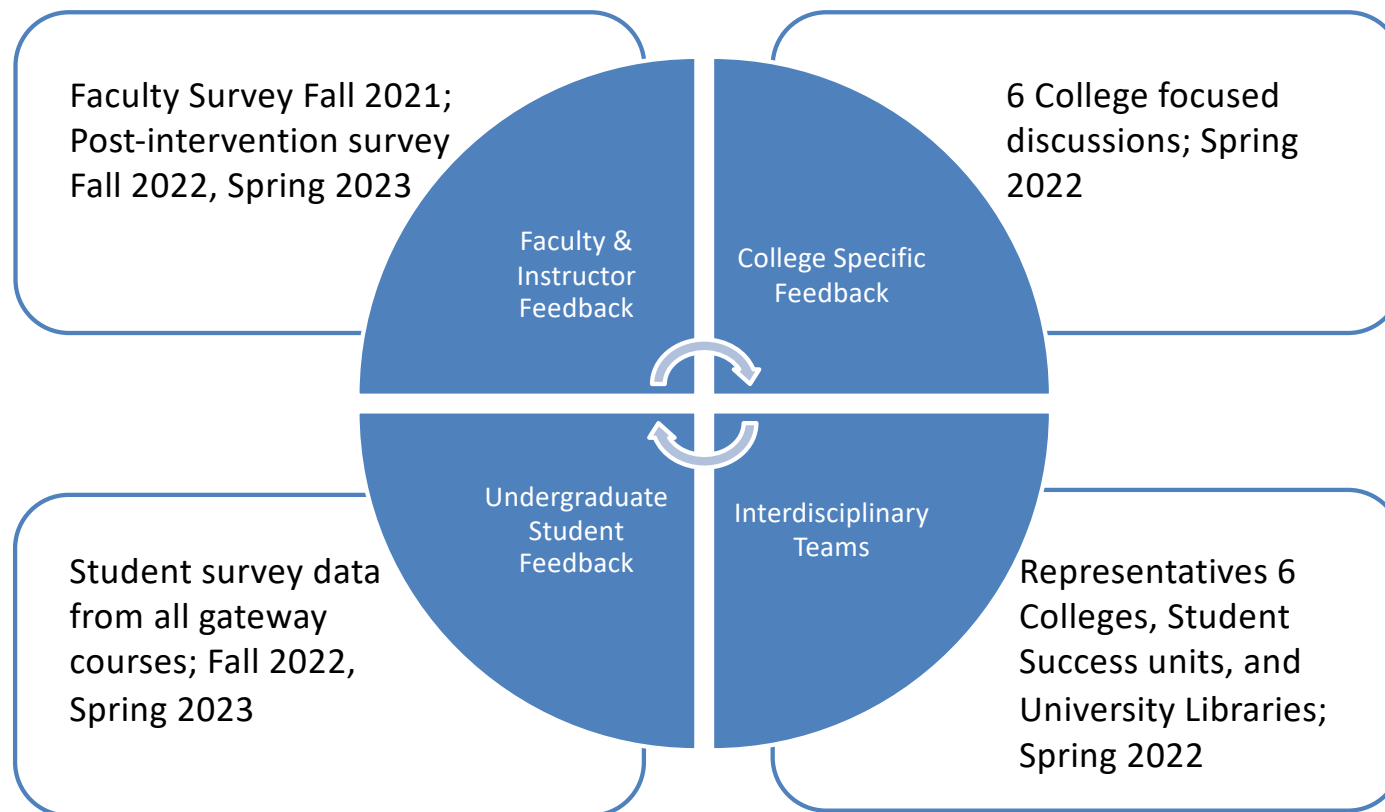
*NOTE – 2019-2020 data omitted due to pandemic anomaly of that academic year

Definitions



- A **Gateway Course** is defined as a course that a student needs to take to advance within a major or is a course required to complete general studies requirements.
- An **Equity Gap** exists when the success rates for students from under-served groups (i.e., racial and ethnic minority, first generation students, and Pell grant awardees) are significantly less than the average success rate in the course.
- The **Success Rate** is the percentage of students who enroll in the course and who earn a grade of A, B, or C.

Data Collection Feedback Model



Strategies and Tactics Aligned to Goals



- Central and localized strategies and tactics pursued in alignment with QI goals.
- Many course transformation efforts were already underway.
- All interventions reviewed to ensure they were well aligned to NIU's vision, mission, and core values and rely on data-informed decisions and use best practices to support continuous quality improvement.

Goal 1: Identify and redesign gateway courses with low success rates or high equity gaps



This first goal involves both establishing regular reporting of gateway courses with low success rates or high equity gaps as well as implementing comprehensive course-specific plans for redesigning courses to infuse inclusive and active learning pedagogies.

COURSE & DEPARTMENT LEVEL

Strategy 1A: Establish criteria for prioritizing courses requiring transformation.

Strategy 1B: Redesign gateway courses with low success rates or high equity gaps.

Goal 2: Assess and deploy support for course transformation or other improvements in the identified courses to enhance student success



While we're focusing on course transformation and infusion of research-based pedagogical practices (e.g., active learning, inclusive teaching, contextualization of learning, etc.) in gateway courses, it's clear that broader academic success supports are needed for incoming freshmen students. To achieve this second goal, we must embrace a holistic approach to enhancing student success.

UNIVERSITY-WIDE LEVEL

Strategy 2A: Assess current institutional support for student success in gateway courses

Strategy 2B: Deploy additional course transformation supports

Strategy 2C: Deploy additional academic success supports

Strategy 2D: Address systemic barriers for first-year student success

Goal 3: Monitor data from and engage in continuous quality improvement of identified courses to enhance student success



Following the implementation of strategic interventions, data will once again be gathered, analyzed and shared, and conversations held with key stakeholders about the success of the interventions and how to best adjust these strategies. This iterative process will be repeated enabling formative assessments to guide the direction of the interventions for student success and engage in continuous improvement.

COURSE, DEPARTMENT, COLLEGE, & UNIVERSITY-WIDE LEVEL

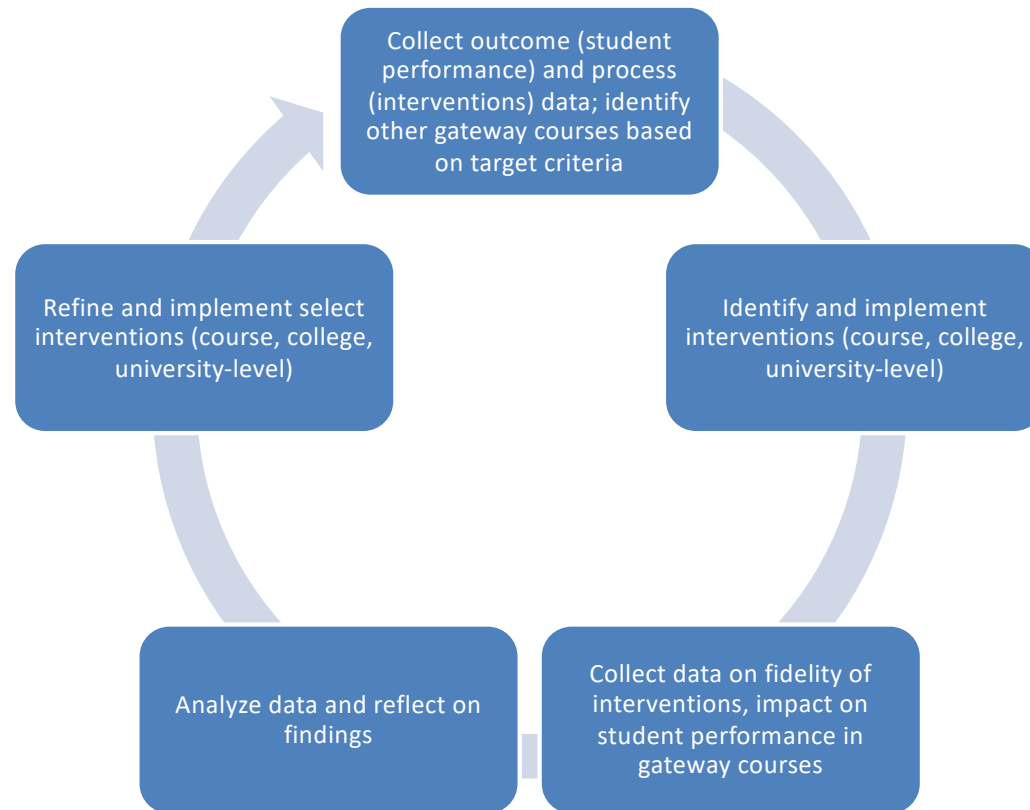
Strategy 3A: Monitor student success data

Strategy 3B: Re-assess student success in target courses and adjust strategies as needed



Wrapping-up HLC QIP

Evaluation of the Quality Initiative



College Discussions – Spring '23



- Fall semester course data shared with colleges along with summary of previously-shared college-specific efforts
- Meeting with QIP Core Team to capture any updates on college-specific interventions since Summer '22 as well as any ongoing plans for continued work
 - Redesigning gateway courses with low success rates or high equity gaps
 - Monitoring student success data
 - Re-assessing student success in target courses and adjusting strategies as needed

Report Due to HLC – May 2023



6,000 words or less, summarizing the following:

- What was accomplished?
- How effective have the interventions been?
- What is the impact of the initiative? (ie: any changes in processes, policies, technology, curricula, programs, student learning and success that are now in place)
- What tools, data, or other information resulted?
- Biggest challenges and opportunities encountered in implementing?
- Individuals and groups involved and their perceptions of impact?
- Plans going forward?
- Lessons learned and best practices identified?



HLC Ten-Year Reaffirmation

Comprehensive Evaluation for Reaffirmation



All institutions undergo a comprehensive evaluation in Year 10 to ensure they are meeting the Criteria for Accreditation, pursuing institutional improvement and complying with certain requirements set by the U.S. Department of Education. This review leads to an action regarding the reaffirmation of the institution's accreditation.

Framework & Focus



- The goal is to tell NIU's story by:
 - Providing a persuasive argument
 - Using supporting evidence
 - Highlighting our strengths as well as our areas for improvement
 - Presenting an authentic depiction of NIU
- The focus is on the institution as a whole
- The HLC is outcome-oriented, and not prescriptive on process

Comprehensive Review Components



Assurance Review

Federal Compliance Review

Student Opinion Survey

On-site Peer Review Visit

Assurance Review



As part of the assurance review, the institution submits an **Assurance Argument**, along with materials of evidence (called an **Evidence File**), to demonstrate that it is in compliance with HLC's criteria for accreditation.



The team of peer reviewers conducting the comprehensive evaluation reviews these materials in preparation for an on-site visit.

Federal Compliance Review



A federal compliance review is conducted as part of the comprehensive evaluation. Institutions must submit a federal compliance filing demonstrating that they are meeting their title IV program responsibility, as well as complying with the expectations of specific regulations set by the U.S. Department of Education.



Compliance with these federal requirements is necessary for the institution to be eligible for federal financial aid. HLC is required to conduct this review as a federally recognized accrediting agency.

Student Opinion Survey



HLC conducts an online survey of the institution's study body 2 months prior to the on-site peer review visit. The survey is intended to give students an opportunity to participate in the evaluation process, and to help identify questions for the peer reviewers to ask while on site.

On-Site Peer Review Visit



On-site visits occur after the peer review team has reviewed the institutional report and student survey results. The team works with the institution to create an agenda for the visit, which typically includes meetings with the institution's leadership and board, as well as open forums with faculty, staff and students.



Visits typically last for 1.5 days. The team will remain in the area for an additional day of deliberations after the visit. NIU's site team will be visiting campus **March 25-27, 2024**

Timeline of Comprehensive Review



Spring/ Summer 2023	August 2023	Fall 2023	January 2024	February 2024	March 2024
Construct Assurance Argument	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit Federal Compliance Review • Submit Quality Initiative Report 	Campus Input on Assurance Argument	Student Opinion Survey	Submit Assurance Argument	Site Visit



Evaluation Framework and Criteria

HLC's Evaluative Framework



Accreditation standards are based on

- 5 over-arching criteria
 - 18 core components
 - 69 sub-components
- A criterion is met only if all core components are met
- Each core component may be:
 - **Met without concerns**; monitoring is not required
 - **Met with concerns** but performance related to some aspect must be improved
 - Judged as **not met**

Criteria for Accreditation



I.
Mission

II. Integrity:
Ethical &
Responsible
Conduct

III. Teaching
& Learning:
Quality,
Resources,
Support

IV. Teaching &
Learning:
Evaluation &
Improvement

V. Resources,
Planning, &
Institutional
Effectiveness

Criteria, Components and Sub-Components



CRITERION 3. TEACHING AND LEARNING: QUALITY, RESOURCES, AND SUPPORT

The institution provides quality education, wherever and however its offerings are delivered.

- 3.C. The institution has the faculty and staff needed for effective, high-quality programs and student services.
 - 3.C.4 Instructors are evaluated regularly in accordance with established institutional policies and procedures.

Full set of criteria may be found at

www.niu.edu/hlc/comprehensive-evaluation/criteria.shtml



Assurance Argument

Core Team Members



Chris McCord

Assurance Argument Chair

Jason Rhode

Interim Accreditation Liaison Officer

Chad McEvoy

Criterion 1: Mission

Sarah Garner

Criterion 2: Integrity

Simón Weffer

Criterion 3: Teaching & Learning Quality

Stephanie Richter

Criterion 4: Teaching & Learning Assessment

Betsy Hull

Criterion 5: Resources & Planning

Omar Ghrayeb

Provost's Designee

Sample Assurance Argument



3.C.3 As prescribed by Article 5 and Article 6 of the university's bylaws, NIU evaluates all faculty according to their written approved department/unit-level procedures for merit, tenure, and promotion. Student feedback is solicited for all courses as outlined in the APPM, and this feedback is incorporated into instructional evaluation of all instructional faculty. Online course evaluations are administered through Testing Services. A majority of tenured and tenure-track faculty are currently being represented by the United Faculty Alliance (UFA) (CLAW faculty, faculty who are jointly appointed with external entities, and SPS with faculty rank are excluded from the union) during the negotiation of this group's first collective bargaining agreement with NIU; the agreement is expected to address future faculty evaluation mechanisms. Instructors are represented by the University Professionals of Illinois Collective Bargaining Agreement, which defines the procedures for annual performance evaluations of instructors.

Sample Evidence Files



Sources

- BOARD OF TRUSTEES_Board of Trustees Regulations_Section II Faculty and Administrative Employees
- BOARD OF TRUSTEES_Board of Trustees Meeting – Feb 15, 2018
- BOARD OF TRUSTEES_Instructors Bargaining Unit Agreement
- DIV ACADEMIC AFFAIRS_Academic Policies and Procedures Manual
- DIV HUMAN RESOURCE SERVICES_Types of Employment
- NIU_Constitution and Bylaws
- NIU_Testing Services_Online Course Evaluations
- NIU_University Council_NIU Bylaws Article 5.pdf
- NIU_University Council_NIU Bylaws Article 6

Where Do We Stand?



- We have a lot to celebrate, particularly when it comes to mission and diversity
- We have come through a harrowing time with strength
- At the same time, we have areas where improvement is needed, particularly in assessment and multi-year budget planning, which we're addressing

Components & Shared Responsibility



NIU's model of shared responsibility places the following sub-components within the responsibility of academic units:

- 3.A.3 Program quality and learning goals are consistent across all modes of delivery and all locations
- 3.B.4 The faculty and students contribute to scholarship, creative work and the discovery of knowledge to the extent appropriate to their offerings and the institution's mission.
- 4.A.4 The institution exercises authority over prerequisites, rigor of courses, expectations for student learning, access to learning resources, and faculty qualifications for all programs, including dual credit programs.

Components & Shared Responsibility (cont.)



- 3.C.3 All instructors are appropriately qualified, including those in dual credit, contractual and consortial offerings.
- 3.C.4 Instructors are evaluated regularly in accordance with established institutional policies and procedures.
- 3.C.5 The institution has processes and resources so that instructors are current in their disciplines and adept in their teaching roles; it supports their professional development.
- 3.C.6 Instructors are accessible for student inquiry.
- 3.C.7 Staff members providing student support services are appropriately qualified, trained and supported in their professional development.

Building the Assurance Argument



We will continue to seek input, particularly for some of the new sub-components:

- 2.B.2 The institution ensures evidence is available to support any claims it makes regarding its contributions to the educational experience through research, community engagement, experiential learning, and economic development.
- 4.B.2 The institution uses the information gained from assessment to improve student learning.
- 5.A.2 The institution's administration uses data to reach informed decisions in the best interests of the institution and its constituents.

Discussion at Your Table



1. Several of the criteria speak to areas that are the responsibility of colleges and units. How might your unit help us address those specific criteria?
2. The HLC criteria include several new components. Do you have any suggestions of examples for evidence that we should include in the Assurance Argument?



Communication Plan

Goals of Communication Plan



- Gather information
- Build awareness of the process
- Generate leadership feedback
- Encourage alignment
- Prepare the campus community for the site visit
- Avoid surprises

Communication Elements



We will

- Reach out with questions throughout the spring and summer
- Provide a penultimate draft for review in the fall
- Update the NIU HLC website niu.edu/hlc

3. What other elements would be helpful?



Stay Updated and Participate

What are we asking?



- Be aware of process and timeline
- Participate in assurance filing creation as needed and requested
- Read and respond to filing as draft is developed and circulated (Fall 2023)
- Be knowledgeable about the content of the document prior to the site visit

NIU HLC website



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Higher Learning Commission

Accreditation Status Accreditation Cycle Quality Initiative 2023-2024 Comprehensive Evaluation FAQ



Higher Learning Commission (HLC)

Northern Illinois University is accredited by the [Higher Learning Commission \(HLC\)](#). The HLC is an institutional accreditation agency that accredits degree-granting colleges and universities that are based in the United States. The HLC is recognized by [The Council for Higher Education Accreditation \(CHEA\)](#).

Institutional accreditation validates the quality of an institution as a whole and evaluates multiple aspects of an institution, including its academic offerings, governance and administration, mission, finances, and resources. HLC evaluates institutions against its [criteria for accreditation](#) that reflect a set of [guiding values](#). HLC's accreditation includes all degree levels as well as onsite and online course delivery.

[VIEW NIU STATEMENT OF ACCREDITATION STATUS](#)

Quality Initiative

The HLC expects institutions to always be engaged in quality improvement and requires those accredited under the [open pathway](#) to undertake a major quality initiative designed to meet present concerns or aspirations.

[LEARN ABOUT NIU'S QUALITY INITIATIVE](#)



niu.edu/hlc