

**WESTERN COMMUNITY COLLEGE AREA
BOARD OF GOVERNORS**

**INFORMAL MEETING
MINUTES**

Wednesday, March 18, 2026

The Western Community College Area Board of Governors held an Informal Board meeting at 10:30 a.m. on Wednesday, March 18, 2026 at Western Nebraska Community College, Coral E. Richards Boardroom, 1601 East 27th Street, in the City of Scottsbluff, in the County of Scotts Bluff, in the State of Nebraska, as per the publicized notice in the Star-Herald Tuesday, March 10, 2026.

A current agenda was available in the Board Secretary's office on the Scottsbluff Campus at the time of the publicized notice.

AREA BOARD

Linda A. Guzman-Gonzales.....	Present
Joshua R. Hanson	Present
Mark A Kaufman	Absent
Allan D. Kreman.....	Present
Starr Lehl, Vice Chair.....	Present
Lori J. Liggett.....	Absent
Coral E. Richards	Present
R. J. Savely, Jr.....	Present
Marjorie A. Schmidt.....	Present
John P. Stinner, Chair	Absent

Mr. Kaufman notified Vice Chair Lehl that he may be absent due to personal business commitments. Ms. Liggett informed the Board secretary she would be absent due to personal health appointments. Mr. Stinner informed the Board secretary he would be absent due to personal business.

QUORUM

Vice Chair Lehl declared a quorum was present for the transaction of business.

COMMUNITY COMMENTS

Vice Chair Lehl asked for comments from the community. Pursuant to Board Policy BP-106, Vice Chair Lehl reminded community members who wish to make comments will be limited to a five-minute presentation. There were no comments.

BOARD CHAIRPERSON COMMENTS

Vice Chair Lehl announced for public information there was a copy of the Nebraska Open Meetings Act available on the table at the back of the room.

Vice Chair Lehl announced that the Board reserves the right to enter a closed session if deemed necessary for any item on the agenda per Section 84-1410 of the Nebraska Revised Statutes.

Board Training – HLC Accreditation

Accreditation, as outlined by President Dart, remains a critical component of institutional effectiveness and accountability, particularly for board members seeking to understand its impact. While not a new concept, accreditation is currently experiencing significant changes, especially in relation to the Higher Learning Commission. President Dart emphasized the importance of accreditation in ensuring educational quality and institutional credibility, while also highlighting how recent administrative shifts are reshaping the accreditation landscape.

Accreditation is essential for any institution that receives federal aid; without it, colleges cannot access funding such as Pell Grants. However, its role extends beyond compliance. Accreditation serves as a benchmark for quality, providing a set of widely accepted standards that define what constitutes an effective higher education institution. For a governing board, these standards offer a framework to evaluate institutional performance, from organizational structure to data usage and overall educational outcomes. Ultimately, accreditation functions as a system of quality assurance, ensuring that students can trust the value of their education.

Historically, accreditation in the United States was regionally based, with institutions tied to a specific accrediting body. For Western Nebraska Community College, that body has been the Higher Learning Commission. While policies have since changed to allow institutions to switch accreditors, there has been no compelling reason to do so, and the College remains engaged in its current accreditation process.

Recent federal policy shifts have introduced new dynamics into the accreditation landscape. Efforts to encourage competition among accrediting agencies and reduce emphasis on certain criteria, such as diversity, equity, and inclusion, have opened the door for the creation of new accrediting bodies. What was once a stable and structured system is now becoming more flexible and potentially more varied. While existing accreditors maintain broadly similar standards, it remains uncertain how new agencies may compare as they emerge.

Several new accrediting agencies are beginning to emerge, though many have yet to fully materialize. President Dart referenced a recent grant initiative aimed at encouraging the development of new accreditors, suggesting that interest is growing, even if the process remains complex.

It is anticipated that a number of new accrediting bodies will appear over time, likely with varied areas of focus. This expectation aligns with the administration's stated priorities for accreditation reform. Among these goals are the elimination of DEI-related standards, the promotion of new accreditors to reduce what was perceived as a monopoly and making it easier for institutions to change accrediting bodies—historically a costly and time-intensive process. Above all, the administration has emphasized a shift toward outcomes, such as graduation rates, persistence, and other measurable indicators of student success.

This outcomes-focused approach has prompted existing accreditors to reassess their priorities while also providing a clear direction for potential new entrants. However, President Dart noted that the number of accreditors remains uncertain; historically, only a small group has operated regionally, each with distinct areas of emphasis. That number could grow significantly in the coming years, though no clear timeline exists. President Dart added that such policy directions are inherently tied to the tenure of a presidential administration and may shift with future leadership.

To illustrate this volatility, President Dart pointed to Title IX regulations, which have undergone substantial changes across multiple administrations, with differing emphasis on the rights of the accused and those affected. While Title IX centers on equal opportunity, he acknowledged concerns that accreditation policy may appear similarly subject to political shifts.

President Dart clarified that accreditation does not dictate classroom content or curriculum. Instead, it focuses on institutional processes: ensuring quality, fostering continuous improvement, and supporting student success through measures like retention and persistence. Over the past two decades, assessment of learning outcomes has become central, with accreditors expecting institutions to define their goals and demonstrate how effectively they measure progress toward them.

Accreditors do not set institutional outcomes but require institutions to establish clear goals and credible methods for assessing whether those goals are being met. For example, general education courses are not designed to teach narrow, specific skills but to promote broader intellectual growth. Assignments, such as papers, serve as tools to evaluate whether those broader learning objectives are achieved.

Ultimately, accreditation is less about prescribing what institutions teach and more about ensuring they do what they claim—setting goals, measuring outcomes, and demonstrating accountability. While there is some influence in aligning with accreditor expectations, the core responsibility remains with institutions to define their mission and prove they are fulfilling it.

The discussion emphasized that accreditation bodies such as the Higher Learning Commission do not prescribe specific course content, for example, what must be taught in a general biology class—but instead defines broad learning outcomes. These outcomes focus on developing students' reasoning abilities, problem-solving skills, and understanding across key subject areas.

Meeting participants reflected on growing concerns about the potential politicization of accreditation. While accreditors have traditionally served a wide range of institutions without ideological alignment, there is unease that, without clear guardrails, future accrediting bodies could become more closely associated with particular political perspectives. Such a shift could fragment higher education along ideological lines, rather than preserving it as a space for diverse viewpoints, critical thinking, and open debate.

Attendees of last year's HLC Annual Conference noted that the conference appeared to carry a stronger political tone than in the past, possibly influenced by significant policy changes and pressures facing higher education. This heightened intensity was seen by some as a reaction to uncertainty and reform, rather than a permanent shift, though perceptions varied based on individual perspectives.

The conversation also clarified that, while accreditors avoid directing curriculum, they do enforce compliance with federal and state regulations. Institutions must adhere to requirements set by entities such as the U.S. Department of Education and state-level coordinating bodies, which approve programs and ensure eligibility for financial aid. Accreditation is therefore essential to institutional survival, as it enables access to funding streams like Pell Grants.

Discussion underscored that accreditation operates within a complex framework of oversight involving federal, state, and accrediting agencies. Maintaining compliance—and understanding the evolving role of accreditation—is critical, not only for institutional operations but also for preserving the broader mission of higher education as a forum for rigorous, inclusive intellectual engagement.

President Dart emphasized a shift from compliance-driven decision-making to a student-centered approach, arguing that desired outcomes—such as retention and completion—are best achieved by focusing on what benefits students rather than merely meeting external requirements.

A key strategy highlighted was the use of data analytics to better understand student behavior and success patterns. Institutional data scientists conduct in-depth analyses, such as examining dual credit enrollment and late registration, to identify factors that influence persistence and completion. These insights allow the institution to move beyond guesswork and implement targeted, evidence-based interventions for specific student populations.

President Dart compared this approach with past practices at other institutions, where multiple initiatives were introduced simultaneously without clear evaluation methods, making it difficult to determine their effectiveness. An example was provided in which a student success course unintentionally reduced retention, illustrating the importance of isolating variables and assessing impact through data.

In terms of accreditation, the institution is preparing a monitoring report focused on persistence, completion, and data-informed decision-making. While performance metrics matter, the emphasis is on understanding outcomes and demonstrating continuous improvement, including accounting for external factors such as personal hardships.

The institution has made significant progress in integrating data into decision-making and aligning its strategic plan with accreditation goals and student success priorities. This alignment is seen as critical to institutional advancement.

Additionally, the institution is developing a quality initiative centered on guided pathways and stackable credentials, aiming to improve student navigation, program clarity, and long-term success. Ongoing professional development and engagement with accreditation bodies further support these efforts.

Overall, the narrative underscores a cultural shift toward intentional, data-informed practices that prioritize student success while meeting accreditation standards.

Next Regular Meeting: Wednesday, March 18, 2026, 1:00 p.m., Coral E. Richards Boardroom, WNCC Scottsbluff Campus, 1601 East 27th Street, Scottsbluff, NE.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned by unanimous consent at 11:37 a.m.