

2026 Presidents Institute

A Deeper Purpose



January 4-7, 2026 • Signia by Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek • Orlando, FL



The Council of Independent Colleges

From Accreditation Sanctions to Success

List Presenters Below

- Hakim J. Lucas, President, Virginia Union University
- Jon Gering, President, Bethel College (KS)
- David King, President, Ursuline College (OH)
- Richanne C. Mankey, President, Defiance College (OH)
- Roderick L. Smothers, Special Assistant to the President, Virginia Union University; Former President, Philander Smith University (AR)

The President's Role in Accreditation

Accreditation sanctions are not merely procedural hurdles—they are defining leadership tests that demand courage, institutional clarity, and the capacity to orchestrate complex organizational realignment under intense scrutiny.

Strategic Leadership vs. Tactical Execution



When Presidents Must Lead

- Establish institutional tone and communicate urgency across all stakeholder groups
- Align and actively manage Board expectations, concerns, and support
- Control both internal messaging and external narrative to protect institutional reputation



When Presidents Must Delegate

- Compliance documentation preparation and submission processes
- Data validation, analysis, and evidence gathering across departments
- Operational improvements executed by provosts, vice presidents, and deans

The Presidential Mandate: Delegate the granular work. Retain the ultimate ownership. Serve as the chief integrator who orchestrates institutional response—not the chief doer buried in operational details.

The Hidden Emotional Architecture of Presidential Leadership

The Loneliness of Final Accountability

The presidency carries a unique burden: ultimate responsibility that cannot be meaningfully shared or distributed. Accreditation crises magnify this isolation, as every decision reverberates across the institution's future.

In these moments, **composure itself becomes leadership currency**—the visible steadiness that allows others to continue their work with confidence.

The Weight of Institutional Shame

Public sanctions are inevitably read as leadership failure. Internal stakeholders question competence and direction. The president absorbs both the emotional toll and reputational consequences.

Yet this very vulnerability creates opportunity: shame forces institutional honesty, loneliness sharpens strategic clarity, and crisis becomes the catalyst for profound cultural transformation.

From Crisis to Institutional Renewal



Acknowledge Reality

Face the sanction with institutional candor and transparency



Address Root Causes

Remove the sanction *and* fix the systemic conditions that enabled it



Catalyze Transformation

Leverage crisis momentum to drive lasting cultural and operational change

- ☐ **The Presidential Truth:** Sanctions do not define our institutions—they refine them. The presidency exists as the designated survivor, bearing the institutional burden so that the university itself may not only endure, but emerge stronger, more focused, and more resilient.



From Sanctions to Success: The Role of the Board

**CIC Presidents Institute
Concurrent Session
January 6, 2026
Jon C. Gering, President**

**WE ARE
THRESHERS**



- **History:** Founded in 1887 as first Mennonite-affiliated college in North America
- **Student body:** UG only, 500 students, 40% Pell, 30% first generation, 75% athletes
- **Governance and accreditation:** Independent corporation structure and board of directors (~20 members), accredited by HLC

**WE ARE
THRESHERS**



- **Vision:** increase human flourishing (*shalom*) in the world
- **Curricular focus:** Liberal arts, career preparation (work requirement), service, faith
- **Finances:** \$43M endowment, CFIs 2.7-3, \$13M annual operating budget, no debt, \$75M assets, 90-acre campus

**WE ARE
THRESHERS**

- Why a Board should care about accreditation sanctions:
 - Fiduciary obligations
 - Time spans for corrective measures
 - Institutional reputation and viability

- Board actions that lead to institutional success:
 - Presidential support
 - Clear and consistent communication
 - Partners in policy development
 - Clarity on governance and management

Overview:

1. The Issue
2. The Objective
3. The Message

The Issue

Institutional Disclosure Obligation

The Issue

Institutional Disclosure Obligation:

“HLC policy 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 Objective

1. Constituent confidence
2. Retention and enrollment
3. Internal leverage

The Message

1. Have a plan
2. Own the narrative
3. Know your audiences



The Defiance College

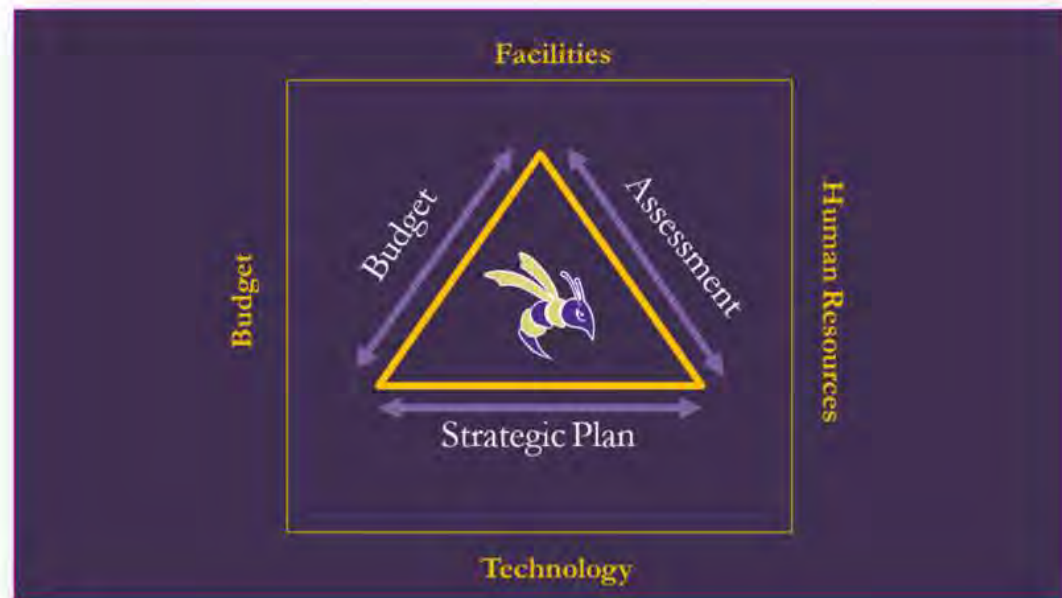
Richanne C. Mankey, President

HLC Status: Initial News

- Heartbreaking
- Unfortunate News Coverage even though we had a Communications Plan
- Communication was key to keep employees and students engaged to use the “stress” toward positive ends
- Began with the End in Mind (Covey, 2000)

HLC Status: The Work

- Intentional
- Utilized Experts
- Checked in with our HLC Liaison Regularly



HLC Status: Retrospective Perspective

- Better off for having done the work
- Galvanized the governance work of our board
- Unified campus and, because of our intentionality, brought purpose to the work



LEADING THROUGH ACCREDITATION

Strategic Guidance for Organizing the Institution to Address Sanctions

A comprehensive framework for college and university leaders navigating the accreditation self-study process with confidence, clarity, and institutional integrity.

Roderick L. Smothers, Sr., Ph.D.

EVP | COO | Interim Provost, Virginia Union
University

Past President, Philander Smith College

The Role of the Liaison

Identifying the Right ALO

Strategic Selection

Select an ALO with institution-wide credibility, political capital, and writing discipline—not just positional authority. The right person brings respect across divisions and the ability to communicate complex ideas clearly.

Air Traffic Control Function

The ALO serves as strategic air traffic control: aligning President, Board, cabinet, consultants, and accreditors. This coordination role requires diplomatic skill and the ability to manage multiple competing priorities simultaneously.

Empowerment Matters

Empower the ALO to operate with clarity, access, and decisional authority, not ceremonial responsibility. They need direct access to senior leadership and





Organizing the Self-Study Work for Results

Effective self-study organization demands intentional structure and clear role differentiation. Rather than assembling committees based on organizational charts or campus politics, successful institutions build teams around deliverables and outcomes.

This approach prevents cognitive overload and mission drift by separating thinking, writing, evidence gathering, and logistics into distinct but coordinated functions. Internal timelines should work backward from submission deadlines, establishing weekly accountability rhythms that maintain

A Proven Organizational Model

Virginia Union University's approach demonstrates how strategic team organization drives successful outcomes:

1. Writing Team

Standards-based subcommittees with dedicated chairs responsible for drafting narrative responses that directly address accreditation criteria with evidence-based arguments.

2. Evidence Team

Controls verification, versioning, and indexing of all supporting documentation. Ensures every claim is substantiated and every document is current, accurate, and properly cataloged.

3. Response Team

Provides rapid response to requests, follow-ups, and edits from evaluators. Maintains agility throughout the process to address emerging questions without disrupting core work streams.

4. Hospitality Team

Manages on-site execution and visitor experience during the accreditation visit. Orchestrates logistics, schedules, and campus interactions that reflect institutional professionalism and preparedness.



Know the Standards and Know Your Committee

Master Compliance Requirements

Deeply understand what compliance actually requires—not folklore, assumptions, or past practices. Review the standards with fresh eyes, consulting official guidance documents and recent interpretation updates. Don't rely on institutional memory or secondhand accounts of previous visits.

Research Your Evaluators

Research the visiting committee's institutional backgrounds, roles, and prior reports. Understanding their professional contexts, areas of expertise, and evaluative perspectives helps you anticipate their frame of reference and prepare accordingly. Review publicly available reports they've authored for other institutions.

Prepare Defensible Evidence

Anticipate lines of inquiry and prepare evidence that is clear, current, and defensible. Every assertion in your self-study should be substantiated with verifiable documentation. Organize evidence proactively, ensuring quick access to supporting materials during the visit when evaluators ask follow-up questions.



Details matter: logistics, responsiveness, tone, and consistency reinforce credibility. Professional execution of seemingly small elements—room setup, materials preparation, timely communication—builds evaluator

Q&A



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**Thank you for attending
this session!**

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