State statement on the accreditation of high schools

College level opportunities for high school students through dual credit or concurrent enrollment programs have increased in recent years. In such programs high school students can earn college credit that may also count towards high school graduation. The goal of these programs is to improve access to and academic preparedness for higher education. Recently the Higher Learning Commission has been approached with the proposal by some state policymakers that the Commission accredit the associate's degree programs offered by certain high schools, on the premise that doing so would further the goal of improved access and remedy inequities in the funding and oversight of these programs.

The Board of Trustees of the Higher Learning Commission considered this proposal at its meeting in February 2012 and again at its meeting in June 2012. The Board acknowledged that the numerous approaches to dual credit and concurrent enrollment have raised questions about how quality control of these programs should be exercised and how state funding formulas should support both the high schools and the colleges in these endeavors. However, the Board concluded that the goals of improved access and oversight are furthered most effectively by greater rather than less control by higher education institutions. Therefore, expanding the role of the Commission and institutional accreditation by accrediting high schools as degree-granting institutions is not an effective way of accomplishing these goals.

The Higher Learning Commission has one body of accreditation standards and it applies its standards to an entire institution, not to a segment of the institution.

These standards are designed to measure quality in a college context. High schools and colleges are not equivalent enterprises such that they can be measured by the same accreditation standards. Accredited colleges need to remain in control of and accountable for college-level programs, regardless of where they are offered.

Capable high school students may be well served by opportunities to start on their college careers even before graduation from high school. These opportunities may expand access, foster academic preparedness for college, and assist in college retention and completion. Through such mechanisms high school students may earn college credit in settings in which accredited colleges ultimately award the college credit and for which they maintain responsibility. The Commission holds these colleges accountable for the quality of these programs.

The Higher Learning Commission believes that the accreditation of high schools to offer college degrees on their own is not consistent with the Commission’s mission to assure and advance the quality of higher learning. Students and the public are better served when accredited colleges maintain responsibility for the quality, rigor, and comparability of these degree programs.

Adopted by the Board of Trustees - June 2012