REPORT OF THE WSCUC TEAM

SPECIAL VISIT

To the University of Hawaii at Hilo

April 29-30, 2025

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The team evaluated the institution under the 2023 Handbook and Standards of Accreditation and prepared this report containing its collective evaluation for consideration and action by the institution and by the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC). The formal action concerning the institution’s status is taken by the Commission and is described in a letter from the Commission to the institution. This report and the Commission letter are made available to the public by publication on the WSCUC website.

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SECTION I – OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

A. Description of Institution, Accreditation History, as relevant, and Visit

The University of Hawaii at Hilo (UH Hilo) is a comprehensive regional institution that grew out of an extension campus founded on Hawai‘i Island in 1947 by the University of Hawaii at Mānoa (UH Mānoa). The campus began as a two-year institution with its first four-year degrees awarded in 1971. UH Hilo initially shared facilities and administrative functions with the local Hilo Technical School, a vocation-focused institution that subsequently transitioned into Hawai‘i Community College. The two institutions continue to share some facilities, and both are members of the broader University of Hawaii system, which includes six other community colleges, the UH West O‘ahu, and UH Mānoa. The UH system is overseen by the Hawaii state legislature and the University of Hawaii board of regents. UH Hilo is comprised of six colleges: the College of Arts and Sciences; the College of Natural and Health Sciences; the College of Business and Economics; the College of Agriculture, Forestry, and Natural Resource Management; Ka Haka ‘Ula o Ke‘elikōlani College of Hawaiian Language; and the Daniel K. Inouye College of Pharmacy.

The post-census Spring 2025 headcount was 2,540, with 74% of students enrolled full-time. Degree-seeking undergraduates account for 79% of the student body and can choose from 38 majors, 27 minors, and 45 certificate programs. Students pursuing a graduate certificate or master’s degree (7% of total headcount) can select from six different programs, while four programs are offered for professional practice and doctoral students (7% of headcount). The remaining 7% of the total headcount represents non-degree-seeking students. Since the Special Visit in 2024, no new degree programs have been established, while the Ph.D. in Pharmaceutical Science has stopped admissions (with termination set for summer of 2025). In addition, the

Pharmacology Doctorate will undergo substantive change to add hybrid distance learning modalities for a part-time track in support of non-traditional students.

The majority of UH Hilo students (52%) are residents of Hawai‘i Island. The remaining students are largely divided between residency on other Hawaiian Islands (19%) and other states and territories (24%). International students and students with no stated permanent address account for 4% and >1%, respectively. The student body at UH Hilo is claimed to be more racially and ethnically diverse than at any other higher education institution in the United States: For full-time students in Fall 2024 (n=1,999), the largest racial/ethnic group consisted of students who identified as Native Hawaiian (29%) and other large racial/ethnic groups include students who identify as White (25%), as Filipino (8%), as Japanese (5%), or as having mixed heritage (15%). Continuing with Fall 2024 full-time data, roughly two-thirds of the students (61%) identify as female, nearly half (43%) are Pell grant recipients, and about 641 (32%) are the first in their immediate family to attend college. All of the above demographic data are drawn from UH Hilo's 2025 Special Visit report or were provided by the institution.

UH Hilo received full accreditation from WASC in 1976 and reaffirmations were issued in 1984, 1989, and 1994. A Special Visit was conducted in 1997, followed by a capacity and preparatory review in 2003 and an educational effectiveness review in 2004. Special Visits took place in 2008 and 2009. A reaffirmation review in 2014 led to a Commission action in 2015 that required UH Hilo to file an interim report in 2017. The last reaffirmation visit in April 2022 led to the issuance of a Formal Notice of Concern by the Commission in July 2022 and the scheduling of a Special Visit in April of 2024 to address (1) integration of all strategic plans, (2) improvement of assessment of student learning and program review, and (3) building institutional research capacity to develop a data-informed culture. While the Special Visit

revealed substantive progress on the second and third items, concerns regarding the first, along with ongoing enrollment declines and concerns around long-term fiscal sustainability, led to the Commission's scheduling of this April 2025 Special Visit.

B. Description of Team's Review Process

The review team for the Special Visit was established on August 26th, 2024, and review team email outlining the general timeline and proposed assignments was sent on February 19th, 2025. Upon receipt of UH Hilo's Special Visit Report, the review team members worked asynchronously to complete their assigned sections of the team worksheet. The review team then met via Zoom on April 16th, 2025, to discuss preliminary findings, confirm roles and responsibilities, and finalize the visit schedule. Prior to and during the visit, the confidential WSCUC-based email address was available to the campus community, and received communications were considered by the review team and discussed as appropriate with university constituents during the visit.

The Special Visit began with a team session on the evening of Monday, April 28, 2025, to review the schedule and finalize questions and discussion items for each session. The formal visit took place on Tuesday, April 29, 2024, with an hour-long session with the chancellor to discuss progress on the three Commission Action Letter issues as well as broader developments, accomplishments, and challenges since the 2024 Special Visit. Each of the three focus issues were then explored through sequential hour-and-fifteen-minute sessions with the relevant principal constituents. The team then split for concurrent hour-long sessions with the officers of the Faculty Congress and with the faculty (including chairs) through an open forum. The visit ended on Wednesday, April 30th, with a private meeting between the team chair and chancellor followed by a public exit meeting where the team chair presented the team's recommendations.

Prior to, during, and following the visit, designated first and second writers developed their sections of the team report based on the UH Hilo Special Visit Report, the team worksheet, and findings from the visit sessions.

C. Institution's Special Report: Quality and Rigor of the Report and Supporting Evidence

The UH Hilo Special Visit Report provided a concise overview of institutional progress on the three issues identified in the Commission's July 2024 action letter. The report began with an introduction section that included an overview of the institution and the students it serves, a summary of the previous Special Visit, a table demonstrating continued progress on program assessment and program review, and general updates on personnel and infrastructure. The report's three subsequent sections focused on the three issues identified by the Commission for this Special Visit and the final section provided some institutional reflection. The authors and reviewers for each section were explicitly noted.

The report was well-organized and clearly written. The narratives for the first two issues (i.e., strategic planning and shared governance, strategic enrollment management) were augmented by links to the products of these efforts, namely the publicly available strategic plan and strategic enrollment management report. While the provided information on the third issue (i.e., long-term budgeting and planning) was, in and of itself, insufficient to assess progress, UH Hilo readily provided the needed financial reports at the start of the special visit, which then allowed the team to provide a robust assessment within this report.

SECTION II – EVALUATION OF ISSUES UNDER THE STANDARDS

Issue 1: Strategic Planning and Shared Governance

In the Special Visit report, UH Hilo describes the process used to harmonize the three previous strategic plans into a unified and now-published strategic plan, stressing how the process engaged the whole campus community and led to foundational and profound conversations around the institution's mission, purpose and core commitments to the community, indigenous students, and the preservation of Hawaiian language, culture, and natural ecosystems. This new strategic plan is titled *Ho'olōkahi: To bring about unity, a strategic plan for 2025-2035* (hereafter *Ho'olōkahi*). The team observed that the university has created a public website overviewing the strategic plan and providing access to a PDF of the entire document. (CFRs 4.6, 4.7, 4.8)

Ho'olōkahi is divided into four sections entitled Mission and Vision, Who We Are, Values, and Goals. The Special Visit report describes how each of these areas was carefully designed to inform the next, leading to the identification of five aligned goals:

1. Demonstrate that UH Hilo is a Native Hawaiian place of learning deeply connected to the history of Hawai'i Island's diverse communities;
2. Address equity gaps for vulnerable communities to overcome barriers to higher education;
3. Empower learners with up-to-date and relevant knowledge to contribute to healthy, vibrant, sustainable, flourishing communities on Hawai'i Island and around the world;
4. Advance and disseminate research, scholarly, and creative activities that address priorities and have global relevance;

5. Develop a more resilient, adaptive, student- and community-centered, future-focused organization.

Each of these five goals includes sections on "Actions" and "Measures" in which UH Hilo describes specific steps the institution will take to achieve the goal and the corresponding data and evidence to be collected to determine their progress. The final paragraph in the Special Visit report includes a commitment from the institution, stating, "*As the institution moves forward, attention will be given to implementation, accountability, and continuous refinement...*" This statement, in addition to the process used for creating the strategic plan, became an area of interest to the team for follow-up during the site visit. (CFRs 4.6, 4.7, 4.8)

In preparation for the site visit, the team identified five general areas of inquiry to better understand UH Hilo's progress in developing and implementing *Ho'olōkahi*. The first two areas centered on the involvement of appropriate stakeholders in the planning process and the perception of buy-in from the broader campus community, and the three remaining areas would focus on implementation strategies and timeline, the associated cost analysis of the plan's goals, and the plan's alignment with the Strategic Enrollment Management Plan (see Issue 2 below).

During the site visit, the team met with key institutional stakeholders involved in the development of *Ho'olōkahi*. These meetings included the chancellor, the vice chancellor for administrative affairs, the interim vice chancellor for academic affairs, the chair and executive council members of the faculty congress, and an open forum for faculty. These meetings were very helpful to the review team in validating and gathering information and evidence related to the five areas of inquiry. The team felt that the members of the community were forthright and straightforward in acknowledging the significant progress they have made as a community coming together to harmonize three competing strategic plans into a single unified vision for the

university. The act of harmonizing the plans was referred to as "intense" by one participant because the process involved self-examination and reflection that was foundational and profound, and extended to re-examining the institutional mission and vision. Other participants noted how they made sure that the Hawaiian culture and native students were represented in the new plan.

The faculty congress expressed strong buy-in and ownership of the strategic plan. They praised their involvement (e.g., "We wrote it line by line.") and considered the economic impact of the university on the city of Hilo and higher education's influence on business and industry. The team was informed that the harmonization process involved releasing a draft for critique from the campus community and an open forum with community members. Meeting participants described one forum incident in which they learned UH Hilo had a non-resident enrollment cap. Faculty Congress endorsed the removal of this cap, which was then approved by administration and subsequently supported by the University of Hawaii system. The team was impressed by the thoroughness of the planning process and the resulting strategic plan.

Overall, the team felt campus stakeholders reflected honestly on the magnitude of the tasks ahead of them, namely creating an implementation strategy for *Ho'olōkahi,* specifically establishing a timeline, conducting a cost analysis, identifying responsible parties for measuring, documenting, and communicating progress, and aligning *Ho'olōkahi* with the SEM Plan. In short, UH Hilo knows what it needs to do next to transition from strategic planning to strategic doing. (CFRs 4.6, 4.7, 4.8)

In conclusion, the team acknowledges UH Hilo's significant efforts and achievements in coming together as faculty, staff, and administrators in the spirit of shared governance to harmonize their strategic plans. The result is a bold, ambitious, and unified *Ho'olōkahi* that

strongly reflects the institution's mission and values. The team recommends that UH Hilo now move expeditiously to implement *Ho'olōkahi*, establishing milestones and a timeline, allocating resources, documenting progress with data and evidence, and frequently updating the campus community on progress. (CFRs 4.6, 4.7, 4.8)

Issue 2: Strategic Enrollment Management Plan

Before the visit, the team reviewed the recently published *UH Hilo Strategic Enrollment Management Plan 2025-2026* (hereafter SEM plan) and additional related information within the institutional report. The team also accessed UH Hilo's historical enrollment data from the University of Hawai'i Office of Institutional Research to review enrollment trends.

UH Hilo selected Echo Delta through a request for proposals procurement process to partner with the UH Hilo Office of Institutional Research to analyze key factors contributing to student success and retention in developing the SEM plan. The SEM plan explains the use of predictive analytics based on a series of statistical and machine learning models conducted to determine what drives enrollment behavior for first-time in college (FTIC) and new transfer students. Admissions trends from top feeder high schools and National Clearinghouse Reports are also provided in the report. The SEM Plan identifies five focus areas aligned to specific goals, actions, and measures within the broader strategic plan. However, the team noted these measures largely lacked specificity, such as an enrollment target and time-based goals. The SEM plan also includes a twelve-month timeline divided into two-month intervals to guide implementation.

During the site visit, the team met with representatives from the enrollment management team to discuss operationalization of the SEM plan and to clarify enrollment targets and time-based goals. The team learned that the university continues to consult with Echo Delta and is

holding internal discussions regarding forming committees for each of the five focus areas. Therefore, concrete plans for operationalizing the SEM plan are in the nascent stage. The team was impressed with the clarity the SEM plan provided in analyzing trend data, providing recommendations, and identifying focus areas. The team noted that the twelve-month timeline was ambitious, particularly for a plan identified for the 2025-2026 academic year, and that the Faculty Congress needs clarity on their roles and responsibilities for successful implementation.

The team recommends operationalizing the SEM plan by determining measurable enrollment targets, allocating resources for each focus area, and identifying the responsible personnel for analyzing and communicating progress on the plan to the campus and broader community. (CFR 3.4)

Issue 3: Long-Range Budgeting and Planning

In their Special Visit report, UH Hilo provided a broad overview of their approach to budgeting and planning. This overview included a flowchart of the new annual operating budget process, and this flowchart represents an important step in strengthening financial transparency, accountability, and communication. While the Special Visit report did not include any multi-year financial forecasts or contingency budget plans, this information was requested and immediately made available during the site visit in the form of a multi-year financial forecast for FY24-FY30, a contingency budget plans for FY26-FY30, a net operating budget for FY19-FY25, and a statement of net positions for FY19-FY24.

During the site visit, the review team's discussion with various constituents and inspection of the above documents confirmed that UH Hilo will continue to have spending in excess of revenues for the foreseeable future and plans to continue utilizing reserves for the next couple of years (i.e., FY26, FY27) in order to cover the operational deficit. While UH Hilo

currently has a healthy tuition reserve balance, continued dependence on these reserves may test the reserve requirement threshold in the near future. Starting FY28, UH Hilo plans to not be dependent on reserves for its operating budget, which will require tremendous discipline and buy-in from the entire campus. Such an abrupt budget adjustment may require implementing drastic cost-cutting measures and/or reallocation of expense items if not accompanied by significant improvements in enrollment.

Although there has been progress on the long-term budget planning process, it is not obvious whether the contingency budget plans are realistic. Even the most optimistic scenario has FY28 with a $1.5 million operational shortfall. The administration's goal to wean off of reserves by FY28 is admirable, though members of the Budget and Planning Committee acknowledged this will be a challenging feat. UH Hilo will have to count on Foundation fundraising, successful public-private partnerships, and other non-tuition-driven initiatives and sources of revenue to offset declining trend in enrollment until their SEM growth plans materialize.

Based on the meetings, interviews, and documentary evidence presented by UH Hilo during the Special Visit, the review team concluded UH Hilo has demonstrated a high level of commitment to addressing the long-term budgeting and planning process. (CFRs 3.4, 3.5, 3.6)

SECTION III – OTHER TOPICS, AS APPROPRIATE

Not applicable

SECTION IV – FINDINGS, COMMENDATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The collective wisdom of the team shares these insights and recommendations for next steps. The team recommends that the University of Hawaii at Hilo:

1. Implement the strategic plan, *Ho'olōkahi*, establish milestones and a timeline, allocate resources, record and document progress with data and evidence, and frequently update the campus community on progress. (CFR 4.8)
2. Operationalize the Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Plan 2025-2026 by determining measurable enrollment targets, allocating resources for each focus area, and identifying the responsible personnel for analyzing and communicating progress on the plan to the campus and broader community. (CFR 3.4)
3. Advance the long-range budgeting and planning process with realistic assumptions and forecasts. Continue to involve all the various constituent groups across university throughout the process as well as frequently communicate the financial status of the institution at all levels. (CFRs 3.4, 3.5, 3.6)