



MORTON COLLEGE  
Minutes for the Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees  
Tuesday, February 28, 2023

**Approved at the Regular Board Meeting on 4/26/23**

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1. Call to Order

The Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees was called to order by Board Chair, Frances Reitz at 9:24 a.m. in person at the Morton College STEM Center, located at 3801 South, Central Ave, Cicero, IL.

2. Roll Call

**Present:**

Frances F. Reitz, Trustee  
Anthony Martinucci, Trustee  
Jose Collazo, Trustee  
Oscar Montiel, Trustee (via Zoom)  
Charles Hernandez, Trustee  
Susan Grazzini, Trustee

Trustee Martinucci made a motion to connect with Trustee Montiel via Zoom.

Trustee Grazzini seconded the motion.

Ayes: Trustees, Grazzini, Collazo, Martinucci, Reitz

Nays: None      Absent: None

Trustee Montiel was connected via Zoom.

**Also Present:**

*HLC Evaluation Team 2023*

Team Chair, Dr. Kristal H. Thrailkill, Vice Chancellor for the Academic Affairs University of Arkansas, Mena, AR.

Dr. Julia M Deisler, Interim Dean, School of Trades, Advanced Technology, and Sustainability and Business Professional Studies, and Education, Santa Fe Community College, Santa Fe, NM  
Damian M Von Frank, Instructor of Economics & Social Sciences, Northwood Technical College, Rice Lake, WI.

Dr. Steven Erickson, Interim Vice President of Institutional Effectiveness and Technology Solutions Minnesota State Community and Technical College, Fergus Falls, MN.

Robert A. Spohr, Vice President of Academic Affairs, Montcalm Community College, Sidney, MI.

3. Citizen Comments

None

#### 4. New Business

##### 4.1. Discussion with HLC Peer Review Team

Trustee Martinucci made a motion to begin the discussion with HLC Peer Review Team.

Trustee Collazo seconded the motion.

Ayes: Trustees, Grazzini, Collazo, Martinucci, Reitz

Nays: None      Absent: None

Trustee Montiel was connected via Zoom.

HLC Team Chair:

I'm from the University of Arkansas, Rich Mountain - a small rural community college in western Arkansas, about 10 miles from Oklahoma. We serve approximately 604 students, and it is a small residential campus. (*HLC Team Members Introduced Themselves and Institutions Represented*)

HLC Team Chair

The reason that we are here today is a 4<sup>th</sup>-year mid-cycle review. We are not looking for anything in particular. It is an across-the-board broad spectrum. This is a review before the reaffirmation of accreditation several years from now. So that is not the purpose of this visit. It is based on what you submitted to us in your institutional HLC Assurance Argument, telling us this is how we are doing in terms of our own self-evaluation. Then we come in, and what we do through discussion with various groups is to see if there's something that was not presented in the evidence. Because what happens with the Assurance Argument is that the institution provides documents, documentation that here is what you say that you do, and there is a limited word count.

You can't elaborate on everything in the Assurance Argument. There is a limited word count and then documents are attached as evidence that support what you say you do in the five criteria. And, so, we come in as an evaluation team and we might discover that you are a little fuzzy on this or that. So that's why we talk to everyone. And it may be in some areas more than others because the HLC consistently looks at assessment of student learning, for example, as a high priority. But we look at everything. So, from talking to senior staff and administrators based on the org chart, we talk about everything just to ensure that everything is in alignment. And so that's our purpose today. And, in the past, there were some issues related to the Board, in particular, that the HLC had a particular focus.

And as part of this review, there was a particular report that was included in the Assurance Argument report, an Embedded Report, describing how you have fixed some issues that were found to be concerns previously.

None of the members of this team were involved in previous assessment. So, this is a fresh evaluation. We need to just talk to you about a few issues as we would talk with you anyway as part of the overall review, but I'll focus on that later. So, can I find out how long each of you has served in this capacity as a trustee? (Trustees introduced themselves and how many years on the board).

So, one of the things that HLC has looked at previously and you now have on your website is board training and there has been an issue in the past. So, I would like to know what is your perception right now? What is your role as a trustee and what do you feel you should be doing for the institution?

Trustee Reitz:

I personally feel that my heart is in this school. My whole goal is to better educate people in our district, make the quality of life better for families and students, be it anyone to come on campus and have a better life experience. Right now, I think we're in a good place for new people that have come on board. There's a couple of individuals here, new people. Unfortunately, the pandemic made it difficult with us trying to meet, talk, communicate and respond. So, that was pretty hard coming out of that. We were able to have a retreat with our Illinois Community College Trustees Association. And that was in April. We sat down and discussed things and we talked about our goals and initiatives and things that we are supposed to be doing as board members.

Also, the State of Illinois incorporated training that's required for trustees. So, that was very important and it is informative training. We go further to educate ourselves, more training, something new, these things are always evolving and changing. In November, my goal as chair was to have a retreat (twice a year - one in the fall and spring) for continuous training and coming out of the pandemic. So, we were not able to have the retreat last November and then there was some illnesses. Unfortunately, our trustee that resigned lost her husband and her 16-year old grandson over the past year. She really had a rough time last year.

The other thing is I'm happy that the HLC is here. We're moving forward and it's a process for everybody.

Trustee Collazo:

I attended here out of high school and met my wife here as well. They keep talking about Morton and I feel proud of it because I feel that it has come a long way. Education for the kids. I see graduation. I see all this happening here. We've been doing a great job.

Trustee Grazzini

I also graduated from the Morton College nursing program. My daughter also graduated from the Morton College Nursing School and I had five children and all five but one at one time attended Morton College. And I very proud to be a board member. I think this community needs Morton College. We have a very diverse community and what I would like to see in the future, I'd like to see us expand some of our programs.

Trustee Martinucci:

My daughter is on the basketball team here and they've been very successful.

Like I said, I could not be prouder of what has taken place here. It is one of many that could give you a sense of pride. I know right now we're working on the ball fields is the next thing. And since then I think we're very proud of what we accomplished and looks like there's going to be even more moving forward.

I deal with the high school. My daughter goes to school here. Proud of fact that she goes to school here and very proud of everything that we've accomplished. I would agree hundred percent with what both trustees have said - definitely heading in the right direction. I think there's a lot that has been accomplished. It just gives you a great feeling when you're here. to see our talk. Our basketball team, as we are ranked right now first in the nation. And that's all important because it gives our community a sense of pride and everybody kind of rallies around the college. We have done a great job on social

media, promoting it and every place I go that somebody says, "wow" you guys are building this, you guys have done this.

And I think we've done a great job of getting the word out - come to Morton College. Frankly, a lot of our kids need to come, they can't afford to go to a four-year college. And I see it all the time. Kids on the basketball team and I got four that are playing on the match team and two or three of them I know are already off for a four year. And I know its sports but that small percentage of it, they've been very successful.

When we first started, compared to what our auditorium looks like, the fitness center open free to every resident. Before, everything looked back in the seventies.

Trustee Hernandez:

I probably would never have gone to college if it was not for Morton College. Probably went to work, did something else but I never would have gone to college. When I went to Morton College we were meeting in the high school, store fronts, things like that. So, when I came back in the years after Illinois University, I worked in the police department. So, I have a very, very soft spot for law enforcement. I completed 45 years.

Before I became a trustee, two or three, four years ago, a group of retired guys would meet for breakfast on a regular basis. Retired public servants and one particular one that was a trustee and he had a passion for our children and for our youth and for the community. In the four years we met for breakfast, I watched Joe Belcaster, become sick, he was diagnosed with a terminal disease and toward the end, Mr. Belcaster was on oxygen and very weak. One time, he grabbed me and said, would you consider replacing me on the Morton College Board of Trustees?

Trustee Montiel (via Zoom)

Let me just introduce myself. My name's Oscar. I don't have a chance to meet everyone in person today. I appreciate you coming out. My role at the college, for me, it's fairly simple. I work in the nonprofit sector. I serve youth of the community. So, my organization is a boys and girls club of Cicero, associated with Boys and Girls Clubs of America. So we provide afterschool services for youth and I've been in this profession for over 15 years. So, I've always had the pleasure of serving youth, younger youth through grade school, through high school, helping them pursue their dreams, their education and professions. And for me the opportunity to be on the board was an opportunity to help bridge the gap of young adolescent to adults for a lot of these youth to pursue higher education. And, so, a lot of what I do is help motivate youth and get them in a place to succeed. But, being on the board now is allowing me to not only do that but to be able to make decisions for a community college and provide them with the best type of education and facilities that we can. So, for me, improving the college at every capacity, so that the kids of our community have the best because I do believe that our kids, our youth deserve the best in the community.

HLC Team Chair:

Thank you. So, are there problems, are your thoughts on what the conflict might be? Is there really or has that been resolved.

Trustee Reitz:

First, if anybody else wants to jump in. When we had our retreats in April of 2022 with the ICCTA, I believe the consensus was the trustees were kind of out of the loop of certain things that were reported because the board agendas and the consent agendas, the meetings did become very short. A lot of things were on consent agenda and that's basically what we communicated to Jim Red. And prior to that, also we met with Rick Legon. That was there prior. One of the issues, the board is not here to micromanage. Our responsibility is board policy, oversee the policy and oversee the hiring of the president and let the president run the day-to-day operations of the college.

However, there are certain items that were raised and a couple other interests who I assume not present, but certain things that were on the consent agenda that were not discussed in detail. There was a purchase of property that created a new soccer field and something like that is something big. We've had very poor facilities here for athletics and wanted to, the Trustees brought that up with the meeting that we weren't aware of but we didn't know the college was purchasing it and responsible for it and it told not a consent agenda. So that was the consensus that I felt coming out of that meeting was that we need to change the agenda where it's more of a discussion driven, where there's more opportunity for discussion and things so the trustees can hear instead of just getting everything jammed through. So, that was one issue and we were planning on having a retreat to discuss with Rick Legon and that was to focus on changing up the agenda even with said that was one of the issues is to change the agenda where it was more discussing more reports, strategic planning, finance, things like that going before the meeting. We have a special close session if needed but our meetings have pretty much shortened to under ten minutes long. I think that's the main issue that I feel we need to change.

HLC Team Chair

Alright, let me back up this a little bit. And, so, going back and looking at what was presented previously in other reviews by the HLC and they are determined that are some issues with the Board and part of it was training about the roles and responsibilities. And so again we've read and understand that you had trainings and that kind of thing. So, from just looking at the past, it appears that there was a lot of board interaction with previous administration that for whatever reason did not work out and there was a lot of turn over within the president's office. Could you explain to me what we've been on our time SO'S so helpful that you've been a long time.

Could you tell me, let's go back because I want to show that contract if possible prior. So if you could tell me what happened before when there was all of that turnover and there was intervention from HLC.

Trustee Reitz

We've had a little bit of turnover on the board of trustees, also Sue Banks just resigned recently. We had Trustee Belcaster sadly passed away. Prior to that we had also, I don't know if I'm missing anyone else and Frank Aguilar, oh Trustee Cundari, She also resigned. So, this standing stems from prior to Dr. Fields coming on board, he's, he's been president six years. So, when he first came on we did have retreats with board members and basically the path that we were on prior to MS arrival was retreats, training, talking about board goals, board evaluation, assessing your performance, talking to the president about his goals the following year, how did we think how the president was doing things, like that.

We were in a good path. And then what happened was some trustee were a little bit too vocal about things and possibly just giving too much input. And I believe the president that were here, we had a couple of them, Leslie Navarro, President Knight, Dr. Grove. So, there was a transition and I think with the new state law that says we're supposed to be trained now on one, three and five years having the

board stay on focused with training and going over evaluations, having someone here from ICCTA, having some continuous training as we have new board members coming on the board knowing what your mission is, what your obligation is to the constituents you run for this board. Cause I didn't answer for myself and I would imagine everyone on board agrees. We love this community, we love our district love students here. We're all products of the student evolving.

Probably the majority of us are lifelong residents and I believe everyone's heart is to try help educate students and create a better life for them. And I think some trustees maybe in the past took that more as a opportunity to just maybe, possibly micromanage. And that's not what a trustee's role is. We're here to sit back and oversee everything that the president does, create policy, review that and be to constituents and serve the community and just letting administration run the school. And I think we all have that focus now. We realize we're here elected to serve constituents. It's not to run the school as part of the community. It's very difficult cause we live in the community. People want to come and tell you things, right and employee. And so they see us at the grocery store and say things and so I mean that's pretty common in community colleges.

HLC Team Chair:

So it sounds like that you've had some issues in the past and that was recognized in the past and so on and then you kind of revise that role and then now we've got Dr. Fields in here and so if you're not micromanaging and you've backed up a little bit and revise that role, you had training and all of that, what happened? Because it sounds to me like a pendulum shift that you had all kinds of things going on here and then you said then we got down to 10 meetings. What happened? How did you go from here to here? You just stepped back from completely as trustees. Tell me what happened.

Trustee Reitz:

I think the main thing that happened was when we were put on notice, that was a very scary place to be. Think that we could lose our accreditation and it's because of a board governance issue that just did not sit well with trustees and that we could be put on notice and lose our accreditation, the board evidence issues and everyone needs to sit down and read board policies, just go on and get training, educate yourself, you're going to be elected to this board and serve as a trustee

Then the pandemic happened. So, we had that the where everyone did take a step back, everything was zooming, people weren't coming to athletic events on campus. And yet the pendulum did swing the other way because we realized we're focused on what it is for the school to be run by the president. But right now, I think it needs to be reassessed again through meetings, having retreats a couple times a year and talking about what is the issue that's going on here, how do we change up the agenda, how do we get more reports where there's more information shared. So for sure again, just a five minute meeting. The two reps that we talked with said that's very unusual.

HLC Team Chair

And we've heard that, I don't call it, I want to say zealous participation and then we've swung back to we've got a 10 minute meeting and it's kind of a hands off and that doesn't work either.

You said that right? And so now we're trying to pull it back the other way. So what would you like to see happen with administration right now if it's you're not getting enough information, what's missing? What information would you like to have?

Trustee Reitz:

Well I think to go back to way the way the event was before where there was reports, where there was administration that were given assessment of what's going on, let's talk about student outcomes. Our enrollments have been decreasing. What are we doing to increase enrollment on campus, the students that register for school and then dropout, what's the completion rate? Let's see what's happening as far as getting students who sign up onsite registration, talking about getting know completion rates.

I think that would be important. We have a nursing program talking about the nursing program kind of change, our physical therapy, occupational, different things like that just to give a report to the board, what's going on. So, I think it needs to swing back if we could trust that's on this board. No, we're not clear to start a debate as a board meeting happens and micromanage, we're here to listen. So, when the people in the community do stop us at Jewel or at the library or the fitness center or something like that, thank you for your question, I'll to pass along to the board chair, the president. A lot of people are a little bit nervous about safety, especially with crime in the city of Chicago.

We didn't have a police chief for a period of time here and the previous police chief made a presentation to the board trustees. This was months ago, months and months ago. And it was quite worrisome. You're worried and then all of a sudden now they have the police chief resign. There's a, we trust while our students are safe, they are being educated.

Trustee Martinucci:

We've been beat up pretty good by the HLC. There was one time in particular, I'll never forget it, our HLC liaison came to a board meeting – Linnea\_ and it was in the old board room and it was a great speech and I know from my standpoint and I'm going to make it short but it was in front of everybody in the meeting, and it was a, so when you say the pendulum, I believe from the trustees that they went there. And it was like that's why it hit us right the head. It was like we're not going to lose our accreditation because we hired a president and it definitely swung that way. But there was a time it was getting serious that and when she came and spoke that time and it set us straight.

I don't question for actually, oh we're going to sit and listen to 20 minutes during our coordinated presentations whether that's good or bad but we see what's going. So yeah, I think you hit it right out of that from wherever you're looking at that it was definitely, it was like and that's it. And then the pandemic hit and it was basically remote meetings for a year and a half and we talked about fiscal responsibility.

HLC Team Chair:

You approve a 66 million budget and that's kind of a big, big ticket on agenda. So definitely looking all of that as trustees being responsible for that approval is so important. If I were board member, I would want to know but that's not micromanagement. That is making sure you're informed and understand the 66 million dollar budget and having some questions about where it's going and how it was achieved to even build that way.

Trustee Martinucci:

And the one thing I think what sometimes people understand out there and vote on things have been done before that planning period, get the pre-agenda. Fran goes over the pre-agenda meeting and if she has questions she, so five, six days before the meeting of things are iron out, take off the budget, take off the agenda at that point it is adjusted.

So, that happens behind closed doors. I know I was the board chair for a short couple of years but I know exactly what is going on. But that's done at that time. So, I think it's all really going over most of this and we if we have a question to call up and ask for and chair ask responsibility.

HLC Team Chair:

That's something you're supposed to be doing as you're going to your retreats and say okay you're absolutely supposed to be. So you mentioned decreasing enrollment and completion rates being obviously important completion rates. Sure. But this decreasing enrollment, what was your role in looking at capital projects? Cause there's been a lot of money spent in the last few years and so if you've got increasing enrollment, how does a capital project fit into that?

Trustee Martinucci:

Well I don't, I dunno if decreasing if it was just during Covid.

Everyone knows the pandemic was an disaster, right? I think we were compared everybody else, right? I think we were bouncing back up there pretty good and that pandemic hurt that. But I think, so one of the reasons to do all of these project is to get, I'm sure you walked through the one shop and all that. So I think that was done with those funds and everything so that we were able to.

HLC Team Chair:

So, I mentioned capital projects in particular because it's a lot of money, it's a huge in and a huge investment in infrastructure for faculty and students. Absolutely. So what is the process if you're wanting a capital project, how does that process work?

Trustee Hernandez:

Make the capital project accessible to a community. Not only would a project enhance the lives and the education for students that participate here. I think the eyes of the community when they see something nice for their kids, I don't think you're going to get no, when I took the position as trustee, I didn't take it for personnel matters. I did it for the school. They have property to enhance the community.

HLC Chair:

No doubt. Nice buildings, more attractive for students for whenever they come through. You mentioned yourself in 72, it wasn't that. So trying to attract students that have a lot of options, you definitely want the facility to reflect the quality up here.

Trustee Collazo:

A couple years ago, a couple us got stuck in an elevator, you remember? We expect for figure out, getting things right with the buildings now and it's way different than it was and that is good news.



HLC Team Chair:

So, I guess what I'm asking in terms of capital projects and how did that flow for you? I guess that's not phrasing that question very well.

Trustee Reitz:

I mean take us back to on April 22 when decision came up with purchasing or not purchasing, basically getting the soccer fields donated from the Town of Cicero. That was when we came out of that meeting that we had was to have a part of a presentation at the board meeting.

Have the architect present to the board what the plans are, show us a drawing of the plant. This is what the college administration envisions because we are in charge of the budget. Where's the money coming from? How much funded and do you pay with federal grants, whatever. That was a big issue. Another issue was sitting in some of the meetings and voting on closing the bookstore and that's going to be a culinary program, whatever, start doing the culinary and there is a big culinary program in the high school. So that was a practical, it was raised. Why isn't this presented to the board that this is what we intend to do, close the bookstore and make it a culinary program. And I think that's where a couple of trustees were becoming vocal saying why are we finding out about this? Why can't this have been presented to the board? What is going on?

What do you envision happening? Is creating a culinary program here at the college a good idea? And I think that's where it should be talked about at a board meeting.

HLC Team Chair:

So that didn't happen, so it didn't happen? So, that's part of this pendulum swing. In fact, that's what brought me back to saying, hey too much before now and now what's happening? So, you're kind of swinging back that way and saying that the soccer field and the culinary program, wait a second, we need to slow down. Okay, so that makes sense. So capital projects definitely coming to you but you're saying that there's a snag there. Okay. So, it's my understanding and it was on the website that the president is resigning.

We found it interesting yesterday that no one on the staff mentioned it, nobody said anything because usually that's something if they have an issue with somebody they will talk about it. And I was like, oh that's just nature of people. That's what they do. But we didn't hear anything. And so looking and discovering that, oh okay, that he's resigning, would you share with me how you ended up there with him wanting to resign and nobody said anything. Was this a request or was this something that he volunteered or do?

Trustee Reitz

I would have to say that coming out of the pandemic, having meetings, there was discussion there. There's been some talking between trustees, the president, wanting to get more of a sit down one-on-one with the president and the board, asking what are your goals? What's going on here? Goals being completed. I believe that there was a little bit of friction and some trustees were not happy with it. I would walk out a meeting and have a couple of one-on-ones with the trustees. President was a little bit

uncomfortable and Dr. Fields submitted his resignation and explaining on resigning and he's supposed to resign in May. And then just for on June, November, I dunno if anyone else has any input

HLC Team Chair:

So, do you know if the decision was personal or?

Trustee Reitz:

I am not sure why he resigned, maybe he wanted to retire and move back to Arkansas. Was it personal animosity or friction with the board? It seems to be both.

And, also any discussion with Brad Ebersol, the ACCT rep, was supposed to run retreat last November. I know Sue Banks did get to talk to him and basically his interpretation was if there's not mutual respect and there's not trust and a good mix between the CEO and the board, if it's not fixable, not prepared to fix it, then it's best to move on. And I think, I don't know when, Keith, do you know what Dr. Fields submitted his recommendation?

Dr. McLaughlin:

I am not sure, you will need to look at the information on the website or boardbook.

HLC Team Chair:

It was August. It's on the website. Yeah. And so with that animosity, that's the reason, because I mean it's not unusual for a president to fulfill what they think they were meant to do at an institution and move on to another location is pretty common. But you had this issue before with administration and then there were things that got you on a magnifying glass with HLC and then there was hands off and then you come back saying hey now we need more information. Did the animosity come from that saying Hey we need more information than what we're getting now Or was it, I mean because that's one of the things that the board needs to do is that when you're looking at fiscal responsibility, you definitely have a role and a responsibility to ask him. Right?

Well would his resigning solve your problem?

Trustee Reitz:

I think I we had another issue that caused a lot of stress for the board, behind the campus there's 13 acres. It was a big project that took place. There was a previous vice president years ago. You assume you were on the board and know what was happening. Yes, I was. And so it was coming into a special closed meeting and the vice president at that time was put on paid administrative leave and then was eventually terminated. And I think when that happened, some of the trustees and speaking for myself, how could something like this happen, assuming we have a vice president and big part going on and all of sudden the vice president is on an administrative leave and then terminated.

That wasn't good to hear that. So, there was a couple other situations that happened where an HR director was terminated, showed up at board meeting, spoke publicly and really said some alarming things.

HLC Team Chair:

And when was that?

Trustee Reitz:

I don't know Probably three years ago. So, that definitely was alarming that the HR director before the board said some things like that.

HLC Team Chair:

Is this resignation something you requested or something that you wanted?

Trustee Reitz:

I felt, and I'm speaking for myself that if the board would sit down and have retreats twice a year, have the president attend, talk to the president and talk with the board, talk about your goals, have one on one, have more of the president and the board members talking about his role, our role, communication, what we're supposed to be, the perfect relationship between college president and the board of trustees. That it was fixable and that just that never materialized. We had one sit down in the very beginning of Dr. Fields's arrival on campus where I thought it went pretty well. And because he was not involved in higher ed prior to coming on board, one of the trustees that no longer on the board had recommended going out there and meeting out the college's residents and so on and so forth, learning more about higher education. And then it was like there was no communication after that.

So, the path forward to right now? I personally think things going on campus look terrific but let's focus on what our goal is as trustees. Like, we're responsible for the overall finances of the college. There should be better communication so there has been some friction and is the resignation surprise?

I'm not that surprised but I would've liked to work things out and better communicated to do things the right way and try to rebuild some trust and respect and communication. So that's where we're at now. And I know our board policy is when the current president leaves that the provost should step in. Yes, interim. And another thing we're supposed to talk about last November, what's the succession plan? Let's discuss with the board, what do we want to do ready to go with that meeting And then all of a sudden in two days it was cancel and I'm one seven so I need everyone here to sit down and discuss and talk about this.

## 5. Adjournment

Trustee Martinucci made a motion to adjourn the Regular Meeting of the Board.

Trustee Collazo seconded the motion.

Ayes: Trustees, Collazo, Grazzini, Martinucci, Montiel, Reitz,

Nays: None

Meeting adjourned

/S/ Frances Reitz  
Board Chair

/S/ Anthony Martinucci  
Board Secretary