

COEUR d'ALENE — North Idaho College Interim President Greg South has called on the board of trustees, college staff and the community to take ownership of the problems at NIC and be part of the solution.

South sent an email message to NIC employees Friday evening advising that, along with two trustees and two college representatives, he met earlier in the day on the NIC campus with Dr. Sonny Ramaswamy, president of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, as well as with other representatives from NIC's accrediting organization, following an action letter of "show cause" issued Thursday.

"An important emphasis shared today is that the NWCCU is looking for cooperation from everyone. All board members must set aside differences and come together to work with one another for the best interests of the students at the college," South wrote. "Employees and the community-at-large also need to play a role in this process by exhibiting positive actions towards achieving a path forward by supporting the board of trustees' efforts in working together."

Show cause is the last step before loss of accreditation. NIC has until March 13 to submit a report explaining why its accreditation should not be terminated.

"The most important step is occurring right now — the recognition by the board and the NIC community that there are no additional chances," South wrote.

The new sanction comes after a warning from the NWCCU in December, which itself followed nearly three years of dysfunction on North Idaho College's board of trustees.

Trustees Greg McKenzie, Todd Banducci and Michael Waggoner did not respond Friday to requests for comment from The Press.

Trustee Tarie Zimmerman noted the actions of the board majority in December and January, coupled with the college's response letter to the NWCCU's warning, which the accrediting body found unsatisfactory.

"I am not surprised the college has been issued the sanction of show cause," she said.

Show cause orders are almost never levied against public institutions like NIC, according to a recent analysis by the **Chronicle** of Higher Education, a news publication for those in higher ed.

Since 2016, the **Chronicle** reported, only two mainland U.S. public institutions of higher education have ever received such a sanction. North Idaho College is now the third.

It's unclear whether NIC will be able to pull out of the spiral.

"This is a unique situation because most schools are trying to get back into compliance, but our board of trustees is not trying to get back into compliance," said a faculty member who did not wish to be identified, citing fears of retaliation from certain trustees. "They've made that evident."

In fact, McKenzie, Banducci and Waggoner have previously downplayed or outright denied any threat to NIC's accreditation.

"What about accreditation?" McKenzie wrote in a two-page letter that was widely circulated to Kootenai County voters before the November 2022 election. "Isn't it still at risk? No, that was Fake News. Accreditation has never been 'at risk.'"

Others in the community also cast doubt over whether the risks to accreditation were real. Before the general election, attorney Art Macomber penned a letter he sent to this newspaper brushing off any concerns.

"The scare tactic complaints about NIC's accreditation seem to be a smokescreen," Macomber said.

If voters elected his preferred candidates, he said, then the problems plaguing the college would disappear.

"Vote for Hartman, Sheridan and Waggoner," Macomber said. "Watch the mess and accreditation issues created by the 'Friends of NIC' fade away in the rearview mirror like a bad dream."

In December, trustees voted 3-2 to hire Macomber as college attorney.

The Kootenai County Republican Central Committee, which backed the campaigns of Banducci, McKenzie and Waggoner — and Hartman and Sheridan, who did not win election — promoted the same narrative.

"All that rhetoric was crazy," Kootenai County GOP Chair Brent Regan said shortly after the November election. "None of that's going to happen. That was never really an issue. That was a campaign threat."

NIC's show cause report must include a "teach out" plan that will allow for currently enrolled students to complete their programs before accreditation is lost.

An on-site peer review visit is scheduled for April 17-18.

In June, the NWCCU commissioners will evaluate NIC. If an adverse action decision is rendered, NIC will have the opportunity to appeal the decision in July.

In a Feb. 10 analysis of the NWCCU's Handbook of Accreditation, the **Chronicle** of Higher Education's **Dan Bauman** wrote, "If North Idaho College fails to take any action to meaningfully correct the deficiencies identified by the accretor, the commission will be forced to withdraw the institution's accreditation come April 2024, two years after it issued its April 2022 warning-sanction letter."

The accretor can also grant the college a reprieve from accreditation loss, if it finds NIC has made "clear progress" toward remedying the issues, but only for another two years, Bauman wrote.

The NWCCU could also lift the show cause sanction if NIC regains the full confidence of the accrediting commission.

"Colleges facing down the prospect of accreditation withdrawal have also turned to the courts in the past. However, institutions currently under an accretor's sanction are barred by federal regulations from switching to a new accretor," Bauman wrote.

South acknowledged Friday in the email to employees that there is much work to do to "fix the deficits of board governance" and protect accreditation.

"The NWCCU made it clear that they want to see NIC succeed yet were serious in their message that everyone on the board must take responsibility for actions that have caused and are causing problems with the college's accreditation," he said.

It's not yet apparent what actions the board will take to resolve the NWCCU's concerns.

"At this time, I am not aware of any plans to meet the expectations levied by the NWCCU," Zimmerman said.

The next meeting of the board of trustees is Feb. 22.