

BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION
REQUEST FOR COMMITTEE AND BOARD ACTION

COMMITTEE: Academic Affairs

NO.: AAC 19-19

COMMITTEE DATE: March 5, 2019

BOARD DATE: March 12, 2019

REVOCATION OF THE DEGREE GRANTING AUTHORITY OF ATLANTIC UNION COLLEGE

MOVED: The Board hereby revokes the legal authority of **Atlantic Union College** to operate and grant degrees in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts retroactive to June 30, 2018.

VOTED: Motion approved by AAC 03/05/2019; Motion adopted by the BHE 03/12/2019

Authority: Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 69, Section 30 et seq.

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Background

Atlantic Union College (AUC) was a small private non-profit Christian institution located in Lancaster, Massachusetts that was founded and owned by the Atlantic Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Its mission was stated as "a Seventh-day Adventist Christian professional college, [which] produces diverse graduates who are inspired by a loving Creator God and who excel not only in service-centered professions, but also in the skills needed to lead others to embody God's ideals for healthy communities."

AUC was organized as South Lancaster Academy in 1883. The Academy was renamed Lancaster Junior College in 1919, and Lancaster Junior College was renamed Atlantic Union College in 1933 when the Commonwealth also awarded AUC the authority to offer the Bachelor of Religious Education and the Bachelor of Arts. Later AUC was approved to offer the Bachelor of Theology (1937), Bachelor of Science (1954), Associate in Science in Nursing (1963) and Associate in Science (1969).

The New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) terminated AUC's accreditation effective July 31, 2011. AUC had been on probation since February 2008 for failure to meet NECHE's standard on financial resources. Due to the loss of accreditation, AUC closed effective June 30, 2011. At that time, appropriate plans were made to teach-out courses for existing students and/or to assist students in transferring to other institutions. The Department of Higher Education (DHE) notified AUC in September 2011 that its degree granting authority would be officially revoked in December 2011. However, after discussions with AUC regarding its future plans, DHE agreed to withhold a recommendation for formal revocation of degree granting authority pending receipt of a petition by AUC for new authority under 610 CMR 2.07. In June 2013, the Board of Higher Education (BHE) conditionally approved AUC to offer the Bachelor of Science in Health Science/Biology and the Bachelor of Arts in Theology/Religion for a period of five years provided that, if AUC did not show significant measurable progress toward meeting the goals set forth in connection with its petition to the BHE and its compliance with the conditions of its approval, the BHE would take appropriate steps to withdraw the College's authority to grant degrees, consistent with 610 CMR 2.10. AUC was required to submit to the DHE semi-annual reports providing narrative and statistical information on AUC, including updates on hiring, enrollment, finances and other information as requested by DHE staff.

In May 2017, AUC requested an extension of the five-year conditional period. Though AUC received conditional approval in June 2013, it did not begin enrolling students until Fall 2015 and requested an extension so AUC could complete five years of academic offerings before it would be required to show that it had complied with the DHE's conditions and was sufficiently stable to receive nonconditional degree granting authority. After an initial review of AUC's supporting documentation for this request, DHE staff were reluctant to recommend extension and requested certain affirmations about AUC's financial stability, including continued support from the Conference, which AUC was unable to provide. Discussions with AUC regarding this request were still in progress when DHE staff were informed in February 2018 that the AUC Board of Trustees and the Atlantic Union Conference Executive Committee voted to suspend the

two baccalaureate programs at the end of the Spring 2018 semester, to teach-out the two non-credit bearing certificate programs and close the institution no later than December 2018, due to financial exigency.

At the time of its closure, AUC had twenty students enrolled in its two baccalaureate programs and twenty-four students enrolled in its two non-credit bearing certificate programs. Due to the College's lack of accreditation, AUC was unable to secure transfer and articulation agreements with any Massachusetts-based institutions of higher education. AUC did arrange transfer and articulation agreements for students with Andrews University in Michigan and Southwestern Adventist University in Texas.

DHE staff worked with AUC to finalize the required Notice of Closure since the submission of an initial draft on March 31, 2018. However, with the sudden departure of AUC's President, Chief Academic Officer, and Chief Financial Officer in May 2018, despite the efforts of the remaining AUC staff who inherited the closure obligations, DHE staff was not able to obtain a closure plan that was complete and satisfactorily met BHE regulations prior the conclusion of AUC's five-year conditional approval on June 30, 2018. DHE staff concluded that AUC provided insufficient information about student transfer pathways, did not communicate clearly and openly with students about the closure and their options, and did not take timely action to ensure that the College would have the authority to continue to offer non-credit bearing certificate programs after June 30, 2018. Because of these deficiencies, DHE staff could not deem AUC's final draft closure plan, submitted June 18, 2018, complete.

In compliance with M.G.L., c. 69, §30A and 610 CMR 2.10, a public hearing regarding the closure of AUC was held on February 19, 2019 at the Department of Higher Education, Room 1401, One Ashburton Place, Boston, MA 02108.

Staff Recommendation

Staff recommends that the Board revoke the authority of Atlantic Union College to operate and grant degrees in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts retroactive to June 30, 2018.