Norfolk State University will find out its fate in December. That is when it will learn whether it has met the requirements of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the accrediting agency for higher education institutions in 11 Southern states and Latin America.

NSU is one of only two public, historically black universities in Virginia. The other is Virginia State University in southern Chesterfield County.

SACS placed NSU on probation in December for failing to show its compliance with accreditation standards. SACS President Belle Wheelan says the school mostly was cited for financial issues, but she added the agency also has concerns about NSU’s governance and academics. SACS says that, apart from being removed from its membership (leading to the loss of accreditation), probation is its most serious sanction.

In the past two years, Saint Paul’s College in Lawrenceville and Virginia Intermont College in Bristol have been forced to close after losing accreditation. Saint Paul’s was a private historically black college.

SACS placed NSU on warning in December 2013. (Warning often, though not always, precedes probation.) That year, the university’s board fired President Tony Atwater and named Eddie Moore interim president.

Moore had turned around Virginia State University after it was plagued with financial problems, continuing to serve as its president for 17 years. He, however, had been unable to save Saint Paul’s College, which closed in 2013, despite serving as its president from 2011 to 2012.

Moore planned to retire before being persuaded by NSU’s rector, Thomas Chewning, to take on the job. “I believe in the mission of Norfolk State and HBCUs [historically black colleges and
universities] in general, and anything I can do to help eliminate the cloud of doubt I felt obligated to do,” Moore says.

A former SACS commissioner, Moore is confident NSU has addressed the accrediting agency’s concerns and believes that probation will be lifted. “If they were to visit right now, they would find we are in compliance,” says Moore.

For example, he says one of the main reasons for the school’s probation was its failure to submit audited financial statements for three years in a row. That has been rectified, Moore says. SACS now has NSU’s audited financial statements from the past four years.

Even though being placed on probation hasn’t hurt NSU’s fundraising efforts, Moore believes it has affected enrollment.

In December, SACS will decide whether to remove the school from membership or lift or extend the probation. Meanwhile, Wheelan says SACS has been working with NSU to help the school understand the agency’s expectations. SACS also has shared strategies that other institutions have used to have their probations lifted.