NSU president: Minor problems added up to sanction

By Corinne Reilly
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While leaders at Norfolk State University acknowledged the seriousness of the school's probationary status with its accreditors, they promised Friday to overcome the setback and said they believe the sanction was for a collection of "minor" problems, mostly with how NSU reported information to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

SACS, which accredits colleges in 11 states, decided this week to place NSU on probation. The university was issued a warning last December. School officials had hoped the warning would be removed this week, but the school was handed a more severe sanction. The only status more serious than probation is withdrawal of a school's accreditation.

On Friday, NSU's interim president, Eddie Moore Jr., met with the university's Board of Visitors for the first time since the SACS decision. He told the 13-member board that the school won't receive detailed information about the reasons for the decision until January, but he outlined what he learned earlier in the week during an informal talk with a SACS representative.

Moore said he believes one of SACS's biggest concerns was that NSU - once three years behind in its financial audits - could not submit an audit for the latest fiscal year.

Although the 2014 audit will be done in the coming weeks, months ahead of what's typical, it wasn't ready in time for the SACS review, Moore said, which counted against NSU.
"They recognized the hard work," Moore said, "but we weren't there yet."

That doesn't mean, though, that the university's board is unsatisfied with NSU's finances, Rector Thomas Chewning said.

"We're very comfortable with the financials," he said.

Among SACS's other concerns, Moore said:

- In its most recent report to the agency, NSU didn't outline how it chooses which academic programs it reviews each year, which could have led SACS to believe reviews are random. Systematic reviews are a key part of ensuring a school's effectiveness.

- In reporting how many faculty members are in each of its departments, NSU failed to break down how many are assigned to the various degree programs.

- Some of the board's policies include inconsistent language.

"The frustrating part to me is that these things sound minor," Moore said, "but when you add them up, it becomes major."

Moore said a SACS team will visit NSU in the spring before deciding in December 2015 whether to leave the probationary status for a second year, remove it or issue a more or less severe sanction.

The university has been working to turn itself around after a period of upheaval that began shortly before the August 2013 firing of NSU's previous president, Tony Atwater.

Moore told board members he will stay at NSU as long as they want him to. When he became interim president in September 2013 - he lived in Texas at the time - he promised to stay on for at least a year and a half. He said Friday that his wife recently joined him in Virginia, and they've bought a house in Suffolk.

The board is in the early stages of putting together a committee to search for Moore's replacement. It's unknown how long the process might take.

Speaking to reporters outside the meeting, Chewning said the board is supportive of Moore. He said some members have expressed concern that the probationary status might slow NSU's momentum, but they are "not rattled."

Moore acknowledged that the probationary status could hurt NSU's enrollment, which dropped this fall to 6,027 students, a 10 percent decline compared with 2013.

Asked what he wants NSU students to know, Moore said: "They're students of a fully accredited university."

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