

Six candidates vie for North Idaho College Board as final accreditation decision looms

Sun., Oct. 6, 2024



Candidates for North Idaho College board of trustees debate at a candidate forum in the Salvation Army Kroc Center in Coeur d'Alene on Sept. 26. (James Hanlon/The Spokesman-Review)

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After two more years of chaos since the last election, North Idaho College is about to find out if it has made enough progress on board governance to retain accreditation.

Parallel to this pivotal moment, voters will decide Nov. 5 who will control a majority of the board of trustees going forward.

Two engineers and an entrepreneur are running against a local legacy business owner, a financial planner and a retired K-12 administrator. While each candidate must live in their respective zone, voters across Kootenai County can vote for all three races.

Given the tight timeline by the accreditor, Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, November may be too late to influence the outcome of the accreditation decision. Even if NIC recovers from its sanction status, however, it will likely remain on probation for a period of heightened monitoring, NWCCU President Sonny Ramaswamy told The Spokesman-Review earlier this year.

A peer evaluation team will visit campus this month and recommend a decision to NWCCU's board, which will meet in January to make a final decision.

William Lyons, a retired electrical engineer, is running against Rick Durbin, an NIC graduate and owner of Silver Pine Wealth Management in Coeur d'Alene.

Greg McKenzie, the only trustee running for re-election, is defending his seat against Eve Knudtsen, owner of Knudtsen Chevrolet in Post Falls.

Michael Angiletta, a business coach at NIC's Workforce Training Center in Rathdrum, is running against Mary Havercroft, a retired educator who spent most of her career at Lakeland Joint School District.

At a public forum late last month, all six candidates agreed that retaining accreditation is the top priority and that better board governance is the answer. The candidates also generally agreed on other topics.

Who endorsed each candidate reveals more about them and their divisions.

In previous elections, the Kootenai County Republican Central Committee endorsed the members of the current board majority: McKenzie, Todd Banducci and Mike Waggoner. The board was under their control when NWCCU gave NIC the highest level of sanction.

Banducci and Waggoner decided not to run for re-election this year.

This year the KCRCC has endorsed McKenzie, Lyons and Angiletta. Those three candidates are campaigning together on a platform called "Make NIC Great Again."

Their website displays a portrait of them posing together with their families in front of a field. Their values are "accountability," "transparency," "family, faith and freedom" and "local control," the website says.

NIC Trustees Brad Corkill and Tarie Zimmerman, the board's minority faction who are not up for election, endorsed Durbin, Knudtsen and Havercroft.

An advocacy organization called Save NIC formed a few years ago in response to the accreditation threats and KCRCC's growing influence. Save NIC's political action committee, Save NIC Now, supports Durbin, Knudtsen and Havercroft.

Because of the current makeup of the board, the Save NIC faction only needs to win one of the races to gain a majority.

Although voters can participate in all three races, the last election in 2022 had mixed results. Waggoner was elected alongside Corkill and Zimmerman, even though he was endorsed by KCRCC and the other two were not.

Christa Hazel, a founder of Save NIC, said that could have been because of resentment against Waggoner's opponent, Pete Broschet, for being appointed by the Idaho Board of Education earlier that year.

The KCRCC candidates' main talking point, besides accreditation, is maintaining local control.

Resentments linger about Broschet and two other board members who were appointed, not elected, in 2022 and hired Nick Swayne as president. Attempts by the next board to put Swayne on administrative leave without cause and hire a replacement are part of what led to elevated board governance sanctions.

If NIC loses accreditation, the board may have to decide between transferring temporary control of the college to another higher education institution or closing the college completely.

Hazel said "local control" is code for opposing the authority of Seattle-based NWCCU and the state of Idaho.

"It sounds like they want an unaccredited school," Hazel said.

In an opinion column published in the Coeur d'Alene Press last month, KCRCC chair Brent Regan claimed that NWCCU requires diversity, equity and inclusion policies which would destroy NIC.

"This November's election will decide the fate of NIC," Regan concluded. "Will it remain a local community college offering real world training and skills for our students or will it become a DEI nest controlled by progressives in Seattle and Boise?"

Hazel said complaints about diversity, equity and inclusion are a distraction and are not part of the accreditation requirements.

In an email, Regan defended the board's composure in the face of protests, disruptive meetings and false narratives.

He said keeping accreditation is a priority and that local control is not mutually exclusive with accreditation.

"Local control is important to ensure NIC serves the needs of the community and not the agenda of the accreditation agency," Regan wrote. "The same people who promised accreditation would be at risk failed to cooperate with the board majority and arranged for the complaint to be filed. The complaint did not mention academic or financial performance."

Zone 3

William Lyons declined to be interviewed, saying he was advised it was against his best interest.

Lyons moved to Idaho to retire in 2019, according to his campaign website. He has an associate degree in electrical engineering from ITT Technical Institute in Indianapolis, which happened to lose accreditation and shut down in 2016, though Lyons makes no mention of that as a motivation for running.

“I am running because the NIC is moving in a very ‘Left Wing’ style and I feel the Board of trustees needs to take a more constrictive style of rule with current NIC operations,” Lyons said in a KCRCC questionnaire.

He says on his website that he opposes affirmative action and diversity, equity and inclusion; and that more needs to be done to enforce Idaho’s new laws against them. He supports dual credit and making the transfer process easier.

Lyons also sits on the board of the Idaho State Rifle and Pistol Association.

Rick Durbin, 54, grew up in Post Falls and has an associate degree from NIC in general studies. Before he was a financial planner he worked for the regional Better Business Bureau.

As a former student, Durbin said the school’s accreditation trouble has been “disheartening” to watch.

“It was as if it was just not real, you know?” Durbin said. “For the last few years, we’ve been watching the chaos and the conflict continue to escalate and about a year ago is when I decided to run for trustee.”

He expects to regain a majority on the board to follow through with the accreditation requirements by working together.

Durbin said that he is a conservative, but he likes to meet people in the middle.

“Everyone has a personal bias and we really have to be responsible to the organization and set those biases aside,” Durbin said.

Looking at KCRCC candidates, Durbin said they are all relatively new to the community.

“I don’t believe they have skin in the game,” Durbin said.

Zone 4

Greg McKenzie, 37, did not respond to requests for an interview.

McKenzie was the chair of the board during one of the most tumultuous periods, when NIC was given the show cause sanction. He voted with the majority to put NIC’s president Nick Swayne on administrative leave without cause and appoint Greg South as interim president with an 18-month contract – decisions that directly led to the show cause sanction.

He was a KCRCC precinct committeeman, but lost his seat in the May election.

His LinkedIn page says he is an acoustic engineer for the Naval Surface Warfare Center Carderock Division, which has a research detachment in Bayview.

His website’s key points say he is a fiscal conservative, focused on retaining accreditation, against vaccine mandates and is an advocate for student rights and freedom of speech on campus.

At the candidate forum hosted by the Coeur d’Alene Chamber of Commerce, McKenzie defended his record and said NIC is in a better place than when he joined the board four years ago, noting his work on outdated policies and not raising taxes.

“By all metrics the college is doing outstanding,” McKenzie said. “I’m very proud of that.”

Eve Knudtsen, 61, took classes at NIC as a young student, but she views the current crisis through the lens of a local businessperson who looks to NIC to recruit a skilled workforce.

“From that standpoint, the loss of accreditation would be a disaster in Kootenai County,” Knudtsen said.

She said the majority of the board has not acted in the best interest of the college and ignored concerns from staff and students, which resulted in multiple letters of no-confidence.

“It’s really pretty simple,” Knudtsen said. “We are where we are because of bad governance by a majority of the board. This election has the potential to change that.”

Knudtsen has experience serving on numerous boards. Among them, she is a current board member of the Coeur d’Alene Area Economic Development Corporation and the Idaho Economic Development Council. She previously chaired Post Falls Chamber of Commerce and Kootenai Health Foundation, and was a board member of North Idaho College Foundation.

Zone 5

Leslie Duncan, chair of the Kootenai County Commissioners, filed to run for trustee in Zone 5, but dropped out last month and endorsed Angiletta. Duncan is still running for re-election on the county commission, with primary and general election endorsements from KCRCC.

Angiletta, 54, said he deliberately moved to North Idaho four years ago because of its conservative values and to start a family.

With a background in marketing he started several businesses, including Online Marketing Institute, an e-learning platform for digital marketing. He said his experience developing a digital curriculum is relevant to NIC, which is looking for ways to modernize and become more accessible to students. He said he wants to expand distance or hybrid learning options.

Angiletta considers his part-time business coaching at NIC’s Workforce Training Center as volunteering, even though “they insist on paying.” He said his supervisor asked the administration and was told there would not be a conflict of interest if elected.

He said coaching more than 200 clients the last couple of years gives him a unique perspective on the needs of the small business community, which depends on talent from NIC.

Angiletta is politically active. He co-founded Secure Idaho Elections, an organization campaigning against Idaho’s Proposition 1, the measure for ranked-choice voting. He chaired KCRCC’s communications committee for several months this summer, he said.

“I’m a Republican,” Angiletta said. “The county is overwhelmingly Republican and so I participate in Republican Party politics as most civic-minded citizens here do.”

Angiletta acknowledged the board is nonpartisan and that it should be governed in a nonpartisan manner.

“That said, the board of trustees should reflect the values of its community as we are democratically representative of the people that elected us,” he said.

Angiletta expressed concerns about the accreditation system, complaining that community colleges in Idaho aren’t allowed to choose their accreditor.

“We want to make sure that requirements aren’t necessarily imposed on our community with values that are misaligned,” Angiletta said.

He said he has heard concerns from community members that “the accreditation body of unelected bureaucrats out of urban Seattle does not represent the values of this community.”

Although he may have disagreements about it, he said defending accreditation is still the top priority.

“That is all that matters right now,” Angiletta said. After that, his priority is “protecting the board as a democratically elected institution.”

He said that “good governance” means listening and civil dialogue. It also means transparency and accountability.

Mary Havercroft, 71, worked at Lakeland School District in Rathdrum for 34 years. She started as a classroom teacher, then became the district’s special services director for 20 years and was the first principal at Twin Lakes Elementary School. She retired in 2014.

She was the chair of Rathdrum’s planning and zoning commission for seven years.

“Accreditation is just a typical, routine part of schools,” Havercroft said. “Schools are accredited on a regular basis. It’s not something that people should be fearful of.”

Havercroft called it alarming that essentially the only reason NIC is in trouble is for board governance.

“That’s something that should be taken care of pretty easily,” Havercroft said. “The fact that it’s taken so long to address it, I don’t know why that would be, other than they didn’t take it seriously.”

As for KCRCC’s influence, Havercroft said the race is nonpartisan because the board is supposed to make the best decisions for the good of the college and its students.

“People aren’t supposed to be bringing their politics or their ideology to the position of trustee,” Havercroft said. “It’s important, of course, to have a board that’s well balanced, that have a nice blend of backgrounds and experience and education. And you can’t help but bring that to the table and that’s healthy. But to go in with certain agendas in mind and thinking as a board member you’re going to be able to bring those forward – that’s not what a board trustee is supposed to be doing. It’s not what makes an effective board.”

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