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President of the Commission
BARBARA E. BRITTINGHAM
bbrittingham@neasc.org

Senior Vice President of the Commission
PATRICIA M. O'BRIEN, SND
pobrien@neasc.org

Vice President of the Commission
CAROL L. ANDERSON
canderson@neasc.org

Vice President of the Commission
PAULA A. HARBECKE
pharbecke@neasc.org

Vice President of the Commission
TALA KHUDAIRI
tkhudairi@neasc.org

January 16, 2018

PRESIDENT'S OFFICE

Mr. Barry M. Maloney
President
Worcester State University
486 Chandler Street, A-256
Worcester, MA 01602-2597

WORCESTER STATE UNIVERSITY

Dear President Maloney:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on November 16, 2017, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education considered the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Worcester State University and voted to take the following action:

that the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Worcester State University be accepted;

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Fall 2022 be confirmed;

that, in addition to the information included in all self-studies, the self-study prepared in advance of the Fall 2022 evaluation give emphasis to the institution's success in:

1. implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of its strategic plan with emphasis on demonstrating that annual resource allocations are aligned with strategic goals and initiatives;
2. assessing student learning outcomes and using the results to make improvements;
3. evaluating the effectiveness of organizational changes and ensuring the effectiveness of its governance structure.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The interim report submitted by Worcester State University was accepted because it responded to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letter of February 10, 2016 and addressed each of the nine standards, including a reflective essay for Standard 8: *Educational Effectiveness* on student learning and success.

The Commission commends Worcester State University (WSU) for submitting a cogent and well-conceived interim report that confirms its continued compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation* and highlights the University's accomplishments over the last five years. The University's revised mission statement and core values were used to shape Strategic Plan 2015-2020: Scholarship, Partnership, and Leadership for a Changing World, and we are especially gratified to learn that WSU has allocated \$425,000 to support work directly related to the plan. We further commend WSU for growing its enrollment by more than 1,000 students over the last decade and for implementing focused strategies that include high-impact academic programming and experiential learning opportunities. We are heartened to learn that WSU's faculty members share a deep and genuine dedication to the process of teaching and learning, and the institution's commitment to maintaining a low student-to-faculty ratio is illustrated by an increase of 9% in the number of full-time faculty positions in the last three years. We are further encouraged by the University's "self-initiated, state-supported push for improved retention and graduation rates." For example, the University attributes an "uptick" in retention to a growing sense of belonging among students resulting, in part, from major capital improvements, including a \$12 million state-of-the-art dining facility, the expansion of a residence hall, and the addition of a parking garage and two new residence halls.

The Commission also commends Worcester State University for its comprehensive reflective essay that details the University's commitment to "consistently exploring and documenting" what and how students are learning across the institution. We understand that, under the leadership of a newly hired Assistant Vice President for Assessment and Planning, the University anticipates assessment practices will "become embedded in the fabric of the teaching and learning process." We are further gratified to note that the University is increasingly employing assessment methods, including course evaluations, program reviews, rubrics, portfolios, student and alumni surveys, standardized examinations, and capstone courses to measure student learning outcomes. WSU is currently in the process of measuring student learning outcomes in critical thinking, information literacy, quantitative literacy, and written communication, and the results of an annual alumni survey are being used to assess student success, inform institutional changes, and help current and future students and families better understand the outcomes of their WSU education. The University has also implemented plans to more systematically analyze data related to enrollment and retention (e.g., the Enrollment Management Plan and the Starfish early warning system), and the results will be used to inform planning and to enhance institutional effectiveness.

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2022 is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years. The items the Commission asks to be given special emphasis within the self-study prepared for the comprehensive evaluation are three matters related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation*, *Institutional Resources*, *Educational Effectiveness*, and *Organization and Governance*.

We understand from the report that WSU's strategic plan guides the funding of institutional initiatives, and we note with approval that "data and information collected from all five University divisions" were used to inform decisions that led to the University's achievement of goals related to improving the campus climate and academic excellence. However, details about how the institution connected these initiatives to its annual resource allocation processes were not specified. Accordingly, the self-study prepared for the Fall 2022 comprehensive evaluation will provide WSU with an opportunity to inform the Commission of its success in implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of its strategic plan with emphasis on demonstrating that annual resource allocations are aligned with its strategic goals and initiatives as evidence that "[t]he institution has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning" (2.5). We are further guided here by our standard on *Planning and Evaluation*:

The institution plans for and responds to financial and other contingencies, establishes feasible priorities, and develops a realistic course of action to achieve identified objectives. Institutional decision-making, particularly the allocation of resources, is consistent with planning priorities (2.4).

The institution's multi-year financial planning is realistic and reflects the capacity of the institution to depend on identified sources of revenue and ensure the advancement of educational quality and services for students (7.6).

The institution's progress in implementing a comprehensive approach to student learning outcomes assessment is notable, as is the increasing percentage of faculty actively involved in assessment activities that has resulted in a "visible shift" in the institutional culture of assessment on campus. As WSU candidly acknowledges, however, the University still "faces challenges" in this area, and we are therefore encouraged to learn that the institution is working to establish protocols to consistently and systematically analyze student learning outcomes. As evidence that "[t]he institution has a demonstrable record of success in using the results of its evaluation activities to inform planning, changes in programs and services, and resource allocation" (2.8), we look forward, in the Fall 2022 self-study, to learning of the University's success in assessing student learning outcomes and using the results to make improvements. Our standard on Educational Effectiveness is also pertinent here:

Assessment of learning is based on verifiable statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. The process of understanding what and how students are learning focuses on the course, competency, program, and institutional level. Assessment has the support of the institution's academic and institutional leadership and the systematic involvement of faculty and appropriate staff (8.3).

The institution defines measures of student success and levels of achievement appropriate to its mission, modalities and locations of instruction, and student body, including any specifically recruited populations. These measures include rates of progression, retention, transfer, and graduation; default and loan repayment rates; licensure passage rates; and employment (8.6).

The results of assessment and quantitative measures of student success are a demonstrable factor in the institution's efforts to improve the learning opportunities and results for students (8.8).

As documented in its report, WSU has recently experienced turnover in several leadership positions. A Provost/Vice President for Academic Affairs was hired in AY2016; an Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs was hired in AY2017; a Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences began serving in January 2017. We are gratified to learn that the individuals in these roles are assimilating into the University and that the governance structure at WSU is stable. In keeping with our standard on *Organization and Governance*, we look forward, through the Fall 2022 self-study, to learning of the institution's success in evaluating the effectiveness of these and other organizational changes and continuing to ensure the effectiveness of its governance structure:

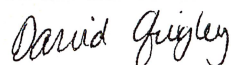
In accordance with established institutional mechanisms and procedures, the chief executive officer and senior administrators consult with faculty, students, other administrators, and staff, and are appropriately responsive to their concerns, needs, and initiatives. The institution's internal governance provides for the appropriate participation of its constituencies, promotes communications, and effectively advances the quality of the institution (3.13).

The Commission expressed appreciation for the report submitted by Worcester State University and hopes the evaluation process has contributed to institutional improvement. It appreciates your cooperation in the effort to provide public assurance of the quality of higher education in New England.

You are encouraged to share this letter with all of the institution's constituencies. It is Commission policy to inform the chairperson of the institution's governing board of action on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Mr. Craig L. Blais. The institution is free to release information about the report and the Commission's action to others, in accordance with the enclosed policy on Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions.

If you have any questions about the Commission's action, please contact Barbara Brittingham, President of the Commission.

Sincerely,



David Quigley

DQ/jm

Enclosure

cc: Mr. Craig L. Blais