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November 16, 2020

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

Dear President Maloney:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on September 24, 2020, the New England Commission of Higher Education considered the distance education expedited review report submitted by Worcester State University and took the following action:

that the report submitted by Worcester State University be accepted, and the institution be granted approval to offer its current courses and academic programs via distance education through Spring 2023;

that the institution be reminded that any plans to offer new programs 50% or more online need to be submitted to the Commission for approval prior to implementation;

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Fall 2022 be confirmed;

that, in addition to the information included in all self-studies, as well as the matters specified in our letters of January 16, 2018 and May 20, 2019, the self-study prepared in advance of the Fall 2022 comprehensive evaluation include an update on the institution's success in offering its current courses and academic programs via distance education with attention to: the evaluation of its contractual relationship with Academic Partners; the assurance of academic integrity; and the assessment of the learning experience of its distance education students;

that, through the Fall 2022 self-study, Worcester State University may request general approval to offer distance education programming within the scope of its mission.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The distance education expedited review report submitted by Worcester State University was accepted and the institution granted approval to offer its current courses and academic programs via distance education through Spring 2023 because the Commission finds the proposed activity to be in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation* and relevant Commission policies.

The Commission thanks Worcester State University (WSU) for its detailed distance education expedited review report. For two decades, the University has delivered undergraduate, graduate, and professional development courses in the online format during which time it has established a sound technological infrastructure, online course-development practices, faculty professional development protocols, and academic and student services to support online learners. We especially appreciate learning that the University has recently increased its “remote and online teaching and learning capacity” as evidenced by the hiring of an Associate Dean of Distance and Global Education and the reassignment of staff to support instructional design. Plans are also in place to add additional full- and part-time positions to assist in Blackboard administration and instructional design. Noteworthy, too, are the communication protocols WSU implemented after the “emergency pivot to remote learning” began that included student satisfaction surveys and a “massive Student Retention Outreach campaign in which staff and faculty volunteers attempted to have a structured individual conversation with every undergraduate student via telephone (or, if telephone contact failed, by email) to discuss the pivot to remote learning, access to technology, difficulties with learning remotely, financial concerns, health and mental wellbeing concerns, registration for courses, and plans for the fall.”

We remind you that any plans to offer new programs 50% or more online need to be submitted to the Commission for approval prior to implementation, in keeping with the Commission’s Policy on Substantive Change.

The Commission confirms the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Fall 2022 and asks that, in addition to the matters specified in our letters of January 16, 2018 and May 20, 2019, the institution provide an update on its success in offering its current courses and academic programs via distance education with attention to: the evaluation of its contractual relationship with Academic Partners; the assurance of academic integrity; and the assessment of the learning experience of its distance education students. We note in the report that WSU began offering fully online graduate programs in Education through a partnership with Academic Partnerships, and fully online programs in Nursing are being developed for future deployment. The University has also contracted with Respondus for a site-wide subscription to its Lockdown Browser and Monitor services for remote testing to “ensure academic integrity for testing,” and we note with favor that the Office of Academic Affairs has a “robust two-tier academic honesty reporting and discipline structure.” The report further assures that “faculty make informed decisions to ensure that courses or course sections taught remotely/online have the same student learning outcomes and expectation level for student work/assignment production/assessment as courses taught in-person on campus;” however, the University’s plans to assess the student learning experience in fully online programs were not addressed. Therefore, we look forward, in the self-study prepared in advance of the Fall 2022 comprehensive evaluation, to receiving an update on these matters as specified in our standards on *Organization and Governance*, *The Academic Program*, and *Educational Effectiveness*:

The institution using contractual arrangements, consortial or other written agreements involving credits and degrees, the delivery of coursework, the assessment of student achievement, or the recruitment or support of students periodically reviews the effectiveness of such arrangements and negotiates appropriate changes. Consistent with Commission policy, the institution maintains sufficient control over the arrangements to ensure quality in the academic program and services for students and prospective students, including the ability to modify the agreements as needed. Written agreements provide for the termination or phasing out of such arrangements as circumstances warrant, and the institution develops appropriate exit strategies as needed (3.18).

Through its system of academic administration and faculty participation, the institution demonstrates an effective system of academic oversight, assuring the quality of the academic program wherever and however it is offered (4.5).

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).

Finally, should Worcester State University wish to be considered for general approval to offer distance education programming within the scope of its mission, the self-study prepared in advance of the Fall 2022 comprehensive evaluation should also discuss the University's developed capacity with this modality.

The Commission expressed appreciation for the report submitted by Worcester State University and hopes its preparation has contributed to institutional improvement. We appreciate your cooperation with 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 and the head of the state system of action on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Mr. Stephen Madaus and Dr. Carlos E. Santiago. 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 Lawrence M. Schall, President of the Commission.

Sincerely,



Russell Carey

RC/jm

cc: Mr. Stephen Madaus
Dr. Carlos E. Santiago

Enclosures:

Policy on Substantive Change
Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions