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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 KHUHAIRI
tkhuhairi@neasc.org

April 11, 2017

Dr. Richard S. Lapidus
President
Fitchburg State University
160 Pearl Street
Fitchburg, MA 01420

Dear President Lapidus:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on March 3, 2017, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education considered the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Fitchburg State University and voted to take the following action:

that the interim report submitted by Fitchburg State University be accepted;

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Spring 2022 be confirmed;

that, in addition to the information included in all self-studies, the self-study prepared in advance of the Spring 2022 evaluation give emphasis to the institution's continued success in implementing and assessing its strategic plan and assuring the effective integration of strategic planning, operational planning, and budgeting.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The interim report submitted by Fitchburg State University was accepted because it responded to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letters of November 19, 2012 and May 14, 2014, and addressed each of the nine standards, including a reflective essay for Standard 8: *Educational Effectiveness* on student learning and success.

The Commission commends Fitchburg State University (FSU) for submitting a comprehensive interim report that documents the substantial progress FSU has made over the last five years. The report includes evidence that FSU has increased faculty support through course release time and microgrants to support scholarship and teaching innovation; increased the diversity of its student body from 9.73% in 2009 to 22.69% in 2014; completed several capital improvements, notable of which are the Antonucci Science Complex and the Hammond Campus Center and Library; and accomplished a number of academic initiatives, including the creation of a new Psychological Science

department and the implementation of a five-year review cycle for graduate programs to align with the undergraduate program review cycle. The University has also expanded the number of online and hybrid courses and programs offered, and transitioned graduate-level Special Education degree programs to an online/hybrid format. We are further heartened to learn that the University has enhanced its existing resources for faculty and students to include 24/7 technical support, online access to library resources and support services and online tutorials, and “a host of other online services for students.” In addition, we are gratified to note the participatory strategic planning process that started in 2013 with seven working groups, each with a faculty chair, and resulted in the *2015-2020 Strategic Plan* that was approved by the Board in April 2015. We understand, however, that implementation of the plan was delayed due to a turnover in leadership that began with the inauguration of a new president in July 2015. Over the last two years, FSU has also hired a new Provost/Vice President of Academic Affairs and Associate Vice President, and the University’s administration was reorganized to include a structure of six deans – four of which are new positions. We understand a national search is currently underway with a goal to fill three of the dean positions by July 2017.

The Commission also commends Fitchburg State University for its thoughtful and informative reflective essay that details the many ways in which the University has strengthened its ability to gather and analyze data to better understand student learning and achievement, and to use assessment results to inform decision-making, planning, and resource allocation. The recent creation of the Office of Institutional Research and Planning, staffed with a Director of Assessment and a Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Research, is evidence of FSU’s commitment to student success. We are particularly pleased to learn that the University’s “evidence-based” approach to assessment has played a “vital role” in academic program revisions, general education curriculum review, and the development of its *2015-2020 Strategic Plan* that “has student success at its core.” To achieve the student success goals outlined in its plan, FSU has implemented a number of initiatives, including: developmental math revisions; freshmen pre-enrollment; DegreeWorks; Guided Pathways to Success in STEM; the Student Success Collaborative; creation of a Student Success Taskforce; and the Reimagining the First Year project. We are further heartened to learn that FSU’s knowledge and understanding of “the method and substance of student learning” has greatly increased due, in part, to the experience the University has gained through programmatic accreditation (e.g. ABET and CCNE), and FSU is now allocating resources and “vigorously” applying lessons learned to shape strategies aimed at improving student retention and graduation rates across the institution. According to the report, overall retention rates increased from 73% in 2011 to 75% in 2015, with a high of 78% in 2013. An increase in six-year IPEDs undergraduate graduation rates from 47% in 2011 to 51% in 2015 demonstrates that the institution’s student success initiatives are taking hold, and an increase in the graduation rate for students of color from 33% in 2011 to 51% in 2015 is especially commendable. We also appreciate FSU’s candid acknowledgement that the University “will need to develop clear strategies to meet the strategic plan’s [graduation] goal of a 5% increase.”

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Spring 2022 is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years. The item the Commission asks to be given special emphasis within the self-study prepared for the comprehensive evaluation is a matter related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation* and *Institutional Resources*.

We recognize that Fitchburg State University delayed the implementation of its *2015-2020 Strategic Plan* due, in part, to changes in the executive leadership team. We also understand from the report that the University decided to curtail spending on strategic initiatives because of its existing structural deficit and the uncertainty regarding the state’s annual allocation. While, as mentioned above, we are gratified that FSU has made substantial progress in its strategic planning and budgeting efforts, we also seek assurance, through the self-study submitted in

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advance of the Spring 2022 comprehensive visit, that the University is implementing and assessing its strategic plan and assuring the effective integration of strategic planning, operational planning, and budgeting as evidence that “[t]he institution has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning” (2.5). Our standards on *Planning and Evaluation* and *Institutional Resources* are also relevant here:

Planning and evaluation are systematic, comprehensive, broad-based, integrated, and appropriate to the institution. They involve the participation of individuals and groups responsible for the achievement of institutional purposes and include external perspectives. Results of planning and evaluation are regularly communicated to appropriate institutional constituencies. The institution allocates sufficient resources for its planning and evaluation efforts (2.1).

The institution plans beyond a short-term horizon, including strategic planning that involves realistic analyses of internal and external opportunities and constraints. The results of strategic planning are implemented in all units of the institution through financial, academic, enrollment, and other supporting plans (2.3).

The institution’s financial planning, including contingency planning, is integrated with overall planning and evaluation processes. The institution demonstrates its ability to analyze its financial condition and understand the opportunities and constraints that will influence its financial condition and acts accordingly. It reallocates resources as necessary to achieve its purposes and objectives. The institution implements a realistic plan for addressing issues raised by the existence of any operating deficit (7.14).

The Commission expressed appreciation for the report submitted by Fitchburg State University and hopes its preparation 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. Martin F. Connors, Jr. 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 P. Angel

DPA/jm

Enclosure

cc: Mr. Martin F. Connors, Jr.