



December 5, 2022

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 September 22, 2022, the New England Commission of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Fitchburg State University:

that Fitchburg State University be continued in accreditation;

that the institution submit an interim (fifth-year) report by January 15, 2027 for consideration in Spring 2027;

that, in addition to the information included in all interim reports, the institution give emphasis to its success in:

- 1) connecting financial planning with strategic priorities through the campus strategic plan;
- 2) continuing to address the institution's physical plant and deferred maintenance needs;
- 3) enhancing the effectiveness of its Board of Trustees, with attention to the roles and responsibilities of the Board's standing committees;
- 4) continuing to develop a culture of assessment, with attention to programs offered through the School of Graduate, Online and Continuing Education;
- 5) meeting its goals for diversity, equity, and inclusion;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Spring 2032.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

Fitchburg State University (FSU or Fitchburg) is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*.

The Commission commends Fitchburg State University for its thorough and well-written self-study. We note with favor the strategic planning process which “stressed the importance of an open and inclusive process” through the involvement of 92 campus community members during the Development Day on September 3, 2019 and, quite impressively, continued through the height of the pandemic, culminating in Board approval of the *2020-2025 Strategic Plan* in December 2020. The 2020-2025 plan covers all aspects of the campus, and both Academic Affairs and Student Affairs use their annual reporting system to “aggregate and synthesize strategic initiatives planned” within their divisions. We are pleased to learn that FSU is on track to address, in a meaningful way, all of the strategic goals outlined in its plan by 2025. The Commission is also gratified to learn from the report of the visiting team of FSU’s “extensive work to elevate diversity, equity and inclusion across the community” and of the gratitude expressed by both undergraduate and graduate students for the “deep dedication to students” demonstrated by the faculty and staff at Fitchburg. In addition, the University has in place strong student support systems including a campus-wide alert system to assess the student experience, retention, and success as well as facilitate interventions. The institution is on solid financial footing with “sufficient reserves to bridge the anticipated 3–5 year financial gap while implementing a strategy to right size the institution.” Of particular note is the enrollment growth in the fully online programs offered by the School of Graduate, Online and Continuing Education (SGOCE) from 140 students in Fall 2014 to 1,722 students in Fall 2020. With its devoted and talented faculty and staff, committed Board of Trustees, engaged student body, and visionary leadership, Fitchburg State University is well positioned to prepare “students to lead, serve, and succeed” well into the future.

Commission policy requires an interim (fifth-year) report of all institutions on a decennial evaluation cycle. Its purpose is to provide the Commission an opportunity to appraise the institution’s current status in keeping with the Policy on Periodic Review. In addition to the information included in all interim reports, Fitchburg State University is asked, in Spring 2027, to report on five matters related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation*; *Institutional Resources*; *Organization and Governance*; *Educational Effectiveness*; and *Students*.

Fitchburg State University’s *2020-2025 Strategic Plan* is a comprehensive, ambitious, and “visionary” initiative. As noted in the report of the visiting team, the plan contains six goals, 39 strategies, 53 outcomes and over 100 key performance indicators. We note with favor that 82% of the faculty and staff reported “being aware of the plan, its role in driving decision making, and the connection to resource allocation.” However, we also agree with the visiting team that the “lack of plans in areas such as finance makes it difficult for the campus community to be informed of the longer-term strategic goals.” The Spring 2027 interim report will provide the institution an opportunity to demonstrate how it has connected financial planning with strategic priorities through the *2020-2025 Strategic Plan*. We are guided here by our standards on *Planning and Evaluation* and *Institutional Resources*:

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 financial planning, including contingency planning, is integrated with overall planning and evaluation processes (7.14).

The Commission commends Fitchburg State University for the successful implementation of its FY2019-2023 Deferred Maintenance Plan which enabled the University to leverage \$7.3 million in state capital appropriations to complete \$16.7 million in maintenance and adaptation renewal. This work has “lowered the campus building age by 23 years” while enhancing FSU’s teaching and learning environments. However, as the team report indicates, there is “\$80 million of needs still to be addressed.” We are, therefore, pleased to learn that an updated five-year deferred maintenance plan will be completed in FY2023. The Spring 2027 report will enable FSU to provide evidence of its continued progress in addressing its physical plant and deferred maintenance needs, in keeping with our standard on *Institutional Resources*:

Facilities are constructed and maintained in accordance with legal requirements to ensure access, safety, security, and a healthy environment with consideration for environmental and ecological concerns (7.23).

The Commission appreciates learning from the team report that members of the FSU Board of Trustees “indicated that they have a strong understanding of the University’s mission and a deep commitment to serving FSU’s students.” We understand that due to unfilled vacancies on the eleven-member Board, there have been occasions when subject matter that would have typically been addressed in one of the five Board subcommittees was instead discussed by the full Board operating as a committee of the whole. We are therefore pleased to learn that the Board has decided to incorporate into next academic year’s calendar a meeting schedule that will formally include subcommittee meetings. The Spring 2027 report will provide an opportunity for the institution to report on the success of these efforts, as evidence that the Board’s “role and functions are effectively carried out through appropriate committees and meetings” (3.8).

We concur with the visiting team that Fitchburg State University has a “robust culture of assessment across the University” and a well-defined assessment process that, when followed, yields “quality information” that is used for improvement. However, the team also notes that “not all programs are assessed” and that assessment of student learning outcomes within the School of Graduate, Online and Continuing Education is “inconsistent.” We are therefore pleased to learn that the University’s seven-year program review cycle includes “all graduate programs” and that, over the upcoming year, deans will review the student learning outcomes to ensure there is sufficient differentiation between baccalaureate and master’s program outcomes. We ask that particular attention be given in the Spring 2027 report to demonstrating that programs offered in the School of Graduate, Online and Continuing Education have published outcomes and use “a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods and direct and indirect measures to understand the experiences and learning outcomes” (8.5) of their students. Our standard on *Educational Effectiveness* offers this additional guidance:

The institution enrolling multiple student bodies, by degree level, location, modality, or other variables, develops and uses the data, evidence, and information below for each student body (8.1).

The institution provides clear public statements about what students are expected to gain from their education, academically and, as appropriate to the institution’s mission, along other dimensions (e.g., civic engagement, religious formation, global awareness). Goals for students’ education reflect the institution’s mission, the level and range of degrees and certificates offered, and the general expectations of the larger academic community (8.2).

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).

Finally, we applaud the work Fitchburg State University has undertaken to understand the overall campus climate around diversity, equity, and inclusion. The Center for Diversity and Inclusiveness (CDI) is "a hub of campus DEI programming" and, in July 2021, the University successfully staffed the Director of Student Diversity, Equity, and Belonging Programs position. The campus-wide Leading for Change committee, which coordinated the University's climate surveys, found evidence that "many students of color don't experience a sense of belonging at FSU." This sentiment was also noted by the visiting team during the open forum with students. For these reasons, we note with favor the work of the abovementioned Leading for Change committee in engaging the community in topics related to DEI. Of particular note is April 2022 programming which "included panels of diverse students sharing their experiences allowing community members to hear what is needed to support their experience and improve their sense of belonging." Furthermore, we are pleased to learn that "a new identity-based programming fund" has provided support for such initiatives as Latinx Heritage Month, LGBTQ+ Month, Black History Month, and Women's Herstory month. We look forward to learning, in the Spring 2027 interim report, of Fitchburg State University's continued progress in meeting its goals for diversity, equity, and inclusion. This section of the report should be informed by our standard on *Students*:

The institution addresses its own goals for the achievement of diversity, equity, and inclusion among its students and provides a safe environment that fosters the intellectual and personal development of its students. It endeavors to ensure the success of its students, offering the resources and services that provide them the opportunity to achieve the goals of their educational program as specified in institutional publications. The institution's interactions with students and prospective students are characterized by integrity and equity (*Students*, Statement of the Standard).

In providing services, in accordance with its mission and purposes, the institution adheres to both the spirit and intent of equal opportunity and its own goals for diversity, equity, and inclusion (5.12).

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Spring 2032 is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years.

You will note that the Commission has specified no length or term of accreditation. Accreditation is a continuing relationship that is reconsidered when necessary. Thus, while the Commission has indicated the timing of the next comprehensive evaluation, the schedule should not be unduly emphasized because it is subject to change.

The Commission expressed appreciation for the self-study prepared by Fitchburg State University and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you, Jay Bry, Vice President for Finance and Administration, Patricia Marshall, Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, Pamela McCafferty, Associate Vice President for Institutional Research, and Frank Sánchez (via phone), team chair, during its deliberations.

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 system of action on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Debbie Phillips and Carlos Santiago. The institution is free to release information about the evaluation and the Commission's action to others, in accordance with the enclosed policy on Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions.

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The Commission hopes that the evaluation process has contributed to institutional improvement. It appreciates your cooperation with the effort to provide public assurance of the quality of higher education.

If you have any questions about the Commission's action, please contact Lawrence M. Schall, President of the Commission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Russell Carey". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Russell Carey

RC/sjp

cc: Debbie Phillips
Carlos Santiago
Visiting team

Enclosure: Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions