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NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS & COLLEGES, INC.
COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

June 4, 2014

Dr. James W. Schmotter
President
Western Connecticut State University
181 White Street
Danbury, CT 06810-6860

Dear President Schmotter:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on April 25, 2014, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Western Connecticut State University:

that Western Connecticut State University be continued in accreditation;

that the report regarding the implementation of the online Ed.D. in Nursing Education program offered through a collaborative agreement with Southern Connecticut State University be accepted and inclusion of the program within the institution's accreditation be confirmed;

that the University submit a report for consideration in Spring 2016 that gives emphasis to the institution's progress in implementing the Ed.D. in Nursing Education program with attention to:

1. assuring that the rigor of courses offered by each institution is consistent and appropriate for doctoral level students;

2. assuring the sufficiency of faculty to advise Ed.D. students during the dissertation phase of their program;

3. implementing program evaluation strategies and assessing learning outcomes of students in the in the Ed.D. in Nursing Education program;

that the University submit a fifth-year interim report for consideration in Fall 2018;

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

1. achieving its goals for enrollment, retention, and graduation as assurance of financial stability;

2. assessing student learning outcomes of the general education core competencies and all majors and using the results to inform decision-making and continuous improvement;

3. continuing to evaluate the impact of governance changes in the State of Connecticut on the University;

4. implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of the institution's strategic plan;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Fall 2023.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its actions.

Western Connecticut State University (WCSU) is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be substantially in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation.*

We commend Western Connecticut State University (WCSU) for preparing a comprehensive and well written self-study. We are especially gratified to learn from the visiting team that the University's mission is clearly articulated, coherent, and consistent; that the shared governance structure is "extraordinary" as evidenced by the openness and transparency by which the University operates; and that there is a shared enthusiasm among the campus community about the University's leadership. Notable accomplishments over the last decade include establishment of the Visual and Performing Arts School, achievement of NCATE accreditation for Education programs, addition of an Ed.D. in Instructional Leadership, 100% pass rate on the Nursing state board examination, and the recent adoption by the Senate of a tiered competency-based model for general education. As demonstrated through the self-study and acknowledged by the team, WSCU is committed to the comprehensive assessment of institutional effectiveness. We note with favor that more than 650 members of the campus community are involved in various planning initiatives, and the academic program review process was recently modified to include the assessment of program viability and alignment with the University's strategic plan. The team verified that courses offered at the Waterbury, Connecticut, location, as well as those offered in non-traditional formats and online, are comparable in content and rigor to traditional face-to-face courses. Faculty are sufficient in number and well qualified, and we are gratified to learn that the institution's mission is articulated through effective and excellent teaching. Further, faculty are active, engaged scholars and practitioners and, as noted by the visiting team, the relationships between students and faculty and between the faculty and the administration are "positive." The University offers a wide variety of academic and student services, and information and technological resources are sufficient to support students. Especially notable is WCSU's ongoing assessment of student services to assure continuous improvement and to inform decisions related to strategic planning and budget allocations. Finally, we share the judgment of the team that there is much to celebrate in the University's growth and development over the last decade. With a highly respected and able President, a new, energetic and competent senior leadership team, and dedicated faculty and staff, Western Connecticut State University is well positioned for future success.

The Commission further commends WCSU for submitting a well-conceived report detailing the implementation of the 51-credit, fully online Ed.D. in Nursing Education program offered through a collaborative agreement with Southern Connecticut State University. The program supports WCSU's mission, and we are gratified to learn from the Ed.D. evaluators that both

institutions collaborated to plan and design a high-quality program to meet the growing demand for doctorally prepared nursing professionals. The report assures that governance is appropriate and that the responsibility for teaching courses and student advisement is shared by each institution. Further, a Doctorate in Nursing Education Collaborative Program Committee comprising Co-Coordinators and faculty and student representatives from each institution is in place to ensure on-going program quality and integrity. Faculty assigned to teach in the Nursing Education program are sufficient in number and well-qualified and we are pleased to learn that they have also successfully completed a comprehensive nine week course in online pedagogy. Finally, as confirmed by the evaluators, student support, library, and technological services are appropriate for doctoral level students, and we are particularly gratified to note that a full-time Instructional Design Coordinator has been hired to support the Ed.D. in Nursing Education program.

The three items the institution is asked to report on in Spring 2016 are related to our standards on *The Academic Program* and *Faculty*.

The evaluators' review of the Ed.D. in Nursing Education syllabi confirmed the concerns described by students as a "perceived difference" in the level of rigor of courses across the two campuses. We share the judgment of the evaluators that faculty at both institutions will need to work closely to ensure that course rigor is consistent across the program and that the student experience is "seamless" regardless of which department is delivering the course. The Spring 2016 report will provide WCSU an opportunity to update the Commission on its continued success in implementing the Ed.D. in Nursing Education program with emphasis on the steps taken to assure that the rigor of all Ed.D. courses is consistent and appropriate for doctoral level students, as evidence that learning objectives for these courses "reflect a high level of complexity, specialization, and generalization" (4.21). Refer to our standard on *The Academic Program* for additional guidance here:

> Institutions offering degrees at multiple levels demonstrate that expectations for student achievement, independent learning, skills in inquiry, and critical judgment are graduated by degree level and in keeping with generally accepted practice (4.4).

We concur with the judgment of the evaluators that there will be a need to "expand the pool of faculty" available to support students during the dissertation phase of the Ed.D. program as more cohorts are enrolled and more students enter the dissertation phase. We are pleased to learn from WCSU's report that the Doctorate in Nursing Education Collaborative Program Committee is charged with "instituting the doctoral student advising process." We look forward to learning, through the report submitted for consideration in Spring 2016, of the institution's success in assuring that sufficient faculty are available to advise Ed.D. students, as evidence that "[t]he institution has in place an effective system of academic advising that meets student needs for information and advice and is compatible with its educational objectives" (5.19).

According to the institution's report, students in the Nursing Education program will develop a portfolio that "reflects achievement of the National League for Nursing's Nurse Educator Competencies." In addition, the Ed.D. Program and Curriculum Committee will evaluate the portfolios of the first cohort in Spring 2015 "as a way to measure the program's effectiveness." The Spring 2016 report will provide the University with an opportunity to update the Commission on its success in implementing its program evaluation strategies and assessing student learning outcomes in the Ed.D. in Nursing Education program. Relevant here is our standard on *The Academic Program*:

> The institution develops, approves, administers, and on a regular cycle reviews its degree programs under effective institutional policies that are implemented by designated bodies

> with established channels of communication and control. Faculty have a substantive voice in these matters (4.9).
>
> The institution's system of periodic review of academic programs includes a focus on understanding what and how students learn as a result of the program (4.52)

Commission policy requires a fifth-year interim 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 fifth-year reports the University is asked, in Fall 2018, to report on four matters related to our standards on *Students, Financial Resources, The Academic Program, Organization and Governance,* and *Planning and Evaluation.*

We appreciate that WCSU candidly acknowledges in its self-study that, given the institution's recent enrollment trends along with the projected decline of high school students in the Northeast region, "enrollment projections will need to be made with caution." Enrollment at WCSU declined 3.4% in Fall 2011 and 4.3% in Fall 2012 to 5,316 FTE and 5,088 FTE, respectively; one-year retention rates for first-time full-time undergraduates have declined from a high of 75% in 2009 to 69% in 2011; and the six-year graduation rate of 42% "remains a concern." We are gratified to learn that strategic initiatives are in place to improve enrollment and retention rates, including a dual-advisement program and a MAP-Works survey to identify at-risk students. The University has also established goals for 2014 and 2015 to increase first-to-second year retention by 3 percentage points each year, to increase entering student enrollment by 4% each year, and to increase out-of-state enrollment by 5% in 2014 and 10% in 2015. The interim report submitted for consideration in Fall 2018 will provide WCSU an opportunity to update the Commission on its success in achieving these goals, as assurance that "planning is realistic and reflects the capacity of the institution to depend on identified sources of revenue" (9.3). Our standard on *Students* provides additional guidance here:

> Measures of student success, including rates of retention and graduation, are separately determined for any group that the institution specifically recruits, and those rates are used in evaluating the success of specialized recruitment and the services and opportunities provided for the recruited students (6.7).
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> The institution's goals for retention and graduation reflect institutional purposes, and the results are used to inform recruitment and the review of programs and services (6.8).
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> Data on retention, graduation, and other measures of student success are regularly reviewed within the institution, with the results being used for planning, resource allocation, and improvement (6.9).

We understand through the self-study that in response to the new statewide transfer articulation policy, the WCSU Faculty Senate approved a tiered competency-based General Education model that will be implemented by September 2014 and WCSU is "utilizing this opportunity to revise curricular practices with respect to general education, majors, and assessment." In addition, we concur with the assessment of the visiting team that it is not readily evident that student learning outcomes in the 65 undergraduate majors are systematically evaluated to inform decisions related to resource allocation, marketing strategies, or enrollment planning. In keeping with our standard on *The Academic Program* we look forward, in the Fall 2018 interim report, to learning of the institution's success in assessing student learning outcomes in the competency-based general education program, as well as in the undergraduate degree program majors, and using the results to inform decision-making and continuous improvement:

> The general education requirement is coherent and substantive. It embodies the institution's definition of an educated person and prepares students for the world in which they will live. The requirement informs the design of all general education courses, and provides criteria for its evaluation, including the assessment of what students learn (4.16).
>
> The institution implements and provides support for systematic and broad-based assessment of what and how students are learning through their academic program and experiences outside the classroom. Assessment is based on clear statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. Assessment provides useful information that helps the institution to improve the experiences provided for students, as well as to assure that the level of student achievement is appropriate for the degree awarded (4.48).
>
> The institution's approach to understanding student learning focuses on the course, program, and institutional level. Evidence is considered at the appropriate level of focus, with the results being a demonstrable factor in improving the learning opportunities and results for students (4.49).

We acknowledge that the recently formed Connecticut Board of Regents is still in the process of establishing consistent statewide procedures and guidelines for institutional effectiveness. We also recognize that, while WCSU has begun to align its policies, procedures, and strategic planning initiatives with the state system, as additional statewide changes are implemented they may have an impact on the University. We look forward to being apprised, in the Fall 2018 interim report, of the results of the University's continued evaluation of the impact of changes in governance in the State of Connecticut on the University. Our standard on *Organization and Governance* will provide guidance for this section of the report:

> In multi-campus systems organized under a single governing board, the division of responsibility and authority between the system office and the institution is clear. Where system and campus boards share governance responsibilities or dimensions of authority, system policies and procedures are clearly defined and equitably administered (3.11).

WSCU indicates in its self-study that there are three primary factors that could affect the successful implementation of the institution's strategic plan: declining state funding, declining student enrollment, and a changing state governance structure. As such, we note with favor that the University has implemented a "practical approach" to planning and goal setting in a time of economic and demographic challenges. The interim report submitted for consideration in Fall 2018 will afford the University an opportunity to inform the Commission of its success in implementing its strategic plan as evidence that "[t]he institution has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning" (2.4). Our standard on *Planning and Evaluation* provides additional guidance here:

> [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 (2.3).

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2023 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 Western Connecticut State University and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you, Dr. Jane Gates, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dr. Ann Atkinson, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, and Dr. Jean F. MacCormack, 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 of action on its accreditation status. In a few days, we will be sending a copy of this letter to Mr. Nicholas Donofrio. The institution is free to release information about the evaluation and the Commission's action to others, in accordance with Commission policy.

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 in New England.

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

Sincerely,

Jean A Wyld

Jean A. Wyld

JAW/sjp

Enclosure

cc: Mr. Nicholas Donofrio
Visiting team