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February 1, 2019

Dr. John B. Clark
President
Western Connecticut State University
181 White Street
Danbury, CT 06810-6860

Dear President Clark:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on November 16, 2018, the New England Commission of Higher Education considered the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Western Connecticut State University and voted to take the following action:

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

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Fall 2023 be confirmed;

that, in addition to the information included in all self-studies, the self-study prepared in advance of the Fall 2023 evaluation give emphasis to the institution's success in:

1. implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of its strategic plan;
2. achieving its enrollment and retention goals and ensuring that institutional resources are sufficient to support its mission;
3. evaluating the effectiveness of its revised General Education curriculum with emphasis on assessing student learning outcomes of the general education core competencies and of all majors and using the results to inform decision-making and continuous improvement;
4. achieving its diversity goals for faculty and staff.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Western Connecticut State University was accepted because it responded to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letters of June 4, 2014 and June 1, 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 Western Connecticut State University (WCSU) for submitting a 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. Under the leadership of a new president, WCSU "forged" a new Board-approved mission and vision statement and implemented a strategic planning process that included constituencies from across the campus and resulted in the development of a strategic plan that is "characterized by a stronger focus on implementation and outcomes." The report documents a robust and well-functioning organizational structure and governance process, and we note with approval the institution's increased use of assessment and program review to support its commitment to "quality first." Evidence of WCSU's focused attention on quality is the use of data to improve its distance education programs by "driv[ing] priorities in the areas of faculty support, student support, and instructional technology requirements." We take favorable note of the steps taken by the institution to strengthen the Ed.D. in Nursing Education program offered collaboratively with Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU). These include changes to faculty advising assignments and more frequent meetings between WCSU and SCSU faculty to review syllabi, shared assignments, and student work. In response to market demands, WCSU developed new undergraduate and graduate degree programs (e.g., BA in Applied Computing; BBA in Cybersecurity; MS in Applied Behavior Analysis), and the University's use of technology, including Degree Works to track students' academic progress and WESTCONN Works to enhance scheduling and assessments for career exploration, to increase efficiencies and improve student success is worth noting. We are further gratified to learn of the University's initiative to "celebrate and promote the importance of faculty scholarly activities as part of the WCSU brand" by documenting faculty accomplishments in an annual publication. We note that in an effort to increase undergraduate enrollment by 1% per year for the next three years, WCSU began offering in-state tuition to undergraduate students residing in seven neighboring counties in New York State which resulted in increased enrollment of 238 students in Fall 2017 generating over \$2.4 million in revenue. WCSU also recently received approval to offer in-state tuition to students in New Jersey, a measure that the institution anticipates will further boost enrollment. Finally, we are assured through the report that academic resources and student services are sufficient to support the institution's mission.

We also thank Western Connecticut State College for its thoughtful and comprehensive reflective essay that includes examples of the student success plans and initiatives that are in place to support the University's strategic priority to "create, strengthen, and enhance programs and curricula that are responsive to the needs of a diverse community of learners." The E-Series forms included in the report support WCSU's assertion that it has "moved from an attitude of compliance to a broad commitment to assessment," and we note with approval that all degree programs have student learning outcomes, all departments have assessment plans, and many programs have implemented changes to curriculum based on those assessments. For instance, at the undergraduate level, improvements have been made to Computer Science, Biology, Music, Business, and Nursing programs; at the graduate level, improvements have been made to the MBA, MS in Counselor Education, and Ed.D. in Instructional Leadership. In addition, several spaces in the library have been "systematically reconfigured" to accommodate partner services on campus creating multipurpose environments that meet the academic needs of faculty and students. Faculty in all four schools are committed to achieving the outcomes of the recently revised general education program that embeds competencies in courses across the curriculum, and, to address the finding that students in the first-year navigation course often need assistance to "successfully apprehend the content of some courses," an ad hoc committee of the various areas that offer tutoring was convened to develop a systematic plan to ensure students are aware of and have access to these important resources. Faculty liaisons have also been selected to help

bridge the gap between professional and faculty advisors. Further evidence of WCSU's commitment to student success is its job placement rate. Over the past four years, percentages of students employed in Connecticut approximately nine months after receiving degrees averaged 71.3% for bachelor's degree and 66.9% for master's degree recipients, and we recognize that these rates do not include students who find employment across the border in New York. Finally, we are encouraged to learn that to achieve its goal to be "widely recognized as a premier public university with outstanding teachers and scholars who prepare students to contribute to the world in a meaningful way," WCSU will focus on "improving outcomes for all students, while continuously reflecting on the quality of its academic programs."

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. The items the Commission asks to be given special emphasis within the self-study prepared for the comprehensive evaluation are four matters related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation*; *Students*; *Institutional Resources*; *Educational Effectiveness*; *The Academic Program*; and *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*.

Since WCSU finalized its strategic plan in 2017, the University President and the University Senate President jointly created a standing committee to operationalize the plan and "keep it moving forward." According to the report, a campus-wide meeting was recently held to discuss the effectiveness of the plan to date, and a dedicated website is under development that will allow members of the WCSU campus community to monitor implementation of the plan on an ongoing basis. We look forward, in the self-study submitted in advance of the Fall 2023 comprehensive evaluation, to receiving an update on WCSU's success in implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of its strategic plan as evidence that "[t]he results of strategic planning are implemented in all units of the institution through financial, academic, enrollment, and other supporting plans" (2.3), and that "[t]he institution has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning" (2.5).

As documented in the report, one-year retention rates for first-time, full-time WCSU students ranged from 73% to 76%; six-year graduation rates ranged from 42% to 49%. While these rates fell short of the University's retention and six-year graduation goals (78% and 50%, respectively), we note favorably that, over the past two years, the six-year graduation rate for full-time transfer students increased from 45% to 54%, and the six-year graduation rate for part-time transfer students increased from 28% to 42%. We understand that it is too soon to measure the "full impact" of recently implemented retention initiatives. However, we are encouraged to learn that the First Year Program, revised General Education program, and publication of Four-Year Plans appear to be contributing to improvements in retention rates, and the University anticipates it will see a "strong impact" – a 2% to 3% improvement – on six-year graduation rates in the next two to three years. In addition to extending in-state tuition to students in New York and New Jersey (as noted positively above) to address its "enrollment and fiscal challenges," WCSU is "talking with industry representatives to get a good sense of their needs and [the University's] fit with those opportunities." To verify that "the institution sets and achieves realistic goals to enroll students who are broadly representative of the population the institution wishes to serve" (*Students*, Statement of the Standard), we ask that the Fall 2023 self-study include an update on the University's success in achieving its enrollment and retention goals and ensuring that institutional resources are sufficient to support its mission. We are further guided here by our standards on *Institutional Resources* and *Educational Effectiveness*:

The institution preserves and enhances available financial resources sufficient to support its mission. It manages its financial resources and allocates them in a way that reflects its mission and purposes. It demonstrates the ability to respond to financial emergencies and unforeseen circumstances (7.4).

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).

We understand from the report that, while Western Connecticut State University is still in the initial phase of implementing its revised General Education curriculum, the University is beginning to see “early signs” that “students are having less trouble completing their General Education curriculum than they experienced in [WCSU’s] older distribution-model approach.” For example, in chemistry courses faculty have “made clear the distinctions between scientific inquiry and critical thinking and broadened the conversation about science.” We note with approval that “planning for systematic assessment of General Education competencies is now under way,” and we acknowledge that the impact of the new curriculum will not be fully understood in terms of outcomes until 2020 when WCSU graduates will have entered under this model. In keeping with our standards on *The Academic Program* and *Educational Effectiveness*, (cited above and below) we look forward to receiving, in the Fall 2023 self-study, information about the University’s success in evaluating the effectiveness of its revised General Education curriculum with emphasis on assessing student learning outcomes of the curriculum’s core competencies and of all 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 general education requirement in each undergraduate program ensures adequate breadth for all degree-seeking students by showing a balanced regard for what are traditionally referred to as the arts and humanities, the sciences including mathematics, and the social sciences. General education requirements include offerings that focus on the subject matter and methodologies of these three primary domains of knowledge as well as on their relationships to one another (4.17).

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 uses a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods and direct and indirect measures to understand the experiences and learning outcomes of its students, employing external perspectives including, as appropriate, benchmarks and peer comparisons (8.5).

We appreciate WCSU’s candid acknowledgment that the University’s faculty and administrators do not fully reflect the diversity of its student population. We therefore note positively that the Office of Diversity and Equity (ODE) launched its first Diversity Council in December 2017. Council members will “develop initiatives to recruit and retain underrepresented minority groups at all levels of the University as well as identify partnership opportunities with the business community to assist the ODE in identifying key trends, changes, and developments in business.”


Through the Fall 2023 self-study, we look forward to being apprised of WCSU's success in "address[ing] its own goals for the achievement of diversity among its faculty and academic staff" (6.5).

The Commission expressed appreciation for the report submitted by Western Connecticut 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 and the head of the state system on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Matt Fleury and Mark Ojakian. 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/sjp

Enclosures

cc: Matt Fleury
Mark Ojakian