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

January 24, 2013

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Dr. Evan S. Dobbelle
President
Westfield State University
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Dear President Dobbelle:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on November 15, 2012, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Westfield State University:

that Westfield State University be continued in accreditation;

that the University submit a fifth year interim report for consideration in Spring, 2017;

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

1. assuring its governance structure effectively facilitates the integration of strategic and academic planning;
2. providing sufficient resources to support institutional planning and evaluation activities;
3. continuing to develop and implement a comprehensive and systematic approach to the assessment of student learning and program review;
4. developing and implementing a coherent and substantive common core curriculum;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Spring, 2022.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its actions.

Westfield State University is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be substantially in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*.

The Commission commends Westfield State University (WSU) for its preparation of a thorough self-study that candidly describes the challenges and opportunities facing the institution. We concur with the visiting team that the commitment of the University's Trustees, administration, faculty, and staff to the "centrality of students" is reflected throughout the institution's institutional and organizational structures. Initiatives implemented to advance two of the University's key strategic priorities – embracing diversity and fostering student success – provide evidence of this commitment, including the Urban Education and Learning Disability programs, the creation of an Office of International Programs, and the support provided to expand and enhance the University's Honors Program. The institution's overall retention rate of 80% is impressive, as is fact that the completion rates of students enrolled in the University's online programs "mirror these results." We note with approval the addition of 50 new tenure-track faculty positions, despite budget cuts from the state over the past five years. The University's effective fiscal management and controls and well-developed budget process are noteworthy, as is its Master Campus Plan updated in 2012 to provide for continued expansion and upgrades to the "functionality and image of the campus." As a teaching institution that proudly offers "private quality and public value," WSU is well-positioned to continue to meet its mission as a public university serving its region and its students.

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 Spring, 2017 to report on four matters related to our standards on *Organization and Governance*, *Planning and Evaluation*, and *The Academic Program*.

The Commission commends Westfield State University's strong commitment to shared governance and is pleased to learn of the implementation of campus update forums, hosted by the All College Committee (ACC), to foster increased communication and transparency. However, as reported by the team and acknowledged by the institution, while the numerous committees formed to advance various strategic and academic initiatives permit the participation of all relevant constituencies, a lack of clarity about the lines of responsibility and relationship among the committees has created frustration about the "slowness of the process." Of particular concern is the delay in approving a new mission statement and the institutional and academic strategic plans that has "negatively affected campus conversations on assessment." We therefore are pleased to learn that the new mission, values, and vision statement and the 2012-2017 Strategic Plan were approved by the Board of Trustees at its Fall 2012 meeting. We are also encouraged that the ACC is committed to finding ways to "streamline [the University's] committee structure" before reestablishing any other ad-hoc or special committees. In keeping with our standard on *Organization and Governance*, the Spring 2017 report will enable the institution to provide evidence that its governance structure effectively facilitates the integration of the institution's strategic and academic planning.

Through its system of board and internal governance, the institution ensures the appropriate consideration of relevant perspectives; decision-making aligned with expertise and responsibility; and timely action on institutional plans, policies, curricular change, and other key considerations. (3.14)

The effectiveness of the institution's organizational structure and system of governance is improved through periodic and systematic review. (3.15)

We understand that at the time of the visit the University's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment was staffed by a single individual, leading to the team's concern about the adequacy of resources provided by the institution to ensure "[i]nstitutional research is sufficient to support planning and evaluation." (2.2). We therefore are pleased to learn that an additional data analyst has since been hired to assist with the activities of the office. In the Spring 2017 report, we seek

assurance of the institution's continued support of its planning and evaluation activities. Our standard on *Planning and Evaluation* provides this additional guidance:

Planning and evaluation are systematic, comprehensive, broad-based, integrated, and appropriate to the institution. ... The institution allocates sufficient resources for its planning and evaluation efforts. (2.1)

We note with approval the efforts of the University's Institutional Assessment Committee to assist departments with the development of student learning outcomes and program review cycles as demonstrated by the institution's E-series forms indicating that "80% of Westfield's undergraduate degree programs and 100% of [the] graduate programs are collecting data for use in assessment of student learning outcomes." As noted by the visiting team, however, only a subset of these programs, 60% and 63% respectively, appear to be using the data for program improvement. With respect to program review, we understand that the "vast majority" of WSU's programs have undergone a program review either as part of the program's specialized accreditation or by participating in the institution's seven-year cycle that includes at least one external reviewer. While we are encouraged by these initial steps, we share the team's concern that these efforts do not yet constitute a formal comprehensive, institution-wide plan. We therefore commend the institution's attempt to "jump start" assessment activities by providing resources for faculty development and release time for the implementation of assessment measures and engagement in the program review process. We look forward to learning, though the Spring 2017 report, of the continued success of the institution's efforts to develop and implement a comprehensive and systematic approach to the assessment of student learning and program review. This section of the report should be informed by our standards on *Planning and Evaluation* and *The Academic Program*.

The institution has a system of periodic review of academic and other programs that includes the use of external perspectives. (2.6)

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 what and how students are learning and using the results for improvement has the support of the institution's academic and institutional leadership and the systematic involvement of faculty. (4.51)

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, and includes external perspectives. The institution devotes appropriate attention to ensuring that its methods of understanding student learning are trustworthy and provide information useful in the continuing improvement of programs and services for students. (4.54)

We appreciate that WSU has been "wrestling with the revision of [its] general education requirements" and understand that the Review of the Common Core Committee's 2009 recommendations are still under review by the Curriculum Committee, the standing committee responsible for the assessment and revision of the Common Core. We are gratified to learn that the Curriculum Committee and ACC are "acutely aware" of the need to move the process forward and are "committed to developing and implementing a revised Common Core." As specified in our

standard on *The Academic Program*, we seek assurance in the Spring 2017 report that the University has completed this work.

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)

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.

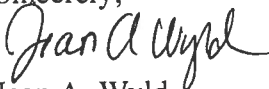
You will note that the Commission has specified no length or term of accreditation. Accreditation is a continuing relationship that is reconsidered when necessary. Thus, while the Commission has indicated the timing of the next comprehensive evaluation, the schedule should not be unduly emphasized because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

The Commission expressed appreciation for the self-study prepared by Westfield State University and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you, Ken Lemanski, Vice President of Government Relations, Stephen Adams, Interim Dean of Faculty, Joseph Camilleri, Assistant Professor of Psychology, and James Schmotter, 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. John F. Flynn, III. 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, Director of the Commission.

Sincerely,

Jean A. Wyld

JAW/sjp
Enclosure

cc: Mr. John F. Flynn, III
Visiting team