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COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

July 11, 2017

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Dr. Ramon Torrecilha
President
Westfield State University
577 Western Avenue
Westfield, MA 01086-1630

Dear President Torrecilha:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on April 20, 2017 the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education considered the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Westfield State University and voted to take the following action:

that the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Westfield 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 gives emphasis to the institution's success in:

- 1) implementing its strategic plan;
- 2) assessing its common core program;
- 3) narrowing the student success "achievement gap;"
- 4) developing and implementing plans to address deferred maintenance.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Westfield State University was accepted because it responded to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letter of January 24, 2013 and addressed each of the nine standards, including a reflective essay for *Standard 8: Educational Effectiveness* on student learning and success.

The Commission commends Westfield State University (WSU) for the progress it has made since its last comprehensive evaluation. We are pleased

to learn of Westfield State University's focused "inclusive" planning process and structure that involves effective collaboration among the President, the All-University Committee, and the three university-wide Advisory Committees on matters related to academics, budget, and facilities planning. We take favorable note of the University's continued commitment to "data-based decision making for assessment and planning" to improve WSU's institutional effectiveness. We are pleased to learn of WSU's investment of more than \$25 million towards its "ambitious building program" and technological upgrades. Additionally, the University doubled the staff in the Institutional Research and Assessment office; this expanded capacity has enhanced efforts to conduct survey research, support learning outcomes assessments for education licensure programs, develop WSU's Student Success Dashboard, and disseminate "critical" institutional data to the university community. WSU's undergraduate and graduate program reviews, which are guided by the institution's Academic Program Review Process, involve external reviewers, and several of the programs hold specialized accreditation, such as WSU's Computer Science program receiving ABET accreditation. The Commission notes with approval Westfield State University's collaborations with public schools and community colleges, particularly its efforts with Springfield public schools to recruit students of color for teaching careers. We take favorable note of the recent appointments of a Vice President for Administration and Finance, Vice President for University Advancement, and Executive Director for Facilities and Capital Planning, and for the institution's sound fiscal management, which has resulted in net revenues of \$13.5 million in 2015 and \$22.6 million in 2016.

From the reflective essay, we are pleased to learn of the "Westfield Experience" which provides the framework for supporting student success and institutional effectiveness, as demonstrated through increased retention and graduation rates, high licensure pass rates and graduates' success in graduate school admissions, and careers. We understand Westfield State University's graduation rate (60.4%) is the highest among the Massachusetts state universities. The University notes that a contributing factor to this success is its large residential cohort that has a "strong sense of community and engagement." Other measures of student success are the 79% fall-to-fall retention rate and first-to-second year retention rates of graduate student cohorts that average between 82% to 86%. We are further gratified to learn that 85% of the class of 2013 was either employed or enrolled in graduate school within two years of graduation and that student loan default rates are low, as demonstrated by the 2013 rate of 3.9%, the most recent figure available.

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 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*, *The Academic Program*, *Educational Effectiveness*, *Students*, and *Institutional Resources*.

The Commission understands that Westfield State University delayed its institutional planning by a year to align with the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education's review schedule. We note that the planning structure has been "redefined and consolidated" and that the three committees that have been engaged in short- and medium-term planning will participate in the strategic planning process. We understand that the new strategic plan for 2019-2024 will build on the work of these committees and will be aligned with the recently revised mission statement. We further understand that WSU will develop its multi-year enrollment and financial forecasting and enhance its capital planning and that these plans will also be incorporated into the strategic planning process. We look forward to learning, through the Spring 2022 self-study of the University's success in developing and implementing its strategic plan, in keeping with our standard on *Planning and Evaluation*:

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 has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning (2.5).

We are pleased to learn of the University's commitment, support, and faculty involvement in initiatives related to the assessment of student learning outcomes, including the common core curriculum. We understand that WSU faculty realized that "a new process for core review" was needed and are gratified to learn that the Dean of Undergraduate Studies has been given responsibility to "steward" this process. A subcommittee of the Curriculum Committee is working with the Dean to establish a plan to review a subset of learning outcomes from the core each year. The report notes full assessment of the core curriculum will likely take six years. We look forward, through the Fall 2022 self-study, to receiving evidence that the University has made progress in assessing its common core program. We are guided by our standards on *The Academic Program* and *Educational Effectiveness*:

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).

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).

We appreciate the University's candid acknowledgement of a "substantial achievement gap" in student success, with six-year graduation rates for "traditionally underrepresented" students — 54% for the 2011 cohort — lagging behind those for white students (65% for the same cohort). We are gratified to learn that closing the achievement gap is an institutional priority and note with favor the initiatives the University is implementing to narrow the gap. We are pleased to learn of the University's plan to link data from two systems, the Student Success Dashboard and the Starfish Retention Center to provide students with "rapid intervention" using targeted resources to support their success. The Spring 2022 comprehensive evaluation will afford the institution an opportunity to update the Commission on WSU's progress in achieving its goal to narrow the achievement gap. This section of the report should be informed by our standards on *Students* and *Educational Effectiveness*:

The institution utilizes appropriate methods of evaluation to assess student readiness for collegiate study and provides services sufficient to serve the needs of students admitted (5.5).

The institution demonstrates its ability to admit students who can be successful in the institution's academic program, including specifically recruited populations. 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 (5.6).

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).

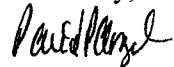
Finally, we are pleased to learn of the significant physical improvements at WSU, including the new Science and Innovation Center Building; renovations to Wilson Hall, the library, and residence halls; and the acquisition and renovation of Juniper Park Elementary School to become the new Dower Center for Performing and Fine Arts. As noted in the report, however, deferred maintenance remains a "significant and complex issue." We understand the University is developing a multi-year capital plan that will include steps to reduce deferred maintenance, and we anticipate being apprised in the Spring 2022 self-study of the University's success in this matter as evidence that WSU "devotes sufficient resources to maintain and enhance its information, physical, and technological resources" (7.21).

The Commission expressed appreciation for the report submitted by Westfield State University and hopes that 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 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. Steven Marcus. 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/sjp

Enclosures

cc: Mr. Steven Marcus