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Harvard University

President of the Commission  
BARBARA E. BRITTINGHAM  
bbrittingham@neche.org

Senior Vice President of the Commission  
PATRICIA M. O'BRIEN, SMD  
pobrien@neche.org

Vice President of the Commission  
CAROL L. ANDERSON  
canderson@neche.org

Vice President of the Commission  
LAURA M. GAMBINO  
lgambino@neche.org

Vice President of the Commission  
PAULA A. HARBECKE  
pharbecke@neche.org

Vice President of the Commission  
AARON PERKUS  
aperkus@neche.org

July 17, 2020

Mr. Dannel P. Malloy  
Chancellor  
University of Maine System  
267 Estabrooke Hall, 15 Estabrooke Drive  
Orono, ME 04469

Dear Chancellor Malloy:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on June 24, 2020, the New England Commission of Higher Education considered the substantive change request submitted by the University of Maine System requesting that the Commission accredit the System and took the following action:

that the University of Maine System be accredited with an effective date of July 1, 2020;

that the accreditation of the University of Maine System encompass the seven universities established in Maine law, the University of Maine School of Law, and all current and future branch campuses and instructional locations within Maine;

that accreditation of the System include general approval to offer degrees from the associate's through the Ph.D. and to offer programming through distance education;

that any new competency-based education program proposed by the System to be offered at any of its universities be considered a substantive change until such time as general approval is given by the Commission;

that a visit to assess general implementation of the substantive change be scheduled for Spring 2021;

that report prepared in advance of the Spring 2021 visit include an emphasis on the System's progress with respect to:

- 1) the continued development of the System's internal governance structure, including further implementation of the University of Maine System Faculty Governance Council;

- 2) further System planning with respect to the issues identified in the substantive change report to be addressed in the self-study for the comprehensive evaluation;

that the Spring 2021 visit also include the previously scheduled implementation visit for three new competency-based education online programs offered at the University of Maine at Presque Isle;

that a comprehensive evaluation of the University of Maine System be scheduled for Fall 2022;

that the self-study prepared in advance of the Fall 2022 evaluation give emphasis to the System's success in:

- 1) further developing the system of reviewing academic programs, including an evaluation of the effectiveness of the methodology to ensure a System-wide perspective as well as qualitative judgments of the programs at the individual institutions;
- 2) strengthening the funding model for research and increasing research funding and doctoral-level education at the University of Maine;
- 3) further developing the internal governance of the System, including the University of Maine System Faculty Governance Council;
- 4) for each of the Commission's standards, addressing the issues identified in the substantive change report to help ensure that the System and its universities are better situated to address important issues and gain value from the move to single accreditation;

that all other previously scheduled visits and reports be cancelled.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The University of Maine System's substantive change request is the result of years of planning and a half decade of conversations with the Commission. Maine is experiencing in particularly acute form the demographic and economic challenges that institutions across New England are facing. System leadership, beginning with former Chancellor James Page and continued by Chancellor Dannel Malloy, has developed a comprehensive plan for system accreditation; and the U.S. Department of Education has approved this approach within the framework of the Higher Education Act and the Commission's federal recognition.

The Commission commends the University of Maine System and its universities for their deliberate and imaginative approach to the proposal. The Chancellor, the Board, campus presidents, and faculty leaders have engaged colleagues within the System and across the state to address the complexities of 'Unified Accreditation,' and to ensure that the interests of the state of Maine and of students are advanced. While several new governance, administrative, and academic structures still need to be implemented, significant design work has taken place and broad-based conversations indicate substantial support for the proposed plan. The System's interest in developing new academic programs and new forms of delivery will require sustained leadership commitment and attention to constituents' concerns along the lines of what the Commission has seen over the last five years. Given the interest in this proposal from elsewhere in the region and beyond, it will be important for System leadership to remain in regular and constructive dialog with Commission staff to ensure successful implementation of System accreditation.

The Commission voted to accredit the University of Maine System effective July 1, 2020 because the substantive change report demonstrated that the System meets the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation*. We are pleased to note that the System has appropriately and thoughtfully outlined a near-term agenda for improvement based on the System's mission to serve the state of Maine, within the framework of the standards. Significant in this decision was the determination by the U.S. Department of Education that the University of Maine System as constituted in Maine law meets the definition of an institution of higher education within the Higher Education Act.

The accreditation of the University of Maine System will now encompass the seven universities established in Maine law, the University of Maine School of Law, and all current and future branch campuses and instructional locations within Maine because the seven universities and the University of Maine School of Law are directly accountable to the Chancellor and under the governance of the University of Maine Board of Trustees. The universities within the System have demonstrated their effectiveness in overseeing branch campuses and instructional locations.

Accreditation of the University of Maine System includes general approval to offer degrees from the associate's through the Ph.D. and to offer programming through distance education reflecting the range of degrees now offered by the universities within the System and the generally demonstrated capacity to offer programming through distance education by the universities.

Any new competency-based education program proposed by the System to be offered at any of its universities is considered a substantive change until such time as general approval is given by the Commission. This stipulation is based on the fact that none of the System's universities have general approval for competency-based education and on the Commission's observation that while competency-based education has many advantages, it is challenging to offer at an appropriate level of quality.

Consistent with Commission policy, the visit scheduled for Spring 2021 will focus principally on assessing the implementation of System accreditation. The matters to be addressed in the report prepared in advance of the visit relate to our standards on *Organization and Governance* and *Planning and Evaluation*.

In anticipation of System accreditation, the System has begun working to develop internal governance in line with our standard on *Organization and Governance*: "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" (3.17). We note that working with faculty leadership from the universities, the System has developed a Faculty Governance Council with key responsibilities for multi-university academic programs and the opportunity to participate in related issues such as "the development of a governance structure to accompany the implementation of the new learning management system (LMS). . . ." While as noted elsewhere in this letter, the development of internal governance will be an issue for the self-study prepared for the comprehensive evaluation, we look forward, at the time of the Spring 2021 visit, consistent with our standard on *Organization and Governance*, to gauging the progress of the System's developing internal governance:

The institution's internal governance provides for the appropriate participation of its constituencies, promotes communications, and effectively advances the quality of the institution (3.13).

The institution's chief academic officer is directly responsible to the chief executive officer, and in concert with the faculty and other academic administrators, is responsible for the quality of the academic program. The institution's organization and governance

structure assure the integrity and quality of academic programming however and wherever offered (3.14).

The Commission takes favorable note of the planning agenda that the System outlined in its substantive change report that includes the goals it seeks to address in the self-study prepared for the comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2022. Through the substantive change visit in Spring 2021, we ask that the System provide an update on the planning for the comprehensive evaluation, as indicated in the substantive change report. Our standard on *Planning and Evaluation* provides this guidance:

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 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 previously scheduled visit to assess the implementation of three competency-based online programs (Bachelor of Arts programs in Accounting, History and Political Science, and Liberal Studies) at the University of Maine at Presque Isle (UMPI) will be included in the Spring 2021 visit. The focus of this portion of the visit, as indicated in our letter of May 7, 2020, is “assuring the academic quality of the three competency-based programs, including student performance; academic quality assurance; and academic support for students as needed.” The other focus of that previously scheduled visit, the implementation of the UMPI Bachelor of Arts degree in History and Political Science at University of Maine at Fort Kent, is cancelled because accreditation of the System has rendered the issue moot.

Scheduling a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2022 is consistent with our letter dated March 13, 2019 indicating the Commission’s receptivity to considering a request for accreditation of the System. The self-study prepared in advance of the visit will afford the University of Maine System and its universities and the University of Maine School of Law the opportunity for self-assessment with respect to each of the nine *Standards for Accreditation*. The areas identified for particular emphasis pertain to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation*; *The Academic Program*; *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*; *Students*; and *Organization and Governance*.

We concur with the observation in the substantive change report that accreditation of the System “will open the door to improving program quality and increasing student achievement.” Building on its method of Programs for Evaluation, focused principally on low-enrollment academic programs, the System has the opportunity to further develop how it reviews academic programs: those offered at a single institution, those (similarly) named offered at multiple institutions, and those offered by faculty from two or more institutions working collaboratively. Through the comprehensive evaluation, we look forward to learning how the System ensures a System-wide perspective on program review as well as qualitative judgments of the programs at the individual institutions. Our standards on *Planning and Evaluation* and *The Academic Program* provide this guidance:

The institution’s principal evaluation focus is the quality, integrity, and effectiveness of its academic programs. Evaluation endeavors and systematic assessment are demonstrably effective in the improvement of academic offerings, student learning, and the student

experience. Systematic feedback from students, former students, and other relevant constituencies is a demonstrable factor in institutional improvement (2.7).

The institution develops, approves, administers, and on a regular cycle reviews its academic programs under institutional policies that are implemented by designated bodies with established channels of communication and control. Review of academic programs includes evidence of student success and program effectiveness and incorporates an external perspective. Faculty have a substantive voice in these matters (4.6).

A second area of emphasis for the self-study will be the System's success in strengthening the funding model for research and increasing research funding and doctoral-level education at the University of Maine. As noted in our February 12, 2020 letter to President Ferrini-Mundy, "As the flagship institution in the University of Maine System and the state's only research university and significant source of Ph.D. graduates, the University of Maine's success in the area of research is key to its mission." And, we note here, that success is key to how well the System serves the state of Maine. The focus in the self-study on strengthening the funding model for research and increasing research funding and doctoral level-education at the University of Maine is pertinent to our standards on *Teaching, Learning and Scholarship* and *Students*:

Scholarship, research, and creative activities receive support appropriate to the institution's mission (*Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*, Statement of the Standard).

Consistent with its mission and purposes, the institution provides support for scholarship, research, and creative activities. Faculty and students undertake research to an extent reflective of the level and nature of the degrees awarded. Policies and procedures related to research are communicated throughout the institution (6.20).

As indicated in the substantive change report, the University of Maine System is and will be developing and strengthening internal governance mechanisms to ensure that the System and the universities collectively can take the greatest advantage of unified accreditation. One example is "the development of a governance structure to accompany the implementation of the new learning management system." The Commission takes favorable note of the initiation of the University of Maine System Faculty Governance Council that "will be responsible for being attentive to issues relevant to multi-university programs, which are defined as programs involving two or more universities collaborating on developing, delivering, and maintaining a single program (degree, certificate, or other credential)." We understand that, as noted in the substantive change report, this Council and likely other mechanisms will evolve, and we look forward, in the comprehensive evaluation, to learning of the System's success in ensuring a "system of governance that facilitates the accomplishment of its mission and purposes and supports institutional effectiveness and integrity" (*Organization and Governance*, Statement of the Standard).

The Commission appreciates the care with which the substantive change report provides a foundation for the upcoming comprehensive evaluation by including a section on "Opportunities for and Approaches to Improvement" for each of the Commission's nine *Standards for Accreditation*. We commend the System and the committees that prepared the report and the feedback offered by others through an open and transparent process. While we understand that these opportunities and approaches will evolve, the thoughtful inclusion of these sections of the report give the Commission confidence that the University of Maine System and all who contribute to its success, including the governing board and the universities, will use the unified accreditation as a means of strengthening public higher education in Maine in these challenging times.

Finally, all other previously scheduled visits and reports for the individual institutions based on prior Commission actions will be cancelled, as the salient matters have been addressed through accreditation of the System or will be addressed in the upcoming visits.

The Commission expressed appreciation for the substantive change request prepared by the University of Maine System and its universities and hopes its preparation has contributed to institutional improvement.

The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you; James Erwin, Esq, Chair, University of Maine System Board of Trustees; Joan Ferrini-Mundy, President, University of Maine; Ryan Low, Vice Chancellor for Finance and Administration and Treasurer; Robert Placido, Interim Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs; James Thelen, General Counsel and Chief of Staff to the Chancellor; Raymond Rice, President, University of Maine at Presque Isle; and Rebecca Wyke, President, University of Maine at Augusta during its deliberations. We appreciate your cooperation with 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 on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to James Erwin. We will also send copies of the letter to the presidents of the universities that have been separately accredited by the Commission. 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.

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

Sincerely,



George Tetler

GT/jm

Enclosure

cc: Mr. James Erwin, Board Chair  
Dr. Joan Ferrini-Mundi, President, University of Maine  
Dr. Glenn Cummings, President, University of Southern Maine  
Dr. Deborah Heeden, President, University of Maine at Fort Kent  
Dr. Raymond Rice, President, University of Maine at Presque Isle  
Dr. Rebecca Wyke, President, University of Maine at Augusta  
Dr. Edward Serna, President, University of Maine at Farmington