Report to the
Faculty, Administration, Trustees, and Students
of

University of Maine System

by

Evaluators representing the
New England Commission of Higher Education

NECHE Report on Substantive Change Progress on Unified Accreditation of University of Maine System. This report was prepared following a review of documents and virtual interviews with University of Maine System administration, faculty, and students from various campuses on May 11–12, 2021.

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On May 11 and 12, 2021, our team of Donald Birx and Myk Garn and on behalf of NECHE performed a virtual visit with the University of Maine System (UMS) to assess

progress toward unified accreditation. We met with groups from across the system including the trustees, President's Council, accreditation liaisons, Faculty Governance Council (FGC), faculty, staff, and students. Open meeting time was often limited so we also allowed the faculty and staff to send us e-mails with their concerns and insights. We will endeavor to summarize these areas of concern and challenge along with some suggestions for moving forward. Overall, we found significant progress in many areas, particularly those that are foundational to building a unified accreditation model. We also found substantial challenges and concerns as would be expected in such a complex undertaking. It is clear that there is a long way to go but UMS has made significant progress in laying the groundwork for unified accreditation, even as much hard work remains.

Mission: While each university within the system has its own mission, the outcomes expressed by the trustees (Increase Enrollment, Improve Student Success and Completion, Enhance Fiscal Positioning, and Support Maine through Research and Economic Development) were clearly key motivators for unified accreditation and form a type of overall vision for the system and its drive for unified accreditation. Of particular prominence and agreement at all UMS campuses and among all system leaders was the emphasis on the students providing the best quality education given the resources available to the system. That didn't mean everyone saw the approach being taken as the best way to achieve these outcomes, but there appeared little resistance to the stated desired outcomes and significant support (as well as concerns) in some groups for unified accreditation and the associated benefits. Key to success so far has been the Chancellor's listening sessions and the move away from a "one university" concept to one of assuring individual campus identities with unified processes and support. In this respect, there was a unified "mission" for system-level accreditation.

Organization and Governance: The most challenging element of unified accreditation across the system is governance, and that showed in our discussions with the various groups and in individual comments. There was considerable tension between perceived top-down system leadership and campus-level initiative and leadership. In some ways, the Faculty Governance Council is caught right in the middle. While the Faculty Governance Council appreciated the opportunity to have greater access to and communication with the Chancellor, the system, and each other, it is still in its infancy and is a bit unclear about its mission and how to realize it. Clearly, a strength is having the group meet together and be a vehicle for communication and coordination. However, council members are concerned that the administration sees them as additionally having the ability to sign off on critical issues rather than as a conduit between the decision-making bodies on each campus (and the existing governance structures) and the system office. They are grappling with defining their role. They don't believe they should be

replacing the existing campus governance or even overseeing it, but rather working with each campus' governance and coordinating where possible. This tension seems to arise from the admirable attempt to maintain individual campus identity and governance while at the same time moving quickly to implement system-wide processes that are seen as important to unified accreditation. This summer might present a good opportunity to work through these issues with the FGC (with stipends), determine agreed upon guidelines, and discuss best approaches to moving forward this fall.

As an observation, the University System of Georgia uses a variety of [advisory committees](#) to build inter-institutional connections and increase awareness of common and unique issues faculty face and the solutions they have crafted. These committees also enable effective and efficient communication across the system at a departmental level.

Members of the UMS FGC were adamant that, while they do not govern their institutions' faculty, they did want to represent their colleagues as best as possible. Since the system has noted that labels matter (by doing away with the 'one university' concept), one change that might better reflect the role of the FCG in keeping with faculty concerns would be to formally change its name to the UMS Faculty Advisory Council. This would underscore the value of the council's faculty voices without implying a contradiction or shift in the avenues of authority within the institutions or between faculty and the system.

We did find that much of the governance structure from the board of trustees through the NECHE accreditation liaison officers, chief businesses officers, University Service Leaders, and President's Council was aligned on mission (student centered support and excellent education) and for the most part on the goals of unification. Trustees were driven by goals of sustainability and a quality education in the face of demographic and funding declines, so they see unification through the lens of increased efficiencies as well as student support. They also believe this is the only plan enabling them to sustain the seven-campus system. In this regard, the Chancellor and UMS presidents are viewed as jumping in and making good progress toward these goals and are clearly supported. The trustees and administration are aware that some of the greatest risks pertain to faculty buy-in and their associated questions about the need for unified accreditation. It was clear though that the process is highlighting both gaps and barriers to collaboration across the system as well as the value in evolving a governance structure that is agile and system-wide, but which preserves the independence and governance of individual institutions. The Presidents and the financial team (cutting across all campuses) were very collaborative and positive about the move to unified accreditation. There was good realism in expectations at this level and of the challenges ahead. As with the President's Council there was openness and honesty in our discussions and with each other, which bodes well for future success.

Planning and Evaluation: It was clear from our discussions and reading the background reports we read before the visit that there has been extensive planning and thinking about this transformation, some of which has gone on for decades but which has clearly taken on a sense of urgency and detail since the arrival of the Chancellor. In taking on this change, it was also evident that evaluation in the form of lessons learned over the past decades was used in developing the current strategy. What we didn't see but which may well exist is a review of best practices from universities that have implemented elements of unified accreditation and a Gantt, PERT, or timeline of major elements. If not done already, now might be a good time to do this research and layout the timeline as the major elements of unified accreditation seem to be well understood at this point. However, the fact that different processes move at different time frames and have different dependencies was not widely grasped by faculty and staff, which tends to create the impression that thoughtful implementation and input is not possible given the perceived pace of change. The timeline would organize the transformation in a way that is holistically visible, noting dependencies and time frames for different tasks, and the research for best practices would support developing some of the detailed elements that are going to be critical to success in the future.

As for government support for students, the interactions with the Maine Department of Education concerning unified accreditation appear to have gone well and financial aid is working under one system-level account. However, since this approach is still new, there were expressed concerns as to how Title IV funds would be distributed to the campuses.

Institutional Resources: At first, it seemed odd to us that there were no stated financial targets for the unified accreditation though clearly there are expectations for significant savings. As the discussions progressed, we saw wisdom in this approach. The focus on constructing and improving processes across the whole system is much more of a lean approach to improving efficiencies than creating financial targets (even though we assume there is some idea of potential savings). The one significant concern expressed was whether there is a uniform awareness of the stress on staff and early adopting faculty in doing multiple jobs in parallel or that there is actually likely to be an increased need for resources across much of the system as it moves deeper into implementation. Fortunately the large grant (although held suspect by some faculty as driving some of this change) from the Harold Alfond Foundation provides the ability to offer funding to support this change. There are still going to be increased resource needs across the system for staff and faculty support for a successful transition and this was brought up in multiple sessions.

In another aspect, just as UMS is confronted with pace mismatches between the urgent administrative and the deliberative academic processes, it is also challenged by a summer calendar gap between 12-month administration and 9-month faculty contracts. As UMS seeks to become more agile, it needs constant communication and participation across all system stakeholders. The deleterious effects of the 3-month summer gap during this time were cited by both administrators and faculty during the visit and solving this structural issue could pay significant benefits for all involved. This might manifest as summer stipends for faculty representatives and/or teams who can maintain the momentum of current works and participate in the development of new initiatives.

In our conversation with the trustees, we did not have opportunities to discuss the system-wide unified EMS/ERP system; however, there was the expressed need for more budgetary and cost control and cross-system collaboration. When talking to the financial team there was a clear understanding that the EMS/ERP system was a foundational component of making unified accreditation work and that it went beyond budgetary and cost control, underpinning many of the features of unified accreditation. Fortunately, there is one centralized IT administration and the CIO is well liked and respected. This is important as much of the underpinning of this consolidation involves IT and finance working together to evolve the EMS/ERP. One of our recommendations would be to put more emphasis on getting EMS/ERP in place ASAP and allocating sufficient resources to accomplish that goal, while giving the other levels of this multilevel unified accreditation process more time to evolve. Again, adding a multilevel time line or PERT chart etc. might be valuable if it does not already exist. In this way, expectations could be aligned across all communities.

Educational Effectiveness: The plan for assuring and assessing outcomes across the campuses is one of the best we have seen and is described well in the UMS report. It is a thoughtful approach to assuring a uniform level of quality education with improved attainment within a wide diversity of student populations and academic programs across the system. It builds on some of the competency-based approaches developed at UMPI, which also impressed us, and which we also evaluated since there could be possibilities and insights gained by expanding the competency-based approach across the system and in assessment. Obviously, in implementing such a system-wide plan, the devil is going to be in the details. Some faculty expressed concerns about their ability to control their course content and expectations, and though unstated directly, the amount of work involved. Unsurprisingly, an undercurrent in many of our conversations was the increased workload from the various processes of unified accreditation and the time frame. The suggestions we made previously with regard to mapping out the time frame for the various elements and making sure the transformation is sufficiently resourced will help keep those who are fully engaged in implementing this and other processes from

burnout. Summer stipends for faculty/staff task forces as mentioned earlier might be helpful.

Students: In all discussions with the groups we met with, students and their success was at the core. While that did not mean everyone saw the unified accreditation (from the students' perspective) as a good thing, there was overwhelming agreement on the centrality of students and their success to the mission of the system. These points were made repeatedly and were thought by the administration and trustees to be one of the key motivations for unified accreditation. They saw it as enabling them to keep institutions open and improve transferability, successful completion, and attainment by students. While in many ways unified accreditation and its implications were somewhat transparent to the students, there was support among those we talked with. Some in the staff and faculty questioned whether unified accreditation was needed to achieve these goals. While this is certainly open to debate, there was concern by trustees and some faculty on the current ability of students to transfer both themselves and their credits. Others discounted this concern. It is still quite early in the implementation phase of developing processes but key elements of the unified accreditation process (such as the unified catalog, centralized institutional research, a common EMS/ERP, and more commonality in financial aid packaging) are seen by the administration as means to establish the underlying processes that may facilitate smoother transferability, more variety of course availability, and a shared ability to learn from each other—all of which should improve student success and attainment. Based on our discussions during the visit, the development of underlying process and systems across the campuses, with or without unified accreditation, is a significant step forward in improving student support and leveraging the system's value.

Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure: While there is every evidence of significant public disclosure, and of transparency and integrity on the part of the trustees and administration, it is not surprising that with the complexity and fluidity of the transformation process there are concerns in each of these areas. Some groups we talked with expressed that unified accreditation has reached deeper and more broadly than they were told. Others wondered if the administration was hiding something and whether implementing efficiencies would eliminate jobs. Some felt they had been misled about the independence of the various universities and their ability to control their own coursework and outcomes. Some wondered why many of the actions taken couldn't be done without unified accreditation—e.g. what was the real reason for unified accreditation? We had a very frank and open discussion with the President's Council about these issues and there was significant evidence of integrity, transparency, and disclosure. The real issue would appear to be the evolving nature of this transformation and the pace of change. One suggestion we received and which we support is to have

more regular open town halls across the system as the transformation process is evolving and gather input and questions, including anonymously. That way everyone hears the same thing and questions and answers can be shared. (There might have been some reluctance to such town halls in the past but now, the time seems to be right.)

Academic Programs: One of the goals and also one of the most exciting possibilities of unified accreditation is multi-campus programs and research. While it was brought up that these options didn't require unified accreditation, it was obvious that moving in this direction was pointing out the missing elements in policies and procedures that would break down barriers and facilitate these endeavors. We met with faculty who were on the leading edge of developing cross-campus programs and those working on joint research initiatives. It was clear from our discussions that faculties were very committed and excited about the possibilities of cross-campus programs and research, and that grant funding should be and is helpful in stimulating these activities. Along with this positive view and excitement there were concerns in four primary areas: burnout, development of underlying processes and policies (which don't exist currently), resource support, and the pace of change. Faculty felt they were on their own to some extent in developing policies and approaches to collaborations such as this and needed more leadership and staff support to keep from burning out while piloting their endeavors. Mitigating these concerns could unleash considerable creative energy and demonstrate to the faculty the value and the benefits unified accreditation. On other fronts, unified accreditation in the academic realm was viewed both positively (transferability, access across campuses, flexibility for students, partnerships for faculty) and negatively (if it is really needed, its evolving nature, the challenges, and the loss of local control). There is a real sense of ownership by faculty in both their students and their programs, so while there are perceived benefits in sharing programs and students there is also a sense of potential loss of students, control, and perhaps eventually even their programs. Countering the negative elements is perhaps best done by demonstrating successful academic programs that bridge campuses.

Along these lines, it is clear that while each institution within the system has its own character and mission, there is also a benefit to building cross-institutional connections, especially as the system seeks to leverage expertise at one institution to the benefit of others. Two initiatives that might advance this goal would be development of collaborative, e.g. 2+2 degree programs like the one reviewed during this visit between UMPI and UMFK, and establishing cross-institutional disciplinary teams. The collaborative programs evidenced during the visit were exemplary of the good work faculty can do, often in the absence or even despite the barriers of current processes and policies. The system might encourage and support collaborative programs that address the academic core where a majority of students would benefit. This might take the form

of the aforementioned 2+2 programs or sharing of general education and lower-division courses among institutions. The work on a unified catalog should be a strong support to these opportunities.

Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship: While just in the nascent stages with some early adopters, the potential in teaching, learning, and scholarship with unified accreditation came up in multiple groups. From our discussions the need to break down barriers, develop cross-system policies, and support the work administratively was evident, as was the significant potential for partnerships for faculty (academically and in scholarship) and opportunities for students. There was also fear on the part of some faculty about their programs as we noted earlier and a questioning of the need and the reality of working across the system. There is interest among some faculty though and there seems to be a real opportunity to create early wins and demonstrations of the benefits of unified accreditation. As such, it might be best to work closely with these faculty to get some of these collaborations up and running, and to listen closely to their concerns and address them. They would then serve as ambassadors to their individual campuses.

The students we met with prefer in-person classes but want the opportunity for cross-system courses and seamless transfers of credits from High Schools, Community Colleges, and between campuses. They view the common catalog positively but wonder how they will know which classes qualify toward their degree programs.

The area of shared and collaborative research, which has already been a focus of the administration, could be seen to really benefit the state of Maine and its students as it would bring capabilities to regional campuses that did not exist before to solve regional problems. A not unusual question was asked as to what the benefits would be to the flagship campus of all of this collaboration and that likely needs a cogent answer if the potential is going to be fully realized. President Birx, having been the research officer for a system, knows that is not an easy question to answer and incentives can be critical. However, the diversity of campus locations, funding availability, and the desire for UMS to be an economic driver across the state should make it attractive to faculty and administration at the flagship and the regional campuses.

One area we did not get a chance to delve deeply into was the collaboration represented by the formation of a multi-university Maine College of Engineering, Computing, and Information Science, to be cooperatively led by the University of Maine to offer programs in engineering and computer science. If we have a return visit, it would be helpful to visit in person and talk with those involved about their challenges and successes. That said, from discussions we did have it looks very promising.

Finally, faculty are working on developing collaborative programs and scholarship across campuses even as they are struggling with building a framework and set of policies for that collaboration. They are breaking new ground and trying to dismantle barriers. While they need more support in this process from administration and likely more interaction with the Faculty Governance Council, nevertheless, they are pushing ahead and piloting new processes and programs.

Recommendations confidential and disclosed:

It is our belief that the substantive change should be included in the institution's accreditation. While there are numerous issues to be worked on, the plan is sound and they are making good progress.

Our recommendations:

1. Look at other institutions of higher education for models of how unified accreditation might work and share those models with the system. While it is true there are not many models of unified accreditation, there are universities that have elements of this model. Penn State is a great example of essentially a unified accreditation, which it calls "one university geographically distributed." When President Birx was there his campus managed to have a unique identity but with supporting processes that made many things easier.
2. Develop a time line, Gantt or PERT chart etc. for the various elements of unified accreditation. In system change, many things have to happen at once and on many levels, but the time scale of those various elements is often quite different.
3. Put an early emphasis on a unified EMS/ERP and strive to build a solid foundation on that system for many of the other elements involved in the unified accreditation.
4. Allow more time for the evolution of the faculty governance process and academic programs across the system universities, and supply them with the resources required. This is particularly true for the Faculty Governance Council. Make sure its charter is clear and accepted by all. Consider Advisory Committees and a name change of the FGC to UMS Faculty Advisory Council better reflecting their perceived role.
5. Have more open forums or town halls with faculty and staff and discuss the impacts and goals of unified accreditation and the progress and challenges that are being faced. Listen to the concerns of those who are involved and impacted by the changes. Continue to be as transparent as possible. When goals or items change, get ahead of them as much as possible so integrity is not questioned.

6. Utilize summers for strategy and proposed policy development with faculty/administrative task forces across the system. As the system works with the institutions to honor and ensure appropriate shared governance during the academic year—so too should faculty, staff and administration find ways to support a 'shared presence' during the summer months.
7. Find a way to share the sense of urgency so that it pervades all levels of the system and its institutions, and relieve to the extent possible staff concerns that efficiencies may come at their expense.
8. Foster academic program collaborations preserving each institutions' character and mission while building cross-institutional connections.

Summary

There is every reason to believe that unified accreditation will be successful as UMS is making good progress—albeit with significant concerns, which we have detailed and it is addressing. It is suggested that another review of progress be made in the Fall of 2022.

Strengths and Concerns

We have attempted to put the strengths and concerns as much as possible in the words of those with whom we spoke, as we thought that would give the best picture of the unified accreditation process.

Strengths (as expressed)
- Teams
    - Strong, impressive, open leadership teams commitment to unified accreditation
- Concept in place—consolidation of a vision
    - Appropriate time—moving on issues that have been under discussion for years. Funding from Alfond grant and COVID-19 have brought resources and drive to implementation.
    - Dismissed terminology of 'one university' dispelling fear of destruction of individual identities with unified accreditation and some aid to early faculty adopters in removing impediments to collaboration (program research).
    - BOT buy-in—Unified accreditation allows us to create synergies, more options, to be competitive, nimble, and keep costs under control.
    - Malloy's U Maine leadership—jumped in full throttle
    - Unified accreditation allows system to be more agile in response to marketplace demands while improving collaboration and student success.

- o No animosity between campuses but perhaps concern due to U Maine's size; pride in their individuality.
  - o Public/private partnership for new dorm was possible under unified environment.
  - o This culture is changing and collaborations are happening.
- Accreditation
  - o Accolades for Barbara Brittingham —NECHE has been a good partner, helpful, transparent – but sense of degree of neutrality may be lost
  - o In process of developing Administrative Practice Letters (APLs)
- Communication/Governances
  - o Chancellor's visits to all campuses.
  - o Set up Faculty Governance Council.
  - o Held numerous listening sessions.
- IT
  - o Centralized with strong CIO who seems to allocate fairly system-wide.
- HR
  - o Faculty must now demonstrate how they are collaborating with other institutions.
- Flexibility—change when needed
  - o Finance now has dual reporting reflecting process realities.
  - o Moving quickly and resolving issues.
  - o Leaving campus-specific policies in place – a minimalistic vision.
- Finance/Efficiencies
  - o System-wide EMS/ERP system being developed with common definitions.
  - o VP finance works with each campus daily.
  - o Finance is a distributed model with centralized control of processes and overall budget but distributed execution and budgeting at campuses.
  - o Title IV funds now managed at system level. (DOE had separate relationships with individual campuses.)
- Reduced Competition
  - o No longer competing within the system for students as they now identify a preferred institution.
  - o Grants made to teams of faculty across campuses incentivizing cross-system collaboration.
- Legislature
  - o Now speaking with one voice to legislature.
- Students
  - o Eventually students will be able to take and see courses across the system—more options.

- Assessment
    - Good cross campus assessment strategy with KPIs/measures to assess and improve.
- Institutional Research
    - Developing data consistency across campuses and centralized Institutional Research.
- Common Catalog Being Developed

Concerns (as expressed)
- Faculty
    - Danger of burnout of most engaged and energized faculty (early adopters).
    - Some still not on board with change, don't believe it is needed or believe rationale is misleading, and don't understand the urgency.
    - Some faculty fear they are losing control of curriculum and quality of programs and believe program change should start from a pedagogical or research based interest.
    - Processes not yet in place.
    - Pace—Given little time to reflect on changes.
    - Seemingly shifting goals or unclear goals.
    - Program sustainability concerns—TLs vs. full-time faculty—need commitment for f/t faculty because there's nothing contractually holding faculty to their program
    - Outside foundation driving change
    - Problems not fixed as soon as they should be
- Staff
    - Staff worry they might lose jobs and that is where efficiencies will come from.
    - Clarification needed on what unified accreditation will or will not do.

- Faculty Governance Council
    - Charter/Charge needs to be clear and agreed upon by all campus faculties.
    - Faculty fear losing autonomy and control.
    - Advisory vs. governance clarity and understanding needed

- IT/Software platforms
    - EMS/ERP is seen as a critical system challenge —currently seven different siloed systems that inhibit students moving from one campus to another—courses, programs and transferability. Restructuring PeopleSoft—still doing manual transfer of credits and student aid – real challenge

- Change
  - Need to align campus and system priorities.
  - Need facilitation and support to overcome barriers.
- Business model
  - Best practice input/comparison/modeling needed.
  - Need a roadmap for governance, process development, etc.
- Finance
  - Need to be transparent about financial issues, consolidating programs, and speaking consistently across all communities.
  - Cost benefits not always clear or understood.
- Communication
  - Some faculty don't feel their feedback is listened to or actually heard, or it is after the fact.
  - History of things done that have not produced positive results.
  - Need to emphasize what is best for students; what is best for the world.
  - Administration needs to be clear and not tell different groups different things.
- Facilitative Agreements and Metrics
  - MOUs need development as well as APLs, KPIs.