



December 2, 2022

Dr. Robert E. Johnson
President
Western New England University
1215 Wilbraham Road
Springfield, MA 01119

Dear President Johnson:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on September 22, 2023, the New England Commission of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Western New England University:

that Western New England University be continued in accreditation;

that the institution submit a report by January 15, 2024 for consideration in Spring 2024 that gives emphasis to the institution's success in:

- 1) ensuring financial stability by achieving its goals for undergraduate and graduate enrollment;
- 2) assuring the sufficiency of faculty and staff to support its programs and services;
- 3) enhancing the effectiveness of its Board of Trustees, with attention to its success in achieving its goals for diversity and succession planning;
- 4) aligning the strategic plans of the University's Colleges and its School of Law with institutional strategic initiatives;

that the institution submit an interim (fifth-year) report by January 15, 2027 for consideration in Spring 2027;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Spring 2032.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its actions.

Western New England University (WNE) is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*.

The Commission commends Western New England University for its thorough and candid self-study. We note with favor that President Johnson, who joined the university in August 2020, has reinvigorated the strategic planning process at WNE through a series of campus-wide “visioning” sessions culminating in a new strategic plan, *Strategic Direction 2021-2025: One University, One Vision*. New organizational leadership models have been put into place including the President’s Council and the Management Council that comprises the President’s Council, Deans, and Associate Vice Presidents. In addition, faculty and student representatives are now routinely invited to attend meetings of the Board of Trustees as well as to interact with board members in other settings such as informal lunches. Guided by its mission to offer “an integrated program of liberal and professional learning in the diverse fields of arts and sciences, business, engineering, law, and pharmacy,” WNE has robust systems in place for program review, outcomes assessment, and student success tracking across its academic programs. Over the past five years, retention has remained constant at around 78%; the six-year graduation rate improved from 59% to 64% from 2011 to 2014; and the overall employment rate within six months of graduation has risen from 90% in 2017 to 95% in 2020. The Commission is pleased to learn that the University has been working to close the gender gap within its student body and, from Fall 2017 to Fall 2021, has experienced an increase of 8% (from 37%-45%) among students identifying as female. Additionally, Western New England University launched the Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) initiative in February 2022 and, to support its priority to further diversify the faculty and staff, has initiated targeted recruitment strategies and dedicated hiring funding for this purpose. We understand that 40% of senior leadership at WNE now identify as BIPOC. We acknowledge that “WNE faced an operating deficit of \$3.5 million in 2018,” and through staffing reductions and other cost-cutting measures, was able to achieve “a modest surplus from operations of \$3.6 million” in FY2021. With its caring and qualified faculty and staff, an engaged student body, and visionary leadership, Western New England University is well positioned to guide students “in their development to become informed and responsible leaders in their local and global communities.”

The items the institution is asked to report on in Spring 2024 are related to our standards on *Students; Institutional Resources; Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship; Organization and Governance; Mission and Purposes; and Planning and Evaluation*.

As noted earlier, Western New England University successfully moved from an operating deficit in FY2018 to an operating surplus in FY2021. We are gratified to learn that the University has recently reinstated raises and expects to increase retirement contributions for faculty and staff in January 2023. As the institution candidly acknowledges, however, critical to its continued financial stability is the achievement of its goals for undergraduate and graduate enrollment. We understand that WNE is adopting a “5/50 Plan” designed to launch, in each of the next five years, one new program that will enroll at least 50 students. The University also seeks to increase international student enrollment by 15-20 students per year over this time period. We seek assurance, in the Spring 2024 report, that the University is able to achieve its goals for undergraduate and graduate enrollment. Our standards on *Students* and *Institutional Resources* are relevant here:

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).

The institution’s multi-year financial planning is realistic and reflects the capacity of the institution to depend on identified sources of revenue and ensure the advancement of educational quality and services for students (7.6).

The Commission shares the concern of the visiting team that the significant faculty and staff reductions enacted by the University in response to its budgetary imbalance, while resulting in a budgetary surplus, have “had an impact on the quality of services and support provided by the remaining staff, as well as on staff morale,” and we note that many positions remain unfilled. We are therefore pleased to learn that the University “will continue to review workloads and compensation equity and explore ways that technology can help improve business processes.” The Spring 2024 report will provide Western New England University with an opportunity to update the Commission on its success in assuring the sufficiency of faculty and staff to support its programs and services. We are guided by our standards on *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship* and *Institutional Resources*:

There are an adequate number of faculty and academic staff, including librarians, advisors, and instructional designers, whose time commitment to the institution is sufficient to assure the accomplishment of class and out-of-class responsibilities essential for the fulfillment of institutional mission and purposes (6.2).

The institution employs sufficient and qualified personnel to fulfill its mission (7.1).

The Commission is pleased to learn that based on its self-assessment in 2016, the Board of Trustees of Western New England University recognized “a need for more diversity on the board and more representation from different sectors of society, including higher education.” We further note with favor that the University’s president has made it “a high priority to seek candidates who will help make the Board more diverse and inclusive.” However, we share the concern of the visiting team about the impact that a “lack of term limits” may have on the board’s achievement of these goals and other efforts to enhance its effectiveness. We look forward to learning, through the Spring 2024 report, of the University’s success in addressing these matters, in keeping with our standard on *Organization and Governance*:

The board assures appropriate attention is given to succession planning for institutional leadership and, where applicable, the composition of the board itself (3.7).

The board systematically develops, ensures, and enhances its own effectiveness through orientation, professional development, effective self-assessment, and regular evaluation including an external perspective. The board addresses its goals for diversity within its membership. Its role and functions are effectively carried out through appropriate committees and meetings (3.8).

With the implementation of *Strategic Direction 2021-2025: One University, One Vision* in 2021, Western New England University has articulated five themes which are well aligned with its Core Values. However, as noted in the report of the visiting team, the strategic plans of the University’s School of Law and three of its four Colleges are older than WNE’s current strategic vision, and the College of Arts & Sciences does not currently have a strategic plan. We appreciate the University’s acknowledgment of the need for its Colleges and School of Law to “develop strategic plans in alignment with the institutional strategic initiatives,” and we look forward, in Spring 2024, to receiving an update on this matter. This section of the report should be informed by our standards on *Mission and Purposes* and *Planning and Evaluation*.

The mission and purposes of the institution are accepted and widely understood by its governing board, administration, faculty, staff, students, and sponsoring entity (if any). They provide direction to the curricula and other activities and form the basis on which expectations for student learning are developed. Specific objectives, reflective of the institution’s overall mission and purposes, are developed by the institution’s individual units (1.4).

Planning and evaluation are systematic, comprehensive, broad-based, integrated, and appropriate to the institution. They involve the participation of individuals and groups responsible for the achievement of institutional purposes and include external perspectives. Results of planning and evaluation are regularly communicated to appropriate institutional constituencies. The institution allocates sufficient resources for its planning and evaluation efforts (2.1).

Commission policy requires an interim (fifth-year) 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.

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Spring 2032 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 Western New England University and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you and Steven R. DiSalvo, 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 Kenneth Rickson. 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.

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.

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

Sincerely,



Russell Carey

RC/sjp

cc: Kenneth Rickson
Visiting team

Enclosure: Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions