

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

March 18, 2004

Dr. Donald P. Wharton
President
Plymouth State University
17 High St., MSC #1
Plymouth, NH 03264-1595

Dear President Wharton:

I write to inform you that at its meeting on March 4, 2004, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Plymouth State University:

That Plymouth State University be continued in accreditation;

that the University submit a fifth-year interim report for consideration in Fall 2008;

that in addition to providing information included in all interim reports, Plymouth State University give emphasis to its continued progress in:

1. ensuring that the campus governance system balances efficiency of accomplishment with opportunities for participation;
2. implementing the new general education program and evaluating its success;
3. ensuring the ability to support the planned expansion of graduate programming; and
4. assessing its overall fiscal well-being, in light of the institution's designation as a university and its expanded mission, without likely prospect of significant additional financial resources from the state;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Fall 2013.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The continuation of Plymouth State University in accreditation is based on the Commission's finding that Plymouth state substantially meets the *Standards for Accreditation*. The institution is commended for its success in fashioning a new general education program, including a new freshman seminar. The Commission is also gratified to note Plymouth State's emphasis on service to the community it serves in northern New

Hampshire, its commitment to student, and the sense of community shared by the faculty, staff, and students of the institution. The new development and strengthen its ability to fulfill an expanded mission.

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. The items specified for review are related to our standard on *Organization and Governance*, *Programs and Instruction*, and *Financial Resources*.

The large number of formal governance committees, ad hoc committees, task forces, and advisory committees appears to have passed the point of useful participation into being considered burdensome and perhaps unduly inefficient. The team report notes that the campus governance system currently creates 415 committee positions to be filled by 156 faculty members. In addition, the desire to encourage student participation has resulted in and unevenness of student involvement and a possible lack of a focused student voice on those matters most appropriate for their involvement. The change in the institution's name and designation to that of a university provides a useful and timely opportunity to review its governance structure and make any appropriate changes to ensure that "the institution has a system of governance that facilitates the successful accomplishment mission and purposes," (3.1) and that students are involved "in those matters in which students have a direct and reasonable interest" (3.8). Through the fifth-year interim report, we look forward to that review and any changes that the institution may elect to make in the governance system.

As noted above, the institution is to be congratulated for developing a new general education program, particularly one that has overcome previously identified problems. With the writing-across-the-curriculum program, and the freshman seminar to be implemented in the fall 2004 semester, the institution is well positioned to provide new students with a strong introduction to the academic community. Through the interim report, the Commission looks forward to learning of the institutions success in implementing the new program and evaluating its success, consistent with our standard on *Programs and Instruction*:

The general education requirement is coherent and substantive, and it embodies the institution's definition of an education person. The requirement informs the design of all general education courses, and provides criteria for its evaluation (4.15)

Graduates successfully completing an undergraduate program demonstrate competence in written and oral communication in English; the ability for scientific and quantitative learning. They also demonstrate knowledge and understanding of scientific, historical, and social phenomena, and a knowledge and appreciation of the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of humankind (4.19)

The institution's graduate program has included a Master of Business Administration, a Master of Education, and a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies. The focus of graduate study has been on serving part-time working adult students with degrees that are relevant to the institution's community in northern New Hampshire. With the new designation as a university, the institution is planning additional graduate offerings, retaining its focus on this student body and on serving the region. The Commission notes that additional graduate education will necessarily require additional resources:

"Graduate programs are not offered unless resources and expectations exceed those required for an undergraduate program in a similar field" (4.21). Some of the areas of anticipated offering, such as in the biological sciences, are particularly expensive, and while outside resources may be attracted to support start-up costs, the institution must plan for the continuing support of these programs. In addition, particularly with university status, it will be important to re-visit the scholarly expectation for the faculty, and for the institution to assess its own accomplishments in this area. We note that the team was unable to make a current assessment, as there was a "lack of documentation of scholarly activity and productivity of the graduate faculty." We note here, the Commission's standard on *Programs and Instruction*: "Scholarship and research receive encouragement and support appropriate to the institution's purposes and objectives" (4.28). Through the interim report, we look forward to learning of the institution's progress in developing its graduate programming, and ensuring the additional resources required.

More broadly, the Commission looks forward at the time of the interim report to the institution's overall assessment of its financial well-being, given its designation as a university, its expanded mission and the lack of realistic prospects for significantly increased financial resources from the state. Indeed, the institution reports level funding this year, with the distinct possibility of a rescission in the year ahead. With state support that is characterized as modest and a reliance on higher tuition from out-of-state students, the institution is vulnerable to shifts in student demographics and attendance patterns in the future. Acceptance rates for out-of-state students are already in the 80 percent range, and residence hall capacity and market conditions limit future enrollment growth and tuition increases. Significant debt and stable but modest results from fundraising also constrain the institution's financial picture. As noted above, an increased mission in graduate education will require additional resources at the time of the interim report, the Commission looks forward to the institution's own assessment of its financial well-being, consistent with our standard on *Financial Resources*:

The institution's financial resources are sufficient to sustain the achievement of its education objectives and to further institutional improvement now and into the foreseeable future (9.1).

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2013 is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation every ten years.

You will note the Commission has specified no length of 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 its appreciation for the self-study prepared by the institution and for the evaluation report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you and Dr. Virginia M. Barry, as well as team chairperson Dr. Dimitrios Pachis.

You are encouraged to share this letter and the team's complete report 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 H Lynch. 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 in 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 Charles M. Cook, director of the Commission.

Sincerely,

[signed]

Terrence J. MacTaggart

TJM/jm

Enclosure

cc: Mr. John H Lynch
Visiting Team