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COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

February 9, 2016

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Dr. James F. Conneely  
President  
University of Maine at Augusta  
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Augusta, ME 04330-9410

Dear President Conneely:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on November 19, 2015, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education took the following action with respect to University of Maine at Augusta:

that University of Maine at Augusta be continued in accreditation;

that the University submit a report for consideration in Spring 2018 that gives emphasis to the institution's progress in:

1. improving the success rates of both its associate and baccalaureate students as measured by traditional retention and graduation rates and other institutional measures of success;
2. decreasing the institution's student loan default rate;

that submission of the report be followed by a visit to validate its contents;

that the University submit an interim (fifth-year) report for consideration in Spring 2020;

that, in addition to the information included in all interim reports, the University give emphasis to its success in:

1. continuing to address the two areas specified for attention in the Spring 2018 report;
2. ensuring sufficient student support services are provided to meet the needs of the institution's part-time and distance education students;
3. using the goals of the 2016-2020 strategic plan to guide resource allocation and the planning efforts of individual units;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Spring 2025.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

University of Maine at Augusta is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be substantially in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*.

The Commission commends University of Maine at Augusta (UMA) for its preparation of a thoughtful, “data-rich” self-study that demonstrates the institution’s success in using a wide range of teaching and learning modalities to accomplish its mission of serving “students of every age and background” on its campuses in Augusta and Bangor, in its robust online programs, and through its administration of eight Outreach Centers and twenty-three learning sites across the state. We note with favor that over the past five years the institution has developed a culture of assessment as evidenced by a “highly functioning” Office of Institutional Research and Planning, and by faculty who value and are actively engaged in the measurement of student achievement. As indicated on the E-series forms, program reviews are conducted on a regular cycle, and we understand from the visiting team that the recently implemented General Education curriculum “characterized by explicit and measurable outcomes” is widely supported by faculty. Particularly as distance education is an integral part of UMA’s future, we commend the investments made to aid its expansion, and more generally to encourage the use of technology in courses, that include dedicated funding to support faculty development and improvement of online offerings and the availability of instructional designers. We recognize the institution’s fiscally conservative approach has allowed it to maintain its internal reserves and fully fund depreciation even in light of enrollment declines, and we acknowledge the success of its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary capital campaign – reaching \$3.2 million of the \$5 million goal – to support, among other things, student scholarships and the enhancement of veterans’ services. Along with the visiting team, we are impressed by the understanding and respect University of Maine at Augusta faculty and staff have for their students, and find that the institution’s entrepreneurial spirit and willingness to develop innovative and responsive programs position it well to continue to be a “transformation institution” that provides accessible and affordable education for Mainers.

The items the institution is asked to report on in Spring 2018 are related to our standard on *Students*.

IPEDS data indicate that University of Maine at Augusta retained 49% of its first-time, full-time bachelor’s degree students from Fall 2012 to Fall 2013; its six-year graduation rate was 13%. (For associate degree students, UMA retained 46%, and its three-year graduation rate was 3%.) As these IPEDS rates are regarded as low and therefore of concern, we note with approval that the University has incorporated “improving retention by strengthening student success” into its strategic plan and has set a goal to increase its IPEDS retention rate for baccalaureate students to 61% and its graduation rate to 18% over a five-year period. In support of this initiative, a Student Success Coordinator position has been established and an additional faculty member hired to explore new pathways for developmental math. UMA has also joined the Educational Advisory Board’s Student Success Collaborative to further its use of data to identify at-risk students. At the same time, because IPEDS data track just first-time, full-time students, these metrics only capture 6% of the institution’s primarily adult, part-time student population. We therefore concur with the visiting team that use of traditional IPEDS retention and graduation rates “represents a challenge” to UMA, and we find commendable the University’s 2013 adoption of an alternative approach – the Student Learning Progress Model (SLPM) – that better measures the ten-year progress of all UMA students. We note, for example, in AY2014 SLPM measures found that 85% of students earning a UMA bachelor’s degree did so within six years, and 62% of students earning a UMA associate’s degree did so within three years. The Spring 2018 report will provide an opportunity for the institution to update the Commission on its progress to improve student persistence and degree completion as measured both by traditional

retention and graduation rates and also by other institutional measures of student success. This request is in keeping with our standard on *Students*:

The institution measures student success, including rates of retention and graduation and other measures of success appropriate to institutional mission (6.6).

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 (6.8).

Data on retention, graduation, and other measures of student success are regularly reviewed within the institution, with the results being used for planning, resource allocation, and improvement (6.9).

While we appreciate the University's commitment to affordability and note that tuition has not increased over the past four years, we remain concerned that University of Maine at Augusta's three-year student loan cohort default rate continues to be around 20%: 19.8% in 2010, 22.7% in 2011, and 19.1% in 2012. We understand that the decrease experienced from 2011 to 2012 could reflect the initial success of measures UMA implemented to decrease its cohort default rate, including the SALT financial literacy program and increased communication with its student borrowers, and note that the University has set a goal over the next five years to further decrease and to then sustain its cohort default rate at 18%. We seek assurance, through the Spring 2018 report, of UMA's continued success to decrease its three-year student loan cohort default rate. Our concern here is informed by our standard on *Students*:

Student financial aid is provided through a well-organized program. Awards are based on the equitable application of clear and publicized criteria. Students are provided with clear and timely information about debt before borrowing (6.14).

The submission of the report in Spring 2018 will be followed by an evaluation visit by Commission representatives to validate its contents.

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. In addition to the information included in all fifth-year reports, the University is asked, in Spring 2020, to give emphasis to its continued success in addressing the two areas of attention specified above for the Spring 2018 progress report. The Commission understands that these issues do not lend themselves to rapid resolution and will require the institution's continued attention over time; hence, we ask that evidence of continued progress be provided in the report submitted for consideration in Spring 2020. The University is also asked, in Spring 2020, to report on two additional matters related to our standards on *Faculty*, *Students*, *Library and Other Information Resources*, and *Planning and Evaluation*.

Particularly given University of Maine at Augusta's strategic goal to promote academic innovation, we support the visiting team's observation that the institution should continue to explore "promising practices" to serve its part-time and distance education students. In addition to extending advising hours, notable examples of improvements made by the University to enhance its student support services include increased use of social media to build communities as part of the online student orientation, embedded services in courses to provide library and writing support as well as access to online tutors, development of an information literacy website, and embedded Class Stewards to help identify struggling students. In keeping with our standards on *Faculty*, *Students*, and *Library and Other Information Resources*, we ask that the Spring 2020 interim report provide evidence that UMA's student support services are appropriate and sufficient to meet the needs of its part-time and distance education students:

The institution has in place an effective system of academic advising that meets student needs for information and advice and is compatible with its educational objectives. ... Resources are adequate to ensure the quality of advising for students regardless of the location of instruction or the mode of delivery (5.19).

The institution offers an array of student services appropriate to its mission and the needs and goals of its students, recognizing the variations in services that are appropriate at the main campus, at off-campus locations, and for programs delivered electronically as well as the differences in circumstances and goals of students pursuing degrees. In all cases, the institution provides academic support services appropriate to the student body. The institution's faculty and professional staff collectively have sufficient interaction with students outside of class to promote students' academic achievement and provide academic and career guidance (6.11).

The institution ensures appropriate access to library and information resources and services for all students regardless of program location or mode of delivery (7.7).

Finally, we understand that University of Maine at Augusta's strategic plan for 2016-2020 was approved by the Board in May 2015 and has since been shared in multiple venues including the faculty retreat and campus-wide open forums. To provide for enrollment growth and financial stability, \$1.6 million of reserves has been earmarked over the next two years to support strategic investments in the areas of student success, academic innovation, and marketing/promotion. We look forward to learning in the Spring 2020 interim report of the institution's use of its 2016-2020 strategic plan goals to guide resource allocation and the planning efforts of individual units to ensure that the "institution has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning" (2.4). Our standard on *Planning and Evaluation* provides this additional guidance:

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. 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).

... Institutional decision-making, particularly the allocation of resources, is consistent with planning priorities (2.3).

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Spring 2025 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 University of Maine at Augusta and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you, Joseph Szakas, Provost and Executive Vice President, Gregory LaPointe, Executive Director of Institutional Research and Planning, Thomas Abbot, Former Dean of Libraries and Distance Education, and Barbara Murphy, 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

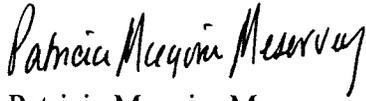
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accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Mr. Samuel W. Collins. The institution is free to release information about the evaluation and the Commission's action to others, in accordance with the enclosed policy 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 in New England.

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

Sincerely,

  
Patricia Maguire Meservey

PMM/jm

Enclosures

cc: Mr. Samuel W. Collins  
Visiting Team