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COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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**President of the Commission**  
BARBARA E. BRITTINGHAM  
bbrittingham@neasc.org

**Senior Vice President of the Commission**  
PATRICIA M. O'BRIEN, SND  
pobrien@neasc.org

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

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

**Vice President of the Commission**  
TALA KHUDAIRI  
tkhudairi@neasc.org

April 13, 2015

Mr. David T. Flanagan  
President  
University of Southern Maine  
P.O. Box 9300, 96 Falmouth Street  
Portland, ME 04104-9300

Dear President Flanagan:

I write to inform you that at its meeting on March 6, 2015 the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education considered the additional information submitted by University of Southern Maine and took the following action:

that the information submitted by University of Southern Maine about its planning efforts be accepted;

that the interim (fifth-year) report scheduled for consideration in Spring 2016 be confirmed;

that, in addition to the information included in all interim reports and the matters specified in our letters of November 29, 2011 and November 18, 2013, the Spring 2016 report give emphasis to the institution's success in:

- 1) continuing to teach out students in the five eliminated academic programs;
- 2) implementing the recommendations of the Metropolitan University Steering Group to realize the institution's revised vision as a "metropolitan university;"
- 3) assuring the sufficiency of financial resources to support its mission, including achieving its goals to increase enrollment;

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

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Spring 2021 be confirmed.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its actions.

The information submitted by University of Southern Maine was accepted because it was generally responsive to the Commission's request of December 8, 2014.

The Commission understands that University of Southern Maine (USM) has decided to eliminate five academic programs. Two of these programs, Applied Medical Sciences and American and New England Studies, are Master's programs that enroll 89 students; the other three (Arts and Humanities, Geosciences, and French) are baccalaureate programs that enroll 135 students. We acknowledge the detailed process USM followed to make the decision to discontinue these programs, and we note with approval that the University has established comprehensive teach out plans for students enrolled in the eliminated programs. Required courses in each program will be offered for the next two years, and students who do not complete within the two-year time frame will be provided with options including directed studies and internships. We are gratified to learn of the University's commitment to "work with each individual student" on a plan of action that will enable the student to complete the requirements of her/his program.

The report submitted by USM also provided an update on the institution's strategic and financial planning efforts. We understand the University has convened a steering group that will oversee a "strategy and implementation plan" to support USM's goal to "become Maine's Metropolitan University." We are also pleased to learn that, as a result of "working continuously" to "prioritize needs and balance academic and administrative cuts," the University was able to prepare a FY2016 budget that eliminated an anticipated \$16 million deficit.

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 interim reports and the items specified for attention in the Commission's letters of November 29, 2011 and November 18, 2013, the University is asked, in Spring 2016, to report on three additional matters related to our standards on *The Academic Program*, *Mission and Purposes*, and *Financial Resources*.

The interim (fifth-year) report will afford University of Southern Maine an opportunity to update the Commission on the teach-out of students in the five eliminated academic programs. By Spring 2016, the University will be in the third semester of the teach-out, and we look forward to learning of students' progress toward program completion as evidence that the institution has made "appropriate arrangements for enrolled students so that they may complete their education with a minimum of disruption" (4.12).

The report of the Metropolitan University Steering Group (MUSG), included as an appendix to USM's report, includes ten recommendations that will enable the University to build a "sustainable structure" to achieve its goal to become "Maine's metropolitan university." We anticipate being appraised, in Spring 2016, of the University's progress in implementing these recommendations, in keeping with our standard on *Mission and Purposes*:

The mission of the institution defines its distinctive character, addresses the needs of society and identifies the students the institution seeks to serve, and reflects both the institution's traditions and its vision for the future. The institution's mission provides the basis upon which the institution identifies its priorities, plans its future and evaluates its endeavors; it provides a basis for the evaluation of the institution against the Commission's Standards (1.1).

The Commission appreciates the candid discussion in the report submitted by University of Southern Maine of the institution's financial and enrollment challenges. From 2008 to 2014, USM's total enrollment declined from 10,009 to 8,428, with a concomitant loss in tuition revenue, at a time when

expenses were increasing and state appropriations were declining. As noted in the report, USM hopes that implementing the initiatives recommended by the MUSG will have a positive impact on "recruiting, enrollment, and retention," but it will take time for these efforts to bear consistent fruit. We take favorable note of the University's commitment to "focus energy on the budget and managing revenues and expenses," and we acknowledge USM's observation that the financial circumstances of the institution and the University of Maine System are "woven together." We look forward to receiving evidence, through the Spring 2016 interim report, of USM's success in securing sufficient revenue to support its mission. We remind you of our standard on *Financial Resources*:

The institution preserves and enhances available financial resources sufficient to support its mission. It manages its financial resources and allocates them in a way that reflects its mission and purposes. It demonstrates the ability to respond to financial emergencies and unforeseen circumstances (9.1).

The institution is financially stable. Ostensible financial stability is not achieved at the expense of educational quality. Its stability and viability are not unduly dependent upon vulnerable financial resources or a historically narrow base of support. The institution's governing board retains appropriate autonomy in all budget and finance matters; this includes institutions that depend on financial support from an external agency (state, church, or other private or public entity) (9.2).

The submission of the report in Spring 2016 will be followed by an evaluation visit by Commission representatives to validate its contents. A copy of the relevant procedures is enclosed for your information and use.

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Spring, 2021, is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years.

The Commission expressed appreciation for the additional information submitted by University of Southern Maine and hopes that its preparation 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.

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 Mr. Sam Collins. The institution is free to release information about the report 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 Barbara Brittingham, President of the Commission.

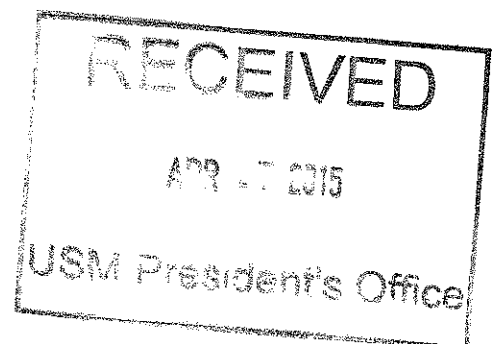
Sincerely,

  
Patricia Maguire Meservey

PMM/sjp

Enclosures

cc: Mr. Sam Collins





**NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES  
COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

3 Burlington Woods, Suite 100, Burlington, MA 01803-4514  
Voice: (781) 425 7785 Fax: (781) 425 1001 Web: <http://cihe.neasc.org>

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## **Procedures for the Focused Evaluation Visit**

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The focused evaluation provides a means of monitoring specific developments or concerns within an institution between comprehensive evaluations. When the Commission requires a focused evaluation, the institution submits a report on specified areas, and a small team visits the institution to validate the information provided in the report, evaluate the areas of focus, and report its findings and its recommendations to the Commission. The Commission considers the institutional report, the team report and confidential recommendation, and the institution's response to the team report and takes action, if appropriate, on the institution's accreditation status.

### **Notification to the Institution**

Several months before the visit, the Commission President sends a reminder to the institution about the upcoming evaluation and works with the chief executive officer on the selection of dates for the visit. The Commission staff selects a prospective team, usually two or three persons including the chairperson, and requests the president's comments on the proposed team before appointing its members. When the team is complete, the institution and team members are informed, and appropriate evaluator materials are sent to the team from the Commission office.

An institution scheduled for a focused evaluation is urged to contact Commission staff for assistance in developing its report and making preparations for the evaluation.

### **Arrangements for the Team Visit**

Upon receipt of the team list, the institution contacts the team chairperson to discuss the schedule for the visit, accommodations, and other arrangements. The institution notifies each team member directly about accommodations and communicates with the team chairperson about all other matters related to the visit. The institution arranges to have all hotel accommodations, and meals if possible, billed directly to the institution. After the visit, the Commission bills the institution for the team members' out-of-pocket expenses, primarily travel costs. Reimbursement should be made directly and promptly to the team. In keeping with Association policy, the Commission office bills the institution for the focused evaluation fee.

### **The Institutional Report**

When the focused evaluation follows submission of the fifth-year interim report, the institution should follow the *Guidelines for Preparing Fifth-Year Reports* when preparing its materials. Otherwise, the following procedures apply.

The report should be a concise narrative containing the following sections:

1. Cover page. Include the institution's name, location, the date, and a brief summary of the subject(s) of the report.

2. Introduction. Indicate the purpose, focus, and limitations (if any) of the report, with specific citation of the Commission's requirements, the processes by which the report was developed, and the organization of the report.
3. Institutional Overview. Describe the institution briefly, including its mission, setting, and any special circumstances which would help in understanding its nature and scope. Discuss any significant changes at the institution since the time of the last comprehensive evaluation.
4. Area(s) of Focus. Describe fully the matter(s) under inquiry and the institution's assessment of the area(s), including strengths or progress achieved, as well as identified concerns and plans for their remedy. Be as explicit and precise as the nature of the materials permits. Discuss how the institution meets the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation* related to the areas of concern. Supporting evidence can be included in the appendices or, if of significant volume, made available in advance to the visiting team by electronic means.
5. Summary Appraisal and Plans. Conclude with a summary appraisal of the institution's continuing development, with particular reference to the area(s) of focus. Describe briefly the institution's ongoing planning and evaluation processes for the next comprehensive evaluation.
6. Appendix. Institutions asked to focus on finance and enrollment should include the F&E Data Forms, available on the Commission website at <http://cihe.neasc.org> via a link on the homepage called "Institutional Reporting Guidelines and Forms."

### **Submission of the Report**

At least six weeks before the visit, unless otherwise specified by the Commission, the institution sends to the Commission office an electronic (pdf) version and four (4) paper copies of its report together with an equal number of institutional catalogs. At the same time, the institution sends copies of the report and catalog directly to each team member. Reports should be single-spaced, printed on both sides of the paper, and stapled or clipped. Please do not use 3-ring binders or elaborate printing options.

### **Conduct of the Visit**

The on-site evaluation follows the customary format described in the Commission's *Evaluation Manual*. In most cases, the visit is one day shorter than the comprehensive visit. It begins typically on Sunday afternoon or evening with a team meeting convened by the chairperson and concludes with an oral report to institutional representatives on Tuesday morning or afternoon. A complex situation may require a longer visit, a matter to be decided by the President of the Commission in consultation with the institution.

For most focused evaluations, a preliminary visit by the team chairperson is unnecessary. However, regular communication by phone should be initiated by the institution, and the chairperson should feel free to contact the institution to discuss arrangements in detail or to request additional materials if team members see a need for them.

### **Preparation of the Team Report**

The steps in the preparation of the team report, and the schedule for its completion, are the same as those prescribed for a comprehensive evaluation. In certain critical situations, the schedule for report preparation may be shortened.

The team report has the following format:

1. Cover Page (template provided by Commission office)
2. Preface Page to the Team Report (provided by Commission office)

3. Introduction and Institutional Overview. This section provides a description of the nature and purpose of the focused evaluation as well as a brief overview of the institution and its significant changes since the last comprehensive evaluation.
4. Area(s) of Focus. The major section of the report addresses the area(s) identified for the focused evaluation, specifically whether the institution has or has not satisfactorily addressed the concerns identified by the Commission. It also describes how and how well the institution fulfills the Commission's standards related to the area(s) of concern.

When the focused evaluation follows submission of the fifth-year interim report, the *Standards for Accreditation* should, together, be treated as one area of focus.

5. Summary. The report should conclude with a list of identified strengths and concerns related to the area(s) of focus.

The institution is provided an opportunity to review a draft of the team report for factual accuracy and also to write a substantive response to the team report.

#### **Team's Confidential Recommendation to the Commission**

In keeping with Commission procedures, the team develops a confidential recommendation based upon its findings in evaluating the area(s) of focus. The nature of each recommendation will depend on the specific purpose of each visit.

The recommendation should contain the following elements:

1. The team's recommendation on the institution's accreditation status, if appropriate. Instances of deferral, Notice of Concern, and probation always require a recommendation on the institution's status of accreditation or candidacy.
  - When the purpose of the visit is to review the Commission's deferral of action on an institution's accreditation status, the options for the team recommendation are: (a) reaffirmation when the institution has adequately responded to the concerns that led to deferral, or (b) probation or withdrawal of accreditation when the institution has not addressed the concerns.
  - For the evaluation of institutions on Notice of Concern, if the institution has satisfactorily addressed the concerns that led to the Notice of Concern, the team should recommend removal of the Notice. If conditions remain largely unchanged, the team should recommend continuation of the Notice. If conditions have worsened and the institution appears not to meet one or more of the *Standards for Accreditation*, the team should recommend probation or withdrawal of accreditation.
  - For the evaluation of institutions on probation, if the institution has satisfactorily addressed the concerns that led to probation, the team should recommend removal of the status together with reaffirmation of accreditation. If adequate progress has not been made and there is evidence that the persistence of the problem(s) that led to probation prevents the institution from meeting the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation* or candidacy, the team should recommend withdrawal of the institution's accreditation or candidacy.
2. The team's recommendation on the timing and content of the next focused visit or progress report. A recommendation for subsequent focused visits or progress reports related to the area(s) of concern is advisable if the team concludes that further monitoring of the specific situation is necessary.

If the institution has satisfactorily dealt with the area(s) of concern, subsequent reports or visits are not appropriate. However, if the institution has made no progress in the area of concern, a recommendation for Notice of Concern or probation status should be considered.

3. The team's recommendation on the timing of the next comprehensive visit. Except in cases of deferral, the Commission has established the schedule for the next comprehensive evaluation of the institution. Such visits must occur at least once every ten years. When evaluating institutions on less than a decennial cycle, focused visit teams should review the timing for the subsequent comprehensive evaluation in light of their findings. The determining factor in making a recommendation to shorten or lengthen the time before the next comprehensive visit should be the Commission's need to monitor the institution. A deteriorating situation may suggest the need for an earlier visit. Conversely, demonstrable ability to address problems satisfactorily would suggest a lengthening of the time until the next evaluation. However, in no case can the next comprehensive evaluation occur later than ten years from the last comprehensive visit.

In cases of deferral where no subsequent evaluation has been scheduled, the team is charged with making a recommendation for the timing of the next visit or visits, focused and/or comprehensive. Again, the Commission's needs to monitor the institutional situation should be the basic consideration in making this recommendation.

4. The rationale for the recommendation. Reasons should be given in narrative form for each component of the recommendation.

#### **Commission Action**

The team report and confidential recommendation, along with the institutional report and response, are considered by the Commission at one of its two regular meetings the semester following the visit. As a part of its consideration of the institutional report and evaluation, the Commission normally asks the team chair and institutional chief executive officer to attend at the hour set aside for the report. Both are informed at an early date of the time and place of the Commission meeting. The institution and team members are informed of the Commission's action shortly after the meeting.

*December 1986*  
*Revised April 2006*  
*Revised February 2009*  
*Revised July 2009*  
*Editorial changes, March 2014*



NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES  
COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION  
3 Burlington Woods, Suite 100, Burlington, MA 01803-4514  
Voice: (781) 425 7785 Fax: (781) 425 1001 Web: <http://cihe.neasc.org>

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## Policy on Credits and Degrees

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The purposes of this policy are to provide guidance to institutions and evaluation teams on the Commission's expectations regarding credits and degrees and to set forth the federal regulations regarding the award of credit.

### Background

The credit system was invented in New England, originally as a way to provide students with the opportunity to elect certain courses as part of their overall degree which had previously consisted of a fully required curriculum. Created to support academic innovation, the academic credit has provided the basis to measure the amount of engaged learning time expected of a typical student enrolled not only in traditional classroom settings but also laboratories, studios, internships and other experiential learning, and most recently distance learning. Students, institutions, employers, and others rely on the common currency of academic credit to support a wide range of desirable functions, including the transfer of students from one institution to another, study abroad programs, formalized recognition of certain forms and quality of non-collegiate study, inter-institutional cooperation on academic programs, and the orderly consideration of students applying to study at the higher degree. For several decades, the federal government has relied on credits as a measure of student academic engagement as a basis of awarding financial aid.

When applying the definition of the credit hour below, other considerations may also be relevant. For example, some institutions may require more academic time than the norms defined below, and such expectations are typical at the graduate level. Also, the Commission's Standards and practices do not preclude perceptive and imaginative innovation aimed at increasing the effectiveness of higher education, measuring student achievement directly rather than relying on academic engaged time. As stated in the Preamble to the *Standards for Accreditation*, "Institutions whose policies, practices, or resources differ significantly from those described in the Standards for Accreditation must present evidence that these are appropriate to higher education, consistent with institutional mission and purposes, and effective in meeting the intent of the Commission's Standards."

### Federal Definition and Commission Review of the Credit Hour

As an accreditor recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education, the Commission is obliged to follow federal law and regulations pertinent to that recognition.

Federal regulation defines a credit hour as an amount of work represented in intended learning outcomes and verified by evidence of student achievement that is an institutional established equivalence that reasonably approximates not less than –

(1) One hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours of out of class student work each week for approximately fifteen weeks for one semester or trimester



degree or higher for admission and usually requires three years or more of postgraduate work including an original research dissertation.<sup>1</sup>

**Joint, Dual or Concurrent Degrees<sup>2</sup>:** While the nomenclature for various arrangements in which students study simultaneously from or for two degree programs is not entirely consistent among institutions, the definitions below will be used by the Commission for purposes of consistency:

**Joint degree:** A single degree awarded by two institutions.

**Dual or concurrent degrees:** Two degrees, awarded by one or two institutions to students who have been admitted to each degree program, based on the normal qualifications. At the undergraduate level, students must typically take the equivalent of a full year of study beyond the first baccalaureate degree to earn the second degree. At the graduate level, enrollment in a dual or concurrent degree program typically results in a reduction in time, for example, a reduction in total time of a semester for two degrees which if taken separately would require four years of full-time study.

**Terms of Study:**

**Quarter:** A calendar of ten weeks of instructional time or its equivalent.

**Semester:** A calendar 15 weeks of instructional time or its equivalent in effort.

*Effective July 1, 2011*

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<sup>1</sup> The initiation of the Ph.D. is considered a substantive change.

<sup>2</sup> Institutions considering joint, dual, or concurrent degrees should consult the Commission's Policy on Substantive Change.