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COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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November 30, 2016

Dr. Glenn A. Cummings
President
University of Southern Maine
P.O. Box 9300, 96 Falmouth Street
Portland, ME 04104-9300

Dear President Cummings:

I write to inform you that at its meeting on September 23, 2016, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education considered the interim report submitted by University of Southern Maine, as well as the report of the visiting team, and took the following action:

that the interim report submitted by University of Southern Maine be accepted;

that the University submit a report for consideration in Spring 2018 that provides an update on the impact of the University of Maine System's One University initiative on the institution, and that gives emphasis to the University's progress in:

1. continuing to strengthen the institution's financial stability, with emphasis on addressing its deferred maintenance needs;
2. meeting its goals for enrollment and retention;
3. achieving stability in institutional leadership and ensuring sufficient full-time faculty to support and enhance the academic programs;
4. continuing to develop a comprehensive approach to the assessment of student learning outcomes and using the results for improvement;

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Spring 2021 be confirmed.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The interim report submitted by University of Southern Maine (USM) was accepted because it responded to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letters of November 29, 2011, November 18, 2013, April 13, 2015, and July 10, 2015 and addressed each of the nine standards including a reflective essay for Standard 8: *Educational Effectiveness* on student learning and success.

Along with the visiting team, the Commission finds University of Southern Maine's rebound after a very difficult period in its history to be impressive. We commend the institutional leadership for creating and fostering a more open and transparent environment that has renewed the engagement of faculty and staff in shared governance. We particularly note with favor the establishment of a new Budget Advisory Committee, co-chaired by the chief business officer and provost, that meets monthly to bring an "institution-wide perspective" to financial decision-making, and the University's use of its website to publish a dashboard of key performance indicators. We are pleased to learn that USM has coalesced around a model of community engagement to define its identity. This faculty-directed initiative which is supported by both the University's internal and external constituencies, capitalizes on the University's location to "enrich curricula, engage new stakeholders, and provide students valuable learning experiences." The Commission further notes with approval that USM has made progress to build a more robust and data-driven culture of assessment and acknowledges the preparation of annual "snapshots" that capture, among a number of items, measures of student success and faculty productivity to ensure continuous improvement between program reviews. In addition, we understand that the University's growing online programs and courses are "fully integrated" into the institution's academic departments and are governed by the same policies and procedures, and view positively the availability of grant incentives to support faculty training in online instruction. We also are aware that of the 224 students affected by the FY2015 elimination of five academic programs, only 15 students remain in those programs. We concur with the visiting team that with clarity of direction brought about by the nine institutional goals identified by the president, and the participation of the full campus community, USM has regained its momentum and positioned itself to continue to meet its "historical commitments to student success and to serving the needs of the region."

As indicated in the reflective essay, in response to the institution's goals that "72% of [its] students will remain at USM between each school year" and that "80% will recommend USM to others," the University's Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and Campus Life units have undertaken joint efforts to reverse declining retention rates and student satisfaction that resulted, in large measure, from the elimination of several academic programs. Recent initiatives include the reorganization and staffing of the Division of Enrollment Management and Student Services, development of a one-stop student services center, introduction of a one-credit co-curricular "lab" to the Entry Year Experience course, creation of living-learning communities, and founding of a Commuter Student Immersion Program.

We recognize that the University of Southern Maine's planning has the added complexity of the institution being a part of the University of Maine System's "One University" initiative, and understand that while implementation to date has primarily been focused on administrative functions, attention is now also being given to the possible consolidation of academic programs. Our letter of July 10, 2015 asked that each report submitted by the University provide an update on the "One University" initiative. Therefore, we ask that USM provide a further update in Spring 2018 on the impact of the "One University" initiative on the institution to ensure that "... the division of responsibility and authority between the system office and the institution is clear" (3.6). In addition, in Spring 2018, the University is asked to report on four items related to our standards on *Institutional Resources, Students, Educational Effectiveness, Organization and Governance, and Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*.

We are aware that declining enrollment, tuition freezes from FY2013 through FY2017, and reduced state support have strained the University of Southern Maine's finances over the past several years. Through prudent management of its resources, however, the University was able, by using "aggressive" cost cutting measures, to achieve an operating margin of \$1.1 million in FY2015 and to breakeven in FY2016 with no financial assistance from the System, and returned \$2.0 million to the reserves. We note with approval that USM is implementing a number of strategies to enhance the institution's financial stability, including increasing financial aid by

raising its discount rate from 8.9% in FY2013 to nearly 20% in FY2016 to help grow enrollment, and making plans to establish an international early college. In addition, we understand increased attention is being given to fundraising with the goal of raising \$50 million for the USM Foundation over the next five years. At the same time, we share the visiting team's concern that the University "remains challenged" to fund its current and growing deferred maintenance backlog of approximately \$250 million, particularly given that 53% of its buildings are over 25 years old. In keeping with our standard on *Institutional Resources*, we ask that the Spring 2018 report provide evidence of the University's continued success to strengthen its financial stability, with emphasis on addressing its deferred maintenance needs:

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 (7.4).

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 an historically narrow base of support (7.5).

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 institution has sufficient and appropriate information, physical, and technological resources necessary for the achievement of its purposes wherever and however its academic programs are offered. It devotes sufficient resources to maintain and enhance its information, physical, and technological resources (7.21).

The Commission is encouraged that, following a period of enrollment declines, the University of Southern Maine welcomed its largest incoming class in a decade in Fall 2016 – 1,800 new students – and doubled the size of its honors program. We further understand that graduate enrollment was up by some 12%. Among the factors contributing to this growth were improved relations with the community college system and high school counselors, and the \$1.0 million allocated to fund merit aid for transfer students. With a total current headcount of 7,739, USM has as one of its nine "aspirational" goals to reach a headcount of 10,000. At the same time, we are pleased to learn there is evidence that the various initiatives noted above implemented by the institution to achieve its goals to increase retention rates from 63% to 72% and six-year graduation rates from 33% to 55% are starting to have a positive impact. The Spring 2018 report will provide USM an opportunity to update the Commission on the institution's progress to achieve its enrollment and retention goals. Our standards on *Students* and *Educational Effectiveness* provide guidance here:

Consistent with its mission, the institution sets and achieves realistic goals to enroll students who are broadly representative of the population the institution wishes to serve (Statement of Standard 5, *Students*).

The institution demonstrates its ability to admit students who can be successful in the institution's academic program, including specifically recruited populations. 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 (5.6).

The institution defines measures of student success and levels of achievement appropriate to its mission, modalities and locations of instruction, and student body, including any specifically recruited populations. These measures include rates of progression, retention,

transfer, and graduation; default and loan repayment rates; licensure passage rates; and employment (8.6).

We note with favor that, after a series of administrative transitions, the arrival of a new president and the appointment of a permanent provost have begun to restore a level of stability to the leadership of University of Southern Maine. As observed by the visiting team, USM appears to once again be strategically moving forward. The effectiveness of the leadership team, many of whom have a relatively short tenure with the institution, in addressing the enrollment and financial challenges that confront the institution has, however, yet to be assessed. At the same time, as the visiting team recognized, the reduction in the number of full-time faculty – from 372 in FY2013 to 265 in FY2016 – has made it more difficult for the remaining faculty to meet their obligations for “student advising, governance service, community outreach, curricular development, and scholarship.” We understand a number of faculty searches have been launched, but also appreciate that the University’s ability to add full-time faculty still depends on improvements in its financial condition. As specified by our standards on *Organization and Governance* and *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*, we ask that the Spring 2018 report give emphasis to the institution’s success in achieving stability in the leadership team and ensuring sufficient full-time faculty to support and enhance the University’s academic programs:

The chief executive officer, through an appropriate administrative structure, effectively manages the institution so as to fulfill its purposes and objectives and establishes the means to assess the effectiveness of the institution. The chief executive officer manages and allocates resources in keeping with institutional purposes and objectives and assesses the effectiveness of the institution. The chief executive officer assures that the institution employs faculty and staff sufficient in role, number, and qualifications appropriate to the institution’s mission, size, and scope (3.12).

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. Responsibilities include instruction, accessibility to students, and the systematic understanding of effective teaching/learning processes and outcomes in courses and programs for which they share responsibility; additional duties may include, e.g., student advisement, academic planning, and participation in policy-making, course and curricular development, research, and institutional governance (6.2).

As validated by the visiting team, USM is “[w]orking to build a more robust assessment framework and to develop a culture of assessment.” The formation of a campus-wide assessment committee in 2012, the development of a calendar of institutional assessment activities, and the increased participation of faculty in assessment workshops are all commendable. We also note with favor the University’s implementation of the “Assessment of Student Learning Plan” that serves as a template for academic programs to examine learning outcomes and create plans for program improvement. We understand 39 of 41 programs submitted updated results in Spring 2015 that were posted on the Office of Academic Assessment website, a website that, in addition, makes available a variety of relevant data to promote data-driven decision-making. While we understand from the visiting team that “closing the assessment loop” continues to be challenging for some programs, we are reassured that continued development of a comprehensive approach to assessment is a “major” initiative of the new provost. We therefore look forward to learning, through the Spring 2018 report, of the institution’s continued success in assessing student achievement and using the results for improvement. We remind you of our standard on *Educational Effectiveness*:

Assessment of learning is based on verifiable statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. The process of understanding what and how students are learning focuses on the course, competency, program, and institutional level. Assessment has the support of the institution's academic and institutional leadership and the systematic involvement of faculty and appropriate staff (8.3).

The results of assessment and quantitative measures of student success are a demonstrable factor in the institution's efforts to improve the learning opportunities and results for students (8.8).

The institution integrates the findings of its assessment process and measures of student success into its program evaluation activities and uses the findings to inform its planning and resource allocation and to establish claims the institution makes to students and prospective students (8.10).

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.

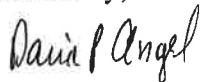
The Commission expressed appreciation for the report prepared by University of Southern Maine and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you as well as James Schmotter, team chair, during its deliberations.

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 Mr. Samuel E. 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,



David P. Angel

DPA/jm

Enclosure

cc: Mr. Samuel E. Collins
Visiting Team