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January 12, 2009

Dr. Anthony W. Marx
President
Amherst College
Converse Hall
Amherst, MA 01002-5000

Dear President Marx:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on November 20, 2008, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Amherst College:

that Amherst College be continued in accreditation;

that the College submit a fifth-year interim report for consideration in Spring 2013;

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

1. advancing an ambitious institutional agenda in a time of likely significant constraints on financial resources;
2. reaching a constructive conclusion on the recommendations of the Committee on Academic Priorities, particularly in the areas of writing and quantitative skills;
3. defining with more clarity the purposes of the first-year seminars;
4. evaluating student learning beyond the class and department level as a cumulative general educational achievement;
5. improving clarity on the ideal distribution across categories of courses that a student might be advised to pursue;
6. monitoring the workload required by faculty committees, particularly the Committee of Six, to ensure that it not interfere excessively with teaching commitments and professional development;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Spring 2018.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

Amherst College is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*.

The College has articulated a compelling mission and is pursuing the mission with excellence and commitment. We concur with the team that Amherst College is an extraordinary institution which enjoys the talents of a strong and committed board, president, administration, faculty, and student body. We commend the institution on the strength of its commitment to access and opportunity for a diverse student body and for its continuing initiatives to perfect an institution that is widely admired and respected as a leader in American higher education.

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. In addition to the information included in all fifth-year reports, the College is asked, in Spring 2013, to report on six matters related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation*, *The Academic Program*, and *Faculty*.

Befitting the stature of Amherst College and the creative energy it applies to institutional improvement, the College has outlined an ambitious agenda that includes the goals of increasing the diversity of the student body, supported by increased recruitment, additional financial aid, and additional academic resources; expanding the student body, to be accompanied by increases in the faculty; and improving residence halls for all students through renovation and construction. Achieving these goals will be especially challenging in the current economic climate, and we look forward to learning in the interim report how the College continues to develop and use "realistic analyses of internal and external opportunities and constraints" (2.2) to ensure its "record of success in implementing the results of its planning" (2.3).

Beginning in 2003 a series of faculty committees has directed attention to strengthening student accomplishment in a variety of areas including writing and quantitative skills. With the College's strong commitment to increasing the diversity of the student body, resulting in more varied educational backgrounds of entering students, we agree with the team that reaching a constructive conclusion on the recommendations of the Committee on Academic Priorities with respect to writing and quantitative skills has special importance in ensuring that Amherst graduates "demonstrate competence in written and oral communication in English [and] the ability for scientific and quantitative reasoning" (4.18).

We note the long tradition at Amherst College of first-year seminars. While they are the only course in common for all students at the College, with the decline of interdisciplinary seminars and a lack of consensus on a writing focus for the seminars, the course does not appear to have a rationale that promotes "coherence through its goals, structure, and content" (4.3). The interim report will afford the College an opportunity to discuss its success in addressing this challenge.

Local research, such as on academic advising, and participation in the efforts of institutional peers, such as through the Teagle Foundation Working Group on an Open Curriculum, reflect important beginning efforts on understanding what and how Amherst College students are learning. At the same time, we concur with the team that the College faces the challenge of finding responsible ways of answering broad questions about what students learn over four years or through a major at the College or, more particularly, about how they develop particular skills such as writing over a college career. We anticipate that at the time of the interim report,

consistent with our standard on *The Academic Program*, the College can report its success in developing a useful program of assessing student learning:

The institution implements and supports a systematic and broad-based approach to the assessment of student learning focused on educational improvement through understanding what and how students are learning through their academic program and, as appropriate, through experiences outside the classroom. This approach is based on a clear statement or statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. The approach provides useful information to help the institution understand what and how students are learning, improve the experiences provided for students, and assure that the level of student achievement is appropriate for the degree awarded. Institutional support is provided for these activities (4.44).

We are gratified by the efforts the College has directed toward the improvement of advising, including participation in the above-mentioned Teagle consortium, particularly as it relates to how students take full advantage of the institution's open curriculum. Achieving some greater clarity on the ideal distribution across categories of courses that a student might be advised to pursue will provide a stronger and more consistent advising system to ensure that 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" (5.17).

Finally, we respect the team's observation that the Committee of Six has time-intensive and effective meetings and that the campus community has "unusual faith" in this system of governance. Particularly in light of the expectation that the College will soon have more junior members, the interim report will provide Amherst College with an opportunity to reflect on its monitoring of the workload required by faculty committees, particularly the Committee of Six, so that participation in governance does not otherwise compromise faculty's "accomplishment of class and out-of-class responsibilities essential for the fulfillment of institutional mission and purposes" (5.3).

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Spring 2018 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 Amherst College and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you, Dr. Gregory S. Call, Dean of the Faculty, and Dr. Craig A. McEwen, team representative, 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. Jide Zeitlin. 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 with the effort to provide public assurance of the quality of higher education in New England.

Dr. Anthony W. Marx
January 12, 2009
Page 4

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

Sincerely,



Elsa M. Nuñez

EMN/jm

Enclosure

cc: Mr. Jide Zeitlin
Visiting Team

