



October 24, 2023

Dr. Michael A. Elliott
President
Amherst College
P.O. Box 5000
Amherst, MA 01002-5000

Dear President Elliott:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on September 22, 2023, the New England Commission of Higher Education considered the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Amherst College and voted to take the following action:

that the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Amherst College be accepted;

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Spring 2028 be confirmed;

that, in addition to the information included in all self-studies, the self-study prepared in advance of the Spring 2028 evaluation give emphasis to the institution's success in:

1. developing and implementing its new strategic plan;
2. achieving its goals for enhancing student community and belonging as well as strengthening the Student Affairs division structure and services;
3. achieving its goals for faculty governance and clarifying tenure expectations.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Amherst College was accepted because it responded to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letters of February 1, 2019, and November 9, 2020, and addressed each of the nine standards, including a reflective essay for Standard 8: *Educational Effectiveness* on student learning and success.

The Commission commends Amherst College (Amherst) for its comprehensive, reflective interim report, which “represents an important moment of transition” for the institution. We appreciate the College’s “deep commitment to equity and access” and are gratified, therefore, to note that the College’s faculty and its student body “have become markedly more diverse.” Amherst ended its “practice of a legacy preference in admissions” in 2021 and has significantly increased its student financial aid. Particularly noteworthy are the College’s continued “strong commitment to student research and scholarship” and “strong tradition of intellectual inquiry and debate.” We understand that the College achieved its \$625 million capital campaign goal in December 2022. Lastly, the Commission concurs with Amherst’s assessment that its

ability to advance initiatives and maintain its high-caliber educational offerings during the pandemic and a leadership transition “speaks to the enduring strength of the College.”

The Commission further commends Amherst College for its continued efforts to assess and improve educational effectiveness at the institution. We appreciate that, while the institution’s overall graduation rate is “among the highest in the country,” the College regularly evaluates disaggregated data, identifies areas of concern, and takes steps to make improvements to processes as necessary. The Commission notes favorably that recent Alumni Survey data show students reporting improved academic skills, particularly quantitative skills, when compared with the results from prior years. Lastly, we acknowledge that Amherst continuously assesses how students navigate the College’s open curriculum and makes program, curricular, and pedagogical changes as needed based on assessment results.

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Spring 2028 is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years. The items the Commission asks to be given special emphasis within the self-study prepared for the comprehensive evaluation are matters related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation*; *Students*; *Organization and Governance*; and *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*.

We are gratified to learn that Amherst College’s 2015 Strategic Plan was an “important and useful guiding document” and that many of the goals in that plan have been achieved. The Commission further notes that the College anticipates its next strategic planning process will “begin in or around fall 2025,” and we anticipate being apprised, through the Spring 2028 self-study, of the institution’s success in developing and implementing its next strategic plan. We are guided here by our standard on *Planning and Evaluation*:

The institution plans beyond a short-term horizon, including strategic planning that involves realistic analyses of internal and external opportunities and constraints. The results of strategic planning are implemented in all units of the institution through financial, academic, enrollment, and other supporting plans (2.3).

The institution has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning (2.5).

The Commission appreciates Amherst College’s candor regarding the “significant leadership transitions” in its Student Affairs division. We understand that the College is in a period of “rebuilding” the division as it aims to “cultivat[e] and build[] supportive and inclusive communities.” We acknowledge the institution’s ongoing efforts to support student “health and holistic wellbeing” through various efforts including the Wellbeing Steering Committee and the JED Wellbeing Initiative working group. The Commission is also pleased to learn of Amherst’s plans to build a Student Center and Dining Commons which will enhance connection, community, and belonging. As informed by our standard on *Students*, we look forward to learning, through the self-study prepared in advance of the Spring 2028 comprehensive evaluation, of the College’s success in these efforts:

The institution systematically identifies the characteristics and needs of its student population and then makes provision for responding to them. The institution’s student services are guided by a philosophy that reflects the institution’s mission and special character, is circulated widely and reviewed periodically, and provides the basis on which services to students can be evaluated (5.8).

The institution offers an array of student services, including physical and mental health services, appropriate to its mission and the needs and goals of its students. It recognizes the

variations in services that are appropriate for residential students, at the main campus, at off-campus locations, and for distance education programs as well as the differences in circumstances and goals of students pursuing degrees (5.9).

The institution ensures that individuals responsible for student services are qualified by formal training and work experience and organizationally placed to represent and address the needs of students effectively. Personnel, facilities, technology, and funding are adequate to implement the institution's student services policies and procedures (5.17).

Amherst College has made considerable progress in reforming its faculty governance – moving from a Committee of Six to a Faculty Executive Committee and creating a Tenure and Promotion Committee. The Commission appreciates that the College is still working to “streamline the committee structure” and to “evaluate the faculty committee system.” Amherst also recognizes that there is a “perceived lack of clarity” in the expectations for receiving tenure and is working to address this concern. Progress to date includes the development of a formal mentoring plan, departmental handbooks, and a common evaluation form. The Spring 2028 self-study will provide an opportunity for Amherst College to apprise the Commission on its continued progress toward achieving its goals for faculty governance and clarifying its tenure expectations. Relevant here are our standards on *Organization and Governance* and *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*:

In accordance with established institutional mechanisms and procedures, the chief executive officer and senior administrators consult with faculty, students, other administrators, and staff, and are appropriately responsive to their concerns, needs, and initiatives. The institution's internal governance provides for the appropriate participation of its constituencies, promotes communications, and effectively advances the quality of the institution (3.13).

Faculty assignments are consistent with the institution's mission and purposes. They are equitably determined to allow faculty adequate time to provide effective instruction, advise and evaluate students, contribute to program and institutional assessment and improvement, continue professional growth, and participate in scholarship, research, creative activities, and service compatible with the mission and purposes of the institution. Faculty assignments and workloads are reappraised periodically and adjusted as institutional conditions change (6.7).

In a handbook or in other written documents that are current and readily available, the institution defines the responsibilities of faculty and other members of the instructional team; the criteria for their recruitment, appointment, retention, evaluation, promotion, and, if applicable, tenure; and policies for resolving grievances (6.8).

The Commission expressed appreciation for the interim report submitted by Amherst College and hopes its preparation has contributed to institutional improvement. It appreciates your cooperation in the effort to provide public assurance of the quality of higher education.

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. Andrew J. Nussbaum. 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.

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If you have any questions about the Commission's action, please contact Lawrence M. Schall,
President of the Commission.

Sincerely,



Russell C. Carey

RCC/jm

cc: Mr. Andrew J. Nussbaum

Enclosure: Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions