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October 8, 2019

Dr. Dennis M. Hanno
President
Wheaton College
26 East Main Street
Norton, MA 02766-2322

Dear President Hanno:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on September 19, 2019, the New England Commission of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Wheaton College:

that Wheaton College be continued in accreditation;

that the institution be asked to submit a report for consideration in Fall 2021 that gives emphasis to the institution's success in:

- 1) developing and implementing a comprehensive plan for assessing student learning;
- 2) achieving a balanced operating budget;
- 3) addressing the College's deferred maintenance and facilities needs;
- 4) assuring the effectiveness of its policies and procedures to ensure alignment of its award of credit with Commission policy;

that the institution submit an interim (fifth-year) report for consideration in Spring 2024;

that, in addition to the information included in all interim reports, the institution give emphasis to its continued success in two of the matters specified for attention in the Fall 2021 report, namely:

- 1) developing and implementing a comprehensive plan for assessing student learning;
- 2) maintaining a balanced operating budget;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Spring 2029.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its actions.

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

The Commission commends Wheaton College (Wheaton) for its thoughtful and comprehensive self-study that was developed through a campus-wide, participatory process. The arrival of a new president in 2014, has brought a “renewed sense of energy and optimism” to the College. The Board of Trustees is highly engaged in ensuring Wheaton’s “long-term sustainability and excellence.” Following an integrated and inclusive process, a new strategic plan was approved by the Board of Trustees in February 2016 and is currently being implemented. We understand that the College is developing a new approach to undergraduate liberal arts education, focused on preparing students for post-graduate employment. The Commission is pleased to learn from the visiting team that student engagement in clubs is a “hallmark of the institution” and a supplemental advising model was implemented in Fall 2018. We note with favor that Wheaton continues to make progress on realizing its Faculty and Staff Investment Strategy and, in February 2019, opened the Center for Collaborative Teaching and Learning to support faculty development. Wheaton College’s 2014 capital campaign received \$137 million in gifts and pledges, exceeding its \$120 million goal. It is evident from the self-study and the report of the visiting team that Wheaton College, with its strong leadership team, engaged Board of Trustees, and dedicated faculty and staff, is well-positioned to “provide a transformative liberal arts education for intellectually curious students” well into the future.

The items the institution is asked to report on in Fall 2021 are related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation*, *The Academic Program*, *Educational Effectiveness*, and *Institutional Resources*.

The Commission appreciates Wheaton’s candor in discussing its assessment structures and processes. We understand that academic program assessment has been “sporadic and decentralized” and the Education Policy Curriculum Evaluation Subcommittee, “too narrowly conceived and constructed to handle assessment across the College.” We appreciate learning, from the institution’s response to the visiting team report, that Wheaton has taken steps to “foster a stronger campus culture of assessment including a Campus-Wide Assessment Plan, the creation of an assessment steering committee to oversee assessment processes, and a Curriculum Implementation Team to support assessment of student learning outcomes.” Curriculum mapping work is progressing, and each department will begin to submit an annual report that will serve as a planning and assessment tool. The College is also “committed to addressing the lack of external reviews” for some programs. The Fall 2021 report will enable Wheaton to provide evidence that it is developing and implementing a comprehensive plan for assessing student learning. We are guided here by our standards on *Planning and Evaluation*, *The Academic Program*, and *Educational Effectiveness*.

The institution’s principal evaluation focus is the quality, integrity, and effectiveness of its academic programs. Evaluation endeavors and systematic assessment are demonstrably effective in the improvement of academic offerings, student learning, and the student experience. Systematic feedback from students, former students, and other relevant constituencies is a demonstrable factor in institutional improvement (2.7).

The institution develops, approves, administers, and on a regular cycle reviews its academic programs under institutional policies that are implemented by designated bodies with established channels of communication and control. Review of academic programs includes evidence of student success and program effectiveness and incorporates an external perspective. Faculty have a substantive voice in these matters (4.6).

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 Commission notes from the team report that Wheaton College continues to experience budgetary shortfalls", and we understand the operating deficit has increased from approximately \$3.25 million in FY2016 to about \$4.5 million in FY2019. The College has not achieved its desired targets for some key drivers, including the discount rate and increasing net student revenues. At the same time, we appreciate that Wheaton increased its cash and short-term investments by \$2.5 million and "remains focused on controlling expenses while growing revenues." In 2019, the College engaged Huron Consulting to identify opportunities for greater efficiency and improvement. We are also pleased to learn that the institution is working to diversify its revenue streams by offering high school summer programs and an overseas student entrepreneurship program. While we appreciate that Wheaton is optimistic these efforts will strengthen the institution's financial position, we also seek assurance, through the Fall 2021 report, that the College "is financially stable, [o]stensible financial stability is not achieved at the expense of educational quality, [and i]ts stability and viability are not unduly dependent upon vulnerable financial resources or an historically narrow base of support" (7.5). We are further guided here by our standard on *Institutional 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 (7.4).

The institution implements a realistic plan for addressing issues raised by the existence of any operating deficit (7.14).

We understand that Wheaton College allocates an average of \$3 million annually to support its facilities maintenance and takes a "planful approach" to making facilities improvements. But, as noted by the visiting team, Wheaton is "funding its deficits at the expense of fully funding depreciation." We share their judgment that continuing with this strategy will "create greater levels of deferred maintenance" for the College. We look forward to being apprised, in the Fall 2021 report, of Wheaton's success in addressing the College's deferred maintenance and facilities needs, as specified in our standard on *Institutional Resources*:

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 acknowledges that Wheaton has a "recently articulated" credit hour policy and notes that at the time of the visit there was "little evidence that credit-hour policy had been communicated to faculty and students..." We are gratified, to learn that, since the time of the visit, Wheaton has taken several steps to communicate the policy and ensure that its award of credit is in alignment with Commission policy, including dissemination of a template for course syllabi and discussions at a First-Year Seminar workshop, New Faculty Orientation, and a faculty meeting. In addition, a process has been developed for gathering data on engaged academic time. We ask that the Fall 2021 report give emphasis to Wheaton College's success in assuring the

effectiveness of its policies and procedures to ensure that its “[c]redit awards are consistent with Commission policy ...” (4.34).

Commission policy requires an interim (fifth-year) report of all institutions on a decennial evaluation cycle. In addition to the matters included in all interim reports, the College is asked, in the Spring 2024 interim (fifth-year) report, to give emphasis to its continued success in addressing two of the areas specified above for attention in the Fall 2021 report: 1) developing and implementing a comprehensive plan for assessing student learning and 2) maintaining a balanced operating budget. The Commission recognizes that these matters do not lend themselves to rapid resolution and will require the College’s sustained attention over time; hence, we ask that further information be provided in the interim report.

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Spring 2029 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 Wheaton College and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you, Renée White, Provost, Meghan Kass, Vice President for Finance and Administration, and Steven C. Bahls, 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 Ms. Janet Lindholm Lebovitz. 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 Quigley

DQ/sjp

cc: Ms. Janet Lindholm Lebovitz
Visiting team

Enclosures