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May 30, 2017

Dr. Donald J. Farish
President
Roger Williams University
One Old Ferry Road
Bristol, RI 02809-2921

Dear President Farish:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on April 20, 2017, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Roger Williams University:

that Roger Williams University be continued in accreditation;

that the University submit an interim (fifth-year) report for consideration in Fall 2021;

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

1. implementing its strategic plan and developing metrics to evaluate progress;
2. strengthening its financial position, with emphasis on diversifying revenue and reducing reliance on its line of credit;
3. achieving its goal to increase diversity and inclusion on campus;
4. continuing to develop the Providence campus to further the institution's mission and objectives;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Fall 2026.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

Roger Williams University is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be substantially in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*.

We commend Roger Williams University (RWU) for its well-written and comprehensive self-study that documents the "very significant" progress made by the institution since its last comprehensive evaluation to build a cohesive

community of trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, and students dedicated to “strengthening society through engaged teaching and learning.” We note with favor the institution’s record undergraduate enrollment and the “rebound” of law school enrollments, the corresponding expansion of its physical facilities including Global Heritage Hall and the Admissions and Alumni House, and the increase of \$40.4 million in total net assets since FY2010. We are pleased to learn that, through a process “designed by the faculty and approved by the administration,” faculty have direct oversight of the curriculum, and we understand that a new faculty contract is in place for 2016-2021. We concur with the visiting team that RWU has developed a robust culture of assessment that involves specialized accreditation of its professional programs and, in addition, a strong and effective five-year internal review cycle that includes “consideration of student performance on established learning outcomes.” The tracking of employment and graduate school acceptance data of recent graduates by the professional programs and the First Destination survey administered by the Center for Career and Professional Development are particularly impressive, as is the adoption of seven co-curricular learning outcomes by the Student Life Division. In addition, we commend the work done by RWU faculty and staff to revise the CORE program and the efforts underway to improve student retention and graduation: the establishment of Living-Learning Communities in which 60% of the incoming first-year class now participate, the launch of a First Year Seminar in Fall 2016, and the creation of a Learning Commons and a Center for Student Academic Success that has become an “integrated hub” for the University’s academic support programs. The resulting improvement in the retention of first-year students (83.4% in Fall 2016, the highest rate in the past ten years), and the increase in its 6-year graduation rate (from 56% for the 1999 entering cohort to 64% for the class that started in 2009) provide evidence of the success of these and other initiatives implemented. Also noteworthy is RWU’s Affordable Excellence program under which tuition is frozen for the four years of attendance that has improved access and heightened the “value proposition” for potential students and their families. We share the visiting team’s view that, with an involved board, highly respected president, and capable and committed faculty and staff, Roger Williams University is well positioned to meet its goal of “building the University the world needs now” by providing undergraduate and graduate programs that focus on both the liberal arts and preparation for the professions.

Commission policy requires an 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 interim reports the University is asked, in Fall 2021, to report on four matters related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation; Institutional Resources; Students; Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship; Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure; and Mission and Purposes.*

We note with approval the Vision Project, approved by the board in June 2015, that “maps out a clear direction” for the institution’s future, further demonstrating University-wide engagement with the involvement of more than a dozen committees and the sharing of documents on the institution’s website. As acknowledged in the self-study, however, the University has yet to “establish the metrics and outcomes by which [it] will evaluate the institution’s progress, the success of strategies, and the contributions of individuals.” We therefore are encouraged to learn that a cabinet retreat is planned for June that will start the process of “putting words into action.” The Fall 2021 interim report will enable the institution to provide evidence that “[t]he institution has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning” (2.5). Our standard on *Planning and Evaluation* further notes:

... 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 using the results of its evaluation activities to inform planning, changes in programs and services, and resource allocation (2.8).

We recognize that operating surpluses over the past three years have “much improved” Roger Williams University’s balance sheet and helped to decrease its deferred maintenance. Long-term debt has also been reduced and refinanced at more favorable terms resulting in interest savings of more than \$17.0 million over the life of the debt. Yet, as RWU has reached capacity on its Bristol campus and implemented a freeze on tuition, we agree with the visiting team that “there is little room to grow net student revenue from tuition, fees, room and board.” In addition, we understand that the institution continues to rely on its working line of credit – \$8.5 million in FY2015 – that “needs to be carefully monitored.” We therefore appreciate that the institution has plans to increase tuition 3.9% in FY2018, and that other strategies are being considered to diversify its revenue base such as increased philanthropy, facilities rental, and offering summer programs. The University’s plan to rebuild its contingency fund to \$1.0 million by the end of FY2018, thereafter adding \$500,000 per year until reaching \$3.0 million, is also admirable. We welcome further information, in the Fall 2021 interim report, regarding the institution’s success in further strengthening its financial position, with emphasis on diversifying its revenue and reducing reliance on its line of credit. This request is in keeping with our standard on *Institutional Resources*:

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).

In its self-study, Roger Williams University identified diversity and inclusion on campus as an “area in need of meaningful study.” The importance of accomplishing this objective is in part driven by the 117% increase in applications between 2009 and 2014 from students of diverse ethnic backgrounds. We are therefore pleased to learn that the institution’s Intercultural Center focuses on the “academic and personal growth of traditionally underrepresented students,” and view positively the recent addition of a Chief Diversity Officer who reports directly to the president and is part of the senior cabinet. As informed by our standards on *Students; Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship; and Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure*, we anticipate being apprised, through the Fall 2021 interim report, of the success of these and other initiatives to create a more diverse and inclusive campus:

... [T]he institution addresses its own goals for the achievement of diversity among its students and provides a safe environment that fosters the intellectual and personal development of its students (*Students*, statement of the Standard).

In providing services, in accordance with its mission and purposes, the institution adheres to both the spirit and intent of equal opportunity and its own goals for diversity (5.12).

The institution ... addresses its own goals for the achievement of diversity among its faculty and academic staff. Hiring reflects the effectiveness of this process and results in a variety of academic and professional backgrounds, training, and experience (6.5).

The institution adheres to non-discriminatory policies and practices in recruitment, admissions, employment, evaluation, disciplinary action, and advancement. It fosters an inclusive atmosphere within the institutional community that respects and supports people of diverse characteristics and backgrounds (9.5).

With its Bristol campus at capacity, RWU signed a 12-year lease in 2015 for a “superb” new facility in Providence, Rhode Island that will provide an additional 75,000 square feet of space. As part of the University’s Rogers Revolution plan intended to “spark economic development in

Rhode Island” through collaborative efforts with the state, major businesses, and non-profits in the area, the Providence campus has the potential to facilitate the institution’s goal of having all students engage in an experiential learning experience prior to graduation, and presents an opportunity for future financial growth. Currently the home of RWU’s School of Continuing Education, the Providence campus also houses other programs, to include third-year law students. In the Fall 2021 interim report, we look forward to learning of the continuing development of the University’s Providence campus to further the institution’s mission and objectives. Our standards on *Mission and Purposes* and *Planning and Evaluation* (cited above) are relevant here:

... The institution’s mission provides the basis upon which the institution identifies its priorities, plans its future, and evaluates its endeavors (1.1).

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2026 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 Roger Williams University and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you and Walter Harrison, 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. Richard L. Bready. 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. Richard L. Bready
Visiting Team