



May 14, 2024

Dr. Julie Chen
Chancellor
University of Massachusetts Lowell
One University Avenue
Lowell, MA 01854

Dear Chancellor Chen:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on April 19, 2024, the New England Commission of Higher Education took the following action with respect to University of Massachusetts Lowell:

that University of Massachusetts Lowell be continued in accreditation;

that the institution submit an interim (fifth-year) report by August 15, 2028, for consideration in Fall 2028;

that, in addition to the information included in all interim reports, the institution is asked, in the Fall 2028 report, to give emphasis to its success in:

- 1) continuing to address the following areas identified for attention in the Fall 2023 self-study: (1) developing a comprehensive approach to assessment and using assessment results for improvement; (2) achieving goals for gender diversity with particular emphasis on STEM disciplines; (3) implementing and monitoring the effectiveness of the English Language program for international students; (4) plans for future programming at Harbor Place campus;
- 2) developing and implementing a plan to address its deferred maintenance;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Fall 2033.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its actions.

University of Massachusetts Lowell (UMass Lowell) is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*.

The Commission commends the University of Massachusetts Lowell for its thorough and comprehensive self-study. We note with favor that UMass Lowell's new strategic plan, The 2028 Strategic Plan, was developed with input from students, faculty, staff, alumni, and external community stakeholders and has four interconnected priorities: Enrollment and Student Success; A Diverse, Welcoming and Inclusive Campus; Research Excellence; and Partnering with Our

Community for Mutual Benefit. Although there has been a slight decrease in institutional enrollment of 1.7% in each of the past three years, a 6% increase in enrollment in Fall 2023 far exceeded the University's 2% goal. The institution serves a highly diverse student population and has been recognized as an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving Institution. Over 40% of its graduates are transfer students, and approximately 40% of its students are first generation; we are gratified, therefore, to learn of the "institution's commitment to supporting underrepresented students, promoting inclusivity, and providing equitable educational experiences." We further note with favor that the University "strategically builds partnerships and programs with individual community colleges," and understand that students Middlesex Community College and Northern Essex Community College comprise over half of UMass Lowell's transfer population. The Commission acknowledges the work the University has accomplished to convert a projected \$37 million deficit for FY2024 to a "1% operating margin" by offering a "Voluntary Separation Incentive" which yielded twenty-two retirements and reducing operating budgets by 15% across the board while preserving resources to support strategic priorities. We concur with the team that the University's support for faculty research and grant-writing is consistent with its plan to be recognized as a Carnegie Classification Highest Research Activity (R1) university. The Commission is also pleased to learn of the "the comprehensive way the institution responds to student characteristics and needs" as evidenced by an increase in counseling and mental health services and tutoring support to meet student demands. With its "unified" executive and leadership teams, supportive board, caring and productive faculty and staff, and engaged students, University of Massachusetts Lowell is well positioned to continue to "build on its founding tradition of innovation, entrepreneurship and partnerships with industry and the community to address challenges facing the region and the world" for many years to come.

Commission policy requires an interim (fifth-year) 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 2028, to report on five matters related to our standards on *Educational Effectiveness*, *Students*, *The Academic Program*, *Planning and Evaluation*, and *Institutional Resources*.

The Commission understands that the University is "still building the culture and infrastructure for assessment" of its general education requirements and Essential Learning Outcomes which apply to all undergraduate majors. We are pleased to learn that the offices and staff supporting assessment at UMass Lowell are "highly accessible, enthusiastic, and dedicated" and that they "offer expertise, training, and consultation" to individuals and departments. At the same time, however, we share the concern of the visiting team that "assessment systems and the uses of assessment for improvement are not fully embedded in institutional culture" and understand that the team was "unable to find evidence of clear, specific commitments and detailed expectations from higher levels of academic leadership regarding learning outcomes assessment projects." We therefore note with favor that the provost has recently required that all graduate programs develop or review their programmatic learning outcomes and that there will be clearer "communication from leadership" about the critical importance of assessment and "the need for faculty to engage in valid learning outcomes assessment." The Fall 2028 interim report will afford the institution an opportunity to update the Commission on its continued success in developing a comprehensive approach to assessment and using assessment results for improvement. As specified in 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 institution uses a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods and direct and indirect measures to understand the experiences and learning outcomes of its students, employing external perspectives including, as appropriate, benchmarks and peer comparisons (8.5).

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

The Commission notes with favor the recent increase in the University's student gender diversity, from 34% of students identifying as female in 2015 to 38% in 2022, and we concur with the visiting team's assessment that there are "excellent resources on campus" to support a "broader self-reflection" involving "the gender climate on campus." However, we are concerned that the University has "not succeeded in substantially moving the needle" for the proportion of women in STEM fields. We are therefore gratified to learn that a task force, reporting directly to the vice provost for academic affairs, has been convened to address gender diversity in STEM. As informed by our standard on *Students*, we look forward to learning, through the Fall 2028 interim report, of UMass Lowell's success in achieving its goals for gender diversity particularly in STEM disciplines:

The institution addresses its own goals for the achievement of diversity, equity, and inclusion among its students and provides a safe environment that fosters the intellectual and personal development of its students (*Students*, Statement of the Standard).

The Commission understands that attention to ensuring adequate English language training for international students at University of Massachusetts Lowell is "a significant issue" as the University "has just over 2,000 international students, broadly defined." The Commission appreciates learning that UMass Lowell has ended its contractual relationship with Navitas, due to its "concerns regarding the quality of services provided," and we take favorable note that the institution is now in partnership with IDP Connect for international student recruitment and transition. Additionally, we note with favor that a bridge program is planned with Middlesex Community College and that two new professional tutors have been hired for the Writing Center to support non-native speakers of English. However, the report did not offer details about how the College plans to assess student learning in the language programs. Accordingly, we look forward to receiving evidence, in the Fall 2028 interim report, that the newly adopted English language training for international students is effective in ensuring that "[s]tudents completing an undergraduate or graduate program demonstrate collegiate-level skills in the English language" (4.11).

The Commission understands that since a peak of 163 students in 2018, enrollment at the instructional location in Haverhill, Massachusetts, Harbor Place has fallen precipitously to its current level of five full-time and five part-time students. We are pleased to learn that the executive director for innovation and workforce development now has oversight for this academic center and that plans are being developed to use the facility for training corporate partners, workforce training, as well as credit-based certificate programs. We further understand that, based on the success of planning for the site, the University "will need to consider whether it is in the institution's best interest to retain the Harbor Place campus." We ask that the Fall 2028 interim report provide an update on the Harbor Place location as evidence that the "institution has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning" (2.5).

Finally, the Commission understands that University of Massachusetts Lowell has "nearly \$1 billion in deferred maintenance to campus buildings and grounds." Four buildings: Olsen Hall, Olney Science Center, Ball Hall, and Weed Hall, have been prioritized for improvements since they comprise the primary laboratory buildings that support the University's "increasingly sophisticated research program." We ask that the Fall 2028 interim report give emphasis to the institution's success in developing and implementing a plan to address its deferred maintenance.

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Our standards on *Planning and Evaluation* (cited above) and *Institutional Resources* provide guidance here:

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).

Facilities are constructed and maintained in accordance with legal requirements to ensure access, safety, security, and a healthy environment with consideration for environmental and ecological concerns (7.23).

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2033 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 University of Massachusetts Lowell and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you, Julie Nash, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, and Joseph Hartman, Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs, 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 and the head of the system of action on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Steven Karem and Martin Meehan. 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.

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

Sincerely,



Russell Carey

RC/sjp

cc: Steven Karem
Martin Meehan
Visiting team

Enclosure: Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions