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COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

November 17, 2008

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Dr. Sara Jayne Steen
President
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Dear President Steen:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on September 18, 2008, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education considered the fifth-year interim report submitted by Plymouth State University and voted to take the following action:

that the fifth-year interim report submitted by Plymouth State University be accepted;

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Fall 2013 be confirmed;

that, in addition to the information included in all self-studies, the self-study prepared in advance of the Fall 2013 evaluation give emphasis to the institution's success in:

1. assessing the effectiveness of recently implemented changes to campus governance and the general education program;
2. assuring sufficient numbers of FTE faculty to support the growth of graduate program offerings;
3. implementing plans to strengthen the fiscal resources of the institution;
4. responding to increasing demands for library and information resources;
5. improving advising effectiveness through faculty training and the exploration of new advising initiatives;
6. implementing measures of student success.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The Commission commends Plymouth State University for a thorough and well-written report that addresses all the issues raised in our letter of March 18, 2004. We are pleased to note that the institution has made considerable progress in becoming a comprehensive regional university. The University has experienced success in expanding its graduate program offerings, has doubled grant income for research and program development from \$1.5 million in 2005 to \$3 million in 2007, and has increased its endowment over the past few years to more than \$6 million dollars. Furthermore, the institution has experienced some success with distance education, as well as with assessment efforts in the area of student services.

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2013 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 *Organization and Governance*, *The Academic Program*, *Faculty*, *Students*, *Library and Other Information Resources*, *Financial Resources* and *Public Disclosure*.

The Commission takes favorable note of steps taken by Plymouth State University to strengthen faculty governance processes by creating more efficient committee structures. In addition, we are pleased to learn that the University has implemented a new general education program incorporating ongoing assessment of student learning. We look forward to learning, in Fall 2013, of the success of these efforts as the University implements its planned evaluation of these changes. We remind you of our standards on *Organization and Governance* and *The Academic Program*:

The authority, responsibilities, and relationships among the governing board, administration, faculty, and staff are clearly described in the institution's by-laws, or an equivalent document, and in a table of organization that displays the working order of the institution. The board, administration, staff, and faculty understand and fulfill their respective roles as set forth in the institution's official documents and are provided with the appropriate information to undertake their respective roles. The institution's organizational structure, decision-making processes, and policies are clear and consistent with its mission and support institutional effectiveness. The institution's system of governance involves the participation of all appropriate constituencies and includes regular communication among them (3.1).

The general education requirement is coherent and substantive. It embodies the institution's definition of an educated person and prepares students for the world in which they will live. The requirement informs the design of all general education courses, and provides criteria for its evaluation, including the assessment of what students learn (4.15).

Plymouth State has expanded its graduate program offerings to align with an evolution of its mission to support regional needs for graduate education. We note, however, that the institution continues to address challenges of ensuring sufficient capacity. The University has realized a 125% increase in FTE graduate enrollment from 394 in FY2004 to 909 in FY2008; however full-time faculty has increased at a much slower pace of 15% from 158 in FY2004 to 181 in FY2008. As part of the self-study prepared for the Fall 2013 comprehensive evaluation, we look forward to an update regarding the institution's success in assuring sufficient numbers of FTE faculty to support the growth of its College of Graduate Studies. Our standards on *The Academic Program* and *Faculty* should inform this discussion:

Institutions offering graduate degrees have an adequate staff of full-time faculty in areas appropriate to the degree offered. Faculty responsible for graduate programs are sufficient by credentials, experience, number, and time commitment for the successful accomplishment of program objectives and program improvement. The scholarly expectations of faculty exceed those expected for faculty working at the undergraduate level. Research-oriented graduate programs have a preponderance of active research scholars on their faculties. Professionally-

oriented programs include faculty who are experienced professionals making scholarly contributions to the development of the field (4.22).

There are an adequate number of faculty whose time commitment to the institution is sufficient to assure the accomplishment of class and out-of-class responsibilities essential for the fulfillment of institutional mission and purposes. Responsibilities of teaching faculty include instruction and the systematic understanding of effective teaching/learning processes and outcomes in courses and programs for which they share responsibility; additional duties may include such functions as student advisement, academic planning, and participation in policy-making, course and curricular development, research, and institutional governance (5.3).

We note the progress made in strengthening the institution's fiscal health. However, overall financial health remains fragile, and the plans provided in this report articulate the additional progress the institution hopes to achieve over the next three to five years. We look forward to learning of Plymouth State University's success as part of the next self-study, with particular attention given to the efforts to minimize increasing utility costs, address deferred maintenance, and increase resources through the upcoming capital campaign. Our standard on *Financial Resources* provides useful guidance here:

The institution preserves and enhances available financial resources sufficient to support its academic and other activities. 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 (9.1).

Opportunities identified for new sources of revenue are reviewed by the administration and board to ensure the integrity of the institution and the quality of the academic program are maintained and enhanced. The institution planning a substantive change demonstrates the financial capacity to ensure that the new initiative meets the standards of quality of the institution and the Commission's Standards (9.9).

We note that the University has experienced a 46% increase in visitors to the library in the past two years, which exemplifies the growing service demands for library resources. However, the number of staff has declined, with five part-time positions eliminated in the past four years. We look forward to learning, as part of the next comprehensive evaluation, of steps taken by the institution to assure appropriate staffing for its library, including an analysis of the effect of a reported increased reliance on electronic resources on the need for library staff. Our standard on *Library and Other Information Resources* should inform this part of the report:

Professionally qualified and numerically adequate staff administer the institution's library, information resources and services, and instructional and information technology support functions (7.4).

The report submitted by Plymouth State University notes that recent surveys of student satisfaction with academic advising revealed satisfaction with advising and overwhelming satisfaction with the Undergraduate Advising Center, while also indicating dissatisfaction with some faculty advisors. The report indicated the need to improve advising effectiveness through faculty training and the exploration of new advising initiatives. We look forward to learning from the next self-study how faculty engage in assessment of advising in ways that enable the adjustments suggested in the report, as supported by our standard on *Faculty*:

... Responsibilities of teaching faculty include instruction and the systematic understanding of effective teaching/learning processes and outcomes in courses and programs for which they share responsibility; additional duties may include such functions as student advisement,

academic planning, and participation in policy-making, course and curricular development, research, and institutional governance (5.3).

The Commission appreciates the care with which Plymouth State University addressed student success through the new forms provided. The E-Series forms addressing assessment of student success for each program were well done. However, the institution provides no information for licensure passage rates and job placement rates as part of the S-Series forms. Since the institution educates many students in health sciences and education, we will anticipate this type of information as part of the self-study for the comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2013. This should be informed by our standards on *The Academic Program, Students, and Public Disclosure*:

The institution's approach to understanding student learning focuses on the course, program, and institutional level. Data and other evidence generated through this approach are considered at the appropriate level of focus, with the results being a demonstrable factor in improving the learning opportunities and results for students (4.45).

The institution measures student success, including rates of retention and graduation and other measures of success appropriate to institutional mission. The institution's goals for retention and graduation reflect institutional purposes, and the results are used to inform recruitment and the review of programs and services. Rates of retention and graduation are separately determined for any group that the institution specifically recruits, and those rates are used in evaluating the success of specialized recruitment and the services and opportunities provided for the recruited students (6.6).

The institution publishes statements of its goals for students' education and the success of students in achieving those goals. Information on student success includes rates of retention and graduation and other measures of student success appropriate to institutional mission. As appropriate, recent information on passage rates for licensure examinations is also published (10.10).

The institution has readily available valid documentation for any statements and promises regarding such matters as program excellence, learning outcomes, success in placement, and achievements of graduates or faculty (10.12).

The Commission expressed appreciation for the report submitted by Plymouth State University and hopes that its preparation has contributed to institutional improvement. It appreciates your cooperation in the effort to provide public assurance of the quality of higher education in New England.

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. Edward Dupont. The institution is free to release information about the report and the Commission's action to others, in accordance with Commission policy.

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. Edward Dupont