



March 15, 2024

Dr. Manohar Singh
Interim President
Western Connecticut State University
181 White Street
Danbury, CT 06810-6860

Dear President Singh:

I write to inform you that at its meeting on March 1, 2024, the New England Commission of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Western Connecticut State University:

that Western Connecticut State University be continued in accreditation;

that the Commission issue a formal Notice of Concern to Western Connecticut State University that it is in danger of not meeting the Commission's standards on *Organization and Governance*, *Institutional Resources*, and *Educational Effectiveness*;

that the University undergo a focused evaluation in Fall 2025;

that the report prepared in advance of the Fall 2025 evaluation address the matters that led to the issuing of the Notice of Concern with emphasis on the institution's success in:

- 1) developing an effective system of shared governance that supports communication, transparency, and accountability at all levels;
- 2) ensuring the stability of its senior leadership, including the hiring of and transition to a permanent president;
- 3) developing a multi-year financial plan that will lead to financial stability and ensure sufficient financial resources to carry out its mission, and developing financial processes that include ongoing enterprise risk management;
- 4) achieving its enrollment and retention goals;
- 5) ensuring sufficient levels of staffing across the University, particularly in student support services and facilities;
- 6) developing and implementing systematic assessment processes, including the development of learning outcomes for all programs, the availability and use of student success data and student survey data, and the regular assessment of the University's general education program and University learning outcomes;

- 7) achieving its goals for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), including the development of a shared understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion and implementation of policies and procedures that support DEI at the institution;

that the institution submit an interim (fifth-year) report for consideration in Fall 2028 and that submission of the report be followed by a visit to validate its content;

that, in addition to the information included in all interim reports, the institution give emphasis to its continued success in addressing the matters specified for attention in the report prepared in advance of the Fall 2025 focused evaluation;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Fall 2033.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its actions.

Western Connecticut State University is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*.

The Commission appreciates the thoughtful, candid self-study that was developed by the Western Connecticut State University (Western or WCSU) community. We agree with the visiting team that, overall, the University is achieving its mission and offering academic programs and services consistent with its stated purpose. The Commission is gratified to learn that Western's current strategic plan was developed through an "inclusive, collegial" process and that development of the next strategic plan is underway. We appreciate that the faculty are "fully engaged" and "well-qualified" and that there is an institutional commitment to professional development. The University's leadership possesses a "strong and shared sense of purpose and mission." Lastly, we acknowledge WCSU's "resiliency and [] capacity to adjust" as it aims to address its challenges.

At the same time, we are concerned to learn from the report of the visiting team of the "heightened level of uncertainty, confusion, and distrust" across the organization and the "need for increased transparency and communication from administration to the campus." Multiple presidential leadership transitions have resulted in changes to internal governance structures, and campus community members express concerns regarding how and when information is shared. While we acknowledge the public meetings that have been held and the task forces that have been formed to advise the president, the Commission concurs with the report of the visiting team that WCSU's future success requires a "shared commitment to transparency, frequent communication, and shared governance at all levels."

The Commission further notes Western's candid assessment that it is "facing devastating financial challenges" and concurs that its "financial future is still of great concern." Despite System Office support of \$17 million in FY2024 and \$6 million in FY2025, the University is projecting deficits of approximately \$4.7 million in FY2024, \$11 million in FY2025, and \$15 million in FY2026. We also understand that staffing has been reduced "through attrition and hiring freezes" and that a retirement incentive has been announced; however, at the same time we share the visiting team's concern regarding the "sufficiency of human resources" to carry out the University's mission.

Additionally, the Commission is concerned with Western's limited efforts to implement systematic assessment processes that improve the student experience. We note from the report of the visiting team that some programs "do not have learning outcomes and do not participate in assessment" and that student success data is not readily available to the campus community.

The formal Notice of Concern is issued by the Commission to convey to Western Connecticut State University that it is in danger of being found not to meet the Commission's standards on *Organization and Governance, Institutional Resources, and Educational Effectiveness*:

The institution has a system of governance that facilitates the accomplishment of its mission and purposes and supports institutional effectiveness and integrity. Through its organizational design and governance structure, the institution creates and sustains an environment that encourages teaching, learning, service, scholarship, and where appropriate, research and creative activity. It demonstrates administrative capacity by assuring provision of support adequate for the appropriate functioning of each organizational component. The institution has sufficient autonomy and control of its programs and operations consistent with its mission to be held directly accountable for meeting the Commission's Standards for Accreditation (*Organization and Governance, statement of the standard*).

The institution has sufficient human, financial, information, physical, and technological resources and capacity to support its mission. Through periodic evaluation, the institution demonstrates that its resources are sufficient to sustain the quality of its educational program and to support institutional improvement now and in the foreseeable future. The institution demonstrates, through verifiable internal and external evidence, its financial capacity to graduate its entering class. The institution administers its resources in an ethical manner and assures effective systems of enterprise risk management, regulatory compliance, internal controls, and contingency management (*Institutional Resources, statement of the standard*).

The institution demonstrates its effectiveness by ensuring satisfactory levels of student achievement on mission-appropriate student outcomes. Based on verifiable information, the institution understands what its students have gained as a result of their education and has useful evidence about the success of its recent graduates. This information is used for planning and improvement, resource allocation, and to inform the public about the institution. Student achievement is at a level appropriate for the degree awarded (*Educational Effectiveness, statement of the standard*).

Commission policy (enclosed) defines a formal Notice of Concern as follows:

When the Commission determines that an institution is in danger of being found not to meet one or more Standards if current circumstances or trends continue, it will take an action continuing the institution in accreditation, with a formal Notice of Concern.

An institution issued a formal Notice of Concern will undergo an evaluation within two years to assess the institution's success in addressing the identified concerns. If the Notice is for *Institutional Resources*, the visit will include a review of the institution's academic records for students and alumni/ae to assess the policies and procedures in place with respect to the retention, safety and security, and disposal of those records.

If the Commission finds the institution has successfully addressed the concerns, it will remove the Notice of Concern and specify further monitoring. If the Commission has reason to believe that the institution may or may not meet one or more *Standards for Accreditation*, the Commission will ask the institution to show cause why it should not be on probation or why its accreditation should not be withdrawn. If the Commission finds that the concerns have not been sufficiently addressed, the Commission may issue a continued formal Notice of Concern. An institution issued a continued formal Notice of Concern is subject to further monitoring which may include a progress report, Annual

Report on Finance and Enrollment (ARFE), or focused evaluation. The Commission will assess the results of that monitoring no later than two years after the continued formal Notice of Concern was issued.

A formal Notice of Concern is not made public by the Commission.

Consistent with this policy, the Commission will monitor the institution's progress in addressing the issues that led to the formal Notice of Concern through the focused evaluation scheduled for Fall 2025 and the interim report with focused evaluation scheduled for Fall 2028.

The focused evaluation visit scheduled for Fall 2025 will afford Western Connecticut State University an opportunity to present evidence of its ongoing progress in addressing the issues that led to the Notices of Concern. The University is also asked, in the report prepared in advance of the focused evaluation, to give emphasis to seven matters related to our standards on *Organization and Governance*; *Institutional Resources*; *Students*; *Planning and Evaluation*; *The Academic Program*; *Educational Effectiveness*; and *Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure*.

We acknowledge, as noted above, the steps Western Connecticut State University is taking to improve communication among its stakeholder groups. In addition, the Commission appreciates that the Board of Regents (BOR) and Chancellor recognize that "there is a need for increased engagement with the state universities moving forward." And, while we are aware that the University Senate is the primary shared governance mechanism at WCSU, we note there are over twenty standing committees of the Senate, resulting in a "multi-layered" governance system that may be impeding timely decision making and communication. In keeping with our standard on *Organization and Governance*, we look forward to learning, through the report prepared in advance of the Fall 2025 focused evaluation, of WCSU's success in developing an effective system of shared governance that supports communication, transparency, and accountability at all levels:

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 (3.2).

The board has a clear understanding of the institution's distinctive mission and exercises the authority to ensure the realization of institutional mission and purposes. The board approves and reviews institutional policies; monitors the institution's fiscal condition; and approves major new initiatives, assuring that they are compatible with institutional mission and capacity. These policies are developed in consultation with appropriate constituencies. The board assures that the institution periodically reviews its success in fulfilling its mission and serving its students. The Board is effective in helping the institution make strategic decisions and confront unforeseen circumstances. It regularly reviews the institution's systems of enterprise risk management, external audits, regulatory compliance, internal controls, and contingency management. The board assures appropriate attention is given to succession planning for institutional leadership and, where applicable, the composition of the board itself (3.7).

Through its system of board and internal governance, the institution ensures the appropriate consideration of relevant perspectives; decision-making aligned with expertise and responsibility; and timely action on institutional plans, policies, curricular change, and other key consideration (3.17).

The effectiveness of the institution's organizational structure and system of governance is improved through regular and systematic review (3.19).

The Commission understands that there has been instability in the senior leadership of Western Connecticut State University. The current president, provost and vice president for academic affairs, and vice president for institutional advancement are all in interim roles. We ask that the Fall 2025 focused evaluation report give emphasis to the University's progress in ensuring the stability of its senior leadership and the hiring of and transition to a permanent president. This section of the report will be informed by our standard on *Organization and Governance* (cited above and below):

The board appoints and periodically reviews the performance of the chief executive officer whose full-time or major responsibility is to the institution (3.10).

The chief executive officer, through an appropriate administrative structure, effectively manages the institution so as to fulfill its purposes and objectives and establishes the means to assess the effectiveness of the institution. The chief executive officer manages and allocates resources in keeping with institutional purposes and objectives and assesses the effectiveness of the institution. The chief executive officer assures that the institution employs faculty and staff sufficient in role, number, and qualifications appropriate to the institution's mission, size, and scope (3.12).

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).

As noted above, Western's financial stability is of concern to the Commission with the University's multi-year financial plans projecting deficits through FY2025. While the visiting team reported that WCSU has been "working hard on many strategies to close the budget gap and begin to restore operating reserves," they also found the strategies "have not yet yielded the results needed to balance the budget." Given that the institution's financial resources are "vulnerable," we concur with the team that Western will benefit from developing systems to identify, assess, and manage risk. As specified in our standards on *Organization and Governance* (cited above) and *Institutional Resources*, we welcome evidence of Western Connecticut State University's success in achieving financial stability:

The board delegates to the chief executive officer and, as appropriate, to others the requisite authority and autonomy to manage the institution compatible with the board's intentions and the institution's mission. In exercising its fiduciary responsibility, the governing board assures that senior officers identify, assess, and manage risks and ensure regulatory compliance (3.11).

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 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 governing board understands, reviews, and approves the institution's financial plans based on multi-year analysis and financial forecasting (7.7).

The institution ensures the integrity of its finances through prudent financial management and organization, a well-organized budget process, appropriate internal control mechanisms, risk assessment, and timely financial reporting to internal and external constituency groups, providing a basis for sound financial decision-making (7.12).

The institution's financial planning, including contingency planning, is integrated with overall planning and evaluation processes. The institution demonstrates its ability to analyze its financial condition and understand the opportunities and constraints that will influence its financial condition and acts accordingly. It reallocates resources as necessary to achieve its purposes and objectives. The institution implements a realistic plan for addressing issues raised by the existence of any operating deficit (7.14).

All fiscal policies, including those related to budgeting, investments, insurance, risk management, contracts and grants, internal transfers and borrowing, fundraising, and other institutional advancement and development activities, are clearly stated in writing and consistently implemented in compliance with ethical and sound financial practices (7.19).

Total FTE enrollment at Western Connecticut State University has declined 8.6% over the past three years, from 4,717 in Fall 2019 to 3,670 in Fall 2022, and retention rates have ranged between 69.9% and 74.5% over this same period. The Commission is gratified to learn, from the report of the visiting team, of WCSU's "strong and innovative programming" designed to improve retention and enhance student success. We also note positively that the institution's "marketing, rebranding, re-organization and retention efforts" are showing early signs of success, including a 10% growth in first-time, full-time enrollment in Fall 2023. The Commission welcomes further information regarding Western's success in achieving its enrollment and retention goals through the report prepared in advance of the Fall 2025 focused evaluation. We are guided here by our standards on *Students* and *Institutional Resources*:

Consistent with its mission, the institution sets and achieves realistic goals to enroll students who are broadly representative of the population the institution wishes to serve (*Students*, statement of the standard).

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 (5.6).

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).

The Commission understands, as noted above, that WCSU has reduced its staffing through retirements and attrition from 429 (total employees excluding faculty and students) in AY2019 to 353 in AY2023. We therefore share the concern of the visiting team that the University will need to ensure it has sufficient staff to support students and maintain facilities moving forward. As expressed in our standards on *Organization and Governance* (cited above) and *Institutional Resources* (cited above and below), the Fall 2025 focused evaluation report will enable the institution to provide evidence of its success in this matter:

The institution employs sufficient and qualified personnel to fulfill its mission. It addresses its own goals for the achievement of diversity, equity, and inclusion among its personnel and assesses the effectiveness of its efforts to achieve those goals (7.1).

We share the concerns of the visiting team regarding Western Connecticut State University's limited assessment efforts, as noted above, and concur that the University will benefit from developing an assessment plan for its general education program and University learning outcomes. We are pleased that WCSU sees this as a "top priority" and has added an Associate Vice President for Institutional Planning and Effectiveness to the provost's office who will "draft an assessment framework for consideration and adoption." Additionally, Institutional Research will "distribute data to departments for their review and action." The report prepared in advance of the Fall 2025 focused evaluation will afford the institution an opportunity to update the Commission on its success in developing and implementing systematic assessment processes. This section of the report will be guided by our standards on *Planning and Evaluation, The Academic Program, and Educational Effectiveness*:

The institution regularly and systematically evaluates the achievement of its mission and purposes, the quality of its academic programs, and the effectiveness of its operational and administrative activities, giving primary focus to the realization of its educational objectives. Its system of evaluation is designed to provide valid information to support institutional improvement. The institution's evaluation efforts are effective for addressing its unique circumstances. These efforts use both quantitative and qualitative methods (2.6).

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 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).

The institution undertakes academic planning and evaluation as part of its overall planning and evaluation to enhance the achievement of institutional mission and program objectives. These activities are realistic and take into account stated goals and available resources. Additions and deletions of programs are consistent with institutional mission and capacity, faculty expertise, student needs, and the availability of sufficient resources required for the development and improvement of academic programs. The institution allocates resources on the basis of its academic planning, needs, and objectives (4.7).

The institution provides clear public statements about what students are expected to gain from their education, academically and, as appropriate to the institution's mission, along other dimensions (e.g., civic engagement, religious formation, global awareness). Goals for students' education reflect the institution's mission, the level and range of degrees and certificates offered, and the general expectations of the larger academic community (8.2).

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

The institution defines measures of student success and levels of achievement appropriate to its mission, modalities and locations of instruction, and student body, including any specifically recruited populations. These measures include rates of progression, retention, transfer, and graduation; default and loan repayment rates; licensure passage rates; and employment. The institution ensures that information about student success is easily accessible on its website (8.6).

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).

Finally, the Commission notes positively the University's efforts to "meet the needs of a diverse campus community," and we acknowledge the creation of the Racial Justice Coalition, Price Center, and the Diversity Council. We appreciate Western Connecticut State University's candor that there is a "need for a more comprehensive strategy" to address diversity, equity, and inclusion at the institution and share the institution's observation that "an explicit, shared understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion" in its written policies and procedures does not exist. The Commission further agrees that the lack of a DEI plan "may be hindering stronger progress" towards achievement of the University's diversity goals. We therefore seek assurance, through the Fall 2025 focused evaluation, of Western Connecticut State University's progress in achieving its goals for diversity, equity, and inclusion. This request is in keeping with our standards on *Students* (cited above and below); *Institutional Resources* (cited above); and *Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure*:

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, equity, and inclusion (5.12).

The institution...fosters an inclusive atmosphere within the institutional community that respects and supports people of diverse characteristics and backgrounds (9.5).

Please upload the requested report by August 15, 2025, using the F2025 Focused Evaluation Report review.

A copy of the procedures for the Fall 2025 focused evaluation is enclosed for your information and use.

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. The University is asked, in the Fall 2028 interim report, to give emphasis to its continued success in addressing the areas specified above for attention in the report prepared in advance of the Fall 2025 focused evaluation. The Commission recognizes that these matters do not lend themselves to rapid resolution and will require the University's sustained attention over time; hence, we ask that further information be provided in the interim report.

The submission of the report in Fall 2028 will be followed by an evaluation visit by Commission representatives to validate its contents. The enclosed Procedures for the Focused Evaluation provide guidance for this review.

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 Western Connecticut State University and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you during its deliberations.

It is Commission policy to arrange a meeting with staff within 90 days of the issuing of a formal Notice of Concern. A member of the Commission staff will call to arrange a meeting with you and members of your governing board.

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 JoAnn Ryan and Terrence Chang. 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: JoAnn Ryan
Terrence Chang
Visiting team

Enclosures:

Policy on Notice of Concern
Procedures for the Focused Evaluation
Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions