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NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS & COLLEGES, INC.
COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

- DAVID P. ANGEL, Chair (2018)
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- DAVID QUIGLEY, Vice Chair (2018)
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- STEPHEN JOHN HODGES (2019)
Hult International Business School
- COLEEN C. PANTALONE (2019)
Northeastern University
- MARIKO SILVER (2019)
Bennington College
- GEORGE W. TETLER (2019)
Worcester, MA

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October 18, 2016

Mr. William Foulkes
Chair, Council on Postsecondary Education
Rhode Island Board of Education
Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner
560 Jefferson Boulevard
Warwick, RI 02886

Dear Mr. Foulkes:

Enclosed for you is a copy of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education's letter of October 11, 2016 to President Frank Sánchez notifying him of the action taken by the Commission at its September 2016 meeting. It is being sent to you in keeping with the Commission's policy to routinely inform board chairs of such actions.

Sincerely,

Barbara Brittingham
Barbara E. Brittingham

BEB/jm

Enclosure





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Dr. Frank Sánchez
President
Rhode Island College
600 Mount Pleasant Avenue
Providence, RI 02908-1991

Dear President Sánchez:

I write to inform you that at its meeting on September 22, 2016, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education considered the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Rhode Island College and voted to take the following action:

that the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Rhode Island College be accepted;

that the College submit a report for consideration in Spring 2017 that gives emphasis to the institution's success in evaluating the effectiveness of its governance structures with attention to assessing the impact of the new Rhode Island Board of Education on the College;

that the College submit a report for consideration in Fall 2017 that gives emphasis to the institution's progress in implementing the recommendations outlined in the audit report of the Council on Postsecondary Education;

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Fall 2020 be confirmed;

that, in addition to the information included in all self-studies, the self-study prepared in advance of the Fall 2020 evaluation give emphasis to the institution's success in:

1. continuing its efforts to address faculty salary and workload issues and to assess the effectiveness of faculty advising;
2. increasing transparency in the budget process, linking budget allocations to priorities identified in the strategic plan, and aligning central and unit budget reporting with emphasis on information technology infrastructure and services;

3. achieving enrollment goals and measures of student success with emphasis on assessing the effectiveness of initiatives to improve retention.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Rhode Island College was accepted because it responded to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letter of March 28, 2012, addressed each of the nine standards, and included a reflective essay on student learning and success.

The Commission thanks Rhode Island College (RIC) for submitting an interim report that documents the institution's accomplishments over the last five years. The College's strategic plan, approved by the Board in 2014 along with the revised mission statement, supports the institution's mission to focus on student success, student engagement with faculty on research, and career attainment. To address changes in the College's student population, RIC has implemented initiatives to meet the needs of incoming students, notable among which are faculty development initiatives related to the Universal Design for Learning, teaching methodologies in face-to-face and online delivery formats, and new faculty orientation programs. The report includes evidence that, as planned, RIC has expanded the governance and oversight structure of its joint Ph.D. program with the University of Rhode Island. An Administrative Committee and a Program Committee consisting of co-directors and faculty members from each of the campuses are in place to set program policies and procedures and to address matters related to the curriculum and students. We further appreciate the progress RIC has made in diversifying revenues, noting favorably that student financial aid has increased by 18.5%, and \$1.7 million in unrestricted donations to endowment has been raised. In addition, new facility construction and building renovation on campus as well as the institution's commitment to maintenance planning is commendable. The \$50 million renovation of classroom buildings and the \$60 million nursing building that will be shared with the University of Rhode Island when it opens in Spring 2017 are especially notable. Further, in response to a 6% drop in enrollment, the College implemented strategies to reorganize the admissions office, streamline the admissions process, and improve transfer student recruitment. In Fall 2015 undergraduate enrollment was the highest since 2011, and Fall 2016 freshman deposits were the highest in five years, demonstrating the effectiveness of these initiatives.

The Commission further commends Rhode Island College for the progress it is making in continuing to develop and implement its assessment plans as evidenced in the reflective essay. We are especially gratified to learn of the improvements in the assessment of educational effectiveness in the general education program, the majors, and the co-curriculum. For example, RIC used AAC&U guidelines to build assessments into its new general education program (implemented in AY2012) and, by AY2015, the College had completed the assessment of three general education learning outcomes. Further, through its semi-annual conference and feedback on department assessment practices, the Committee on Assessment and Student Outcomes (CASO) has made notable progress in involving faculty in student outcomes assessment as evidenced by the wide range of department activities documented in the report.

The item the institution is asked to report on in Spring 2017 is related to our standard on *Organization and Governance*.

According to the report, in 2014 the Rhode Island Assembly consolidated the governance of all public education in Rhode Island into a 17-member Rhode Island Board of Education that is charged with integrating "policymaking and planning across all levels of education in the state." The report, however, does not specify how RIC is evaluating the impact of this change on the institution. We look forward, in the report submitted for consideration in Spring 2017, to learning about the mechanisms in place at RIC to evaluate the effectiveness of its governance structures, as evidence that RIC's "organizational structure, decision-making processes, and

policies are clear and consistent with its mission and support institutional effectiveness” (3.2). We are further informed by our standard on *Organization and Governance*:

In multi-campus systems organized under a single governing board, the division of responsibility and authority between the system office and the institution is clear. Where system and campus boards share governance responsibilities or dimensions of authority, system policies and procedures are clearly defined and equitably administered (3.6).

In addition, the institution is asked, in Fall 2017, to report on one matter related to our standard on *Institutional Resources*.

Rhode Island College candidly acknowledges in its report the ongoing challenges the institution faces related to issues identified in an independent financial audit conducted by the Council on Postsecondary Education; namely: human resource policies and procedures; budget planning; interim appointments; grants management; purchasing controls; and fiscal management of the auxiliaries. We are therefore gratified to learn that RIC is “building capacity” in each of these areas, and we note with approval that the College has hired several new positions, including a Budget Director, a Director of Grant Accounting, a new Vice President for Administration and Finance, a new facilities manager, and a controller. We are also pleased to note that RIC will “implement the auditors’ recommendations by the end of fiscal year 2017.” We ask that the report submitted for consideration in Fall 2017 include evidence of the institution’s progress in implementing the recommendations outlined in the audit report of the Council on Postsecondary Education as evidence that RIC “manages its financial resources and allocates them in a way that reflects its mission and purposes” (7.4). Our standard on *Institutional Resources* provides this additional guidance:

Human resources policies are readily available, consistently applied, and periodically reviewed (7.2).

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).

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2020 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 *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship, Institutional Resources, Students, and Educational Effectiveness*.

As Rhode Island College candidly recognizes in its report, the institution is grappling with issues related to “extremely modest salaries for most faculty” and an increase in the faculty workload due, in part, to an “unsustainably high” advising load for faculty in some departments. We note with favor that the College has implemented strategies to begin to address these issues, including “re-establishing” the Committee on Academic Advising and appointing a full-time faculty member to the position of Director of Faculty Advising. In addition, the College has engaged a consultant to review and help plan for a change in budgeting procedures to “permit” more appropriate faculty salaries. The self-study submitted prior to the Fall 2020 comprehensive

evaluation will provide an opportunity for RIC to update the Commission on its continued efforts in addressing faculty-related issues with attention to concerns about salaries, workload, and the effectiveness of faculty advising. We are informed here by our standard on *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*:

Salaries and benefits are set at levels that ensure the institution's continued ability to attract and retain appropriately qualified faculty and academic staff whose profiles are consistent with the institution's mission and purposes. Faculty and academic staff are provided with substantial opportunities for continued professional development throughout their careers (6.6).

Faculty assignments are consistent with the institution's mission and purposes. They are equitably determined to allow faculty adequate time to provide effective instruction, advise and evaluate students, contribute to program and institutional assessment and improvement, continue professional growth, and participate in scholarship, research, creative activities, and service compatible with the mission and purposes of the institution. Faculty assignments and workloads are reappraised periodically and adjusted as institutional conditions change (6.7).

The institution's system of academic advising meets student needs for information and advice compatible with its educational objectives. The quality of advising is assured regardless of the location of instruction or the mode of delivery (6.19).

We understand that, in the past, RIC's budget development process "has not been well defined, organized, or transparent." For example, the College has experienced "growth and improvement in instructional technology and physical resources across the campus and in every classroom," however "[t]echnology upgrades were not previously identified, prioritized, and included as part of the institution's budget development process and budgeting a plan to fund infrastructure issues fell behind." We therefore note with approval that RIC is taking steps to make improvements in this area, including: implementation of a new budget process and related procedures to ensure that high priority matters are linked to budget allocations and that "every department understands the new process;" development of a new process for requesting, reviewing, and approving capital projects and general maintenance projects; and development of a "systematic" approach to address challenges related to the collection of budget reports and other financial data. We look forward, in the Fall 2020 self-study, to learning of the institution's continued success in increasing transparency in the budget process, linking budget allocations to priorities identified in the strategic plan, and aligning central and unit budget reporting with emphasis on information technology infrastructure and services. Our standard on *Institutional Resources* (noted above and below) will guide this section of the self-study:

The institution establishes and implements its budget after appropriate consultation with relevant constituencies in accord with realistic overall planning that provides for the appropriate integration of academic, student service, fiscal, development, information, technology, and physical resource priorities to advance its educational objectives (7.13).

The institution demonstrates the effectiveness of its policies and procedures in ensuring the reliability of its technology systems, the integrity and security of data, and the privacy of individuals. The institution establishes and applies clear policies and procedures and monitors and responds to illegal or inappropriate uses of its technology systems and resources. It has regularly updated disaster planning and recovery policies and procedures (7.25).

We recognize that the College has experienced a downward trend in enrollment in recent years. We also note that, while the institution has implemented various strategies to improve retention and graduation rates during this time period, retention rates (averaging 76%) and graduation rates

(averaging 44%) have remained mostly constant. We acknowledge that RIC's student population comprises a large number of first-generation students and working adults who may not take advantage of opportunities to interact with faculty or engage in non-classroom learning activities. It is therefore encouraging to learn that recently collected NSSE assessment data provides preliminary evidence that students feel more connected to their program and to the College, presumably as a result of RIC's improved approach to student advising mentioned above. However, the report does not specify RIC's plans to evaluate the effectiveness of its advising program and other retention efforts to determine the extent to which these strategies are improving retention and graduation rates. It is also not clear to the Commission how RIC uses assessment results to inform decision-making related to planning and the allocation of institutional resources to retention initiatives. The self-study submitted in Fall 2017 will afford RIC an opportunity to update the Commission on this matter as evidence that "[t]he 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). Our standard on *Educational Effectiveness* is also relevant here:

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 (8.6).

The institution uses additional quantitative measures of success, such as further education, civic participation, religious formation, and others, as appropriate to its mission, to understand the success of its recent graduates. Information from students and former students is regularly considered (8.7).

The Commission expressed appreciation for the report submitted by Rhode Island College 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. William Foulkes. The institution is free to release information about the report and the Commission's action to others, in accordance with the enclosed policy on Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions.

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. William Foulkes