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April 17, 2012

Dr. Christopher E. Hopey
President
Merrimack College
315 Turnpike Street A21
North Andover, MA 01845

Dear President Hopey:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on March 2, 2012, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Merrimack College:

that Merrimack College be continued in accreditation;

that the College submit a report for consideration in Spring 2013 that gives emphasis to the institution's progress developing a unified long-range operational plan linked to a long-term financial plan based on the institution's strategic plan;

that the proposals to offer the Master of Science in Engineering and Master of Science in Management programs be approved, and the programs encompassed within the institution's accreditation, with an effective date of March 2, 2012;

that the institution's accreditation at the master's level be limited to the Master of Education, Master of Science in Engineering, and Master of Science in Management and the College be reminded that should it plan to offer additional programs at the master's level, it needs to submit a report to the Commission, in keeping with the Policy on Substantive Change;

that an on-site evaluation of the Master of Science in Engineering and Master of Science in Management programs be scheduled for Fall 2013;

that the report prepared in advance of the Fall 2013 evaluation give emphasis to the institution's success in implementing the two new degree programs, with particular attention to:

1. achieving enrollment goals for the programs;

2. assuring provision of appropriate student services for graduate students, including opportunities for international students to enhance their English-language skills;
3. assuring that faculty who teach in the College's graduate programs fulfill the institution's expectations for scholarship;
4. implementing plans to assess student learning;

that, in the report prepared for the Fall 2013 evaluation, the institution may request general approval to offer programs at the master's level within the scope of its mission;

that the College submit a fifth-year interim report for consideration in Fall 2016;

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

1. continuing to implement its long-term operational and financial plans;
2. clarifying the responsibilities of the president, provost, deans, and faculty for oversight of academic programs and completing the planned reorganization of the School of Advanced Studies;
3. developing a culture of assessment and implementing a comprehensive approach to the assessment of student learning, including assessment of the Liberal Studies program;
4. addressing faculty workload issues;
5. achieving its goals for diversity;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Fall 2021.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

Merrimack College is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be substantially in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*.

The Commission concurs with the visiting team that the past decade has brought "sweeping changes" to Merrimack College and that these changes have "generated energy and enthusiasm for the future" of the College. We take favorable note of the College's adoption of a new mission statement and development of a comprehensive strategic plan, "Advancing Merrimack College in the 21st Century: The Agenda for Distinction." There is widespread appreciation across the campus for the "new approach" to governance, characterized by transparency, a reorganization of faculty committees, and heightened responsibilities for the Faculty Senate. We commend the College for its successful transition to a 4x4 curriculum and for improvements to its first-to-second year retention rate, from 69% to 81% during the last three years. The institution's commitment to student life and retention as a "key priority" is evident in its "Mack Calls" program for first-year students, expanded hours for the library, upgrades to the wireless network, and renovations to classrooms, laboratories, athletic fields, dining facilities, residence halls, and the library. We share the judgment of the visiting team that the achievements of the past decade, coupled with the "major and positive influence" of the new administration, position the dedicated faculty and staff of Merrimack College well to meet the challenges of the future and to achieve the ambitious institutional goals outlined in the strategic plan.

The item the institution is asked to report on in Spring 2013 is related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation* and *Financial Resources*.

The Commission is gratified to learn that Merrimack College is in the process of developing operational plans to implement the five goals specified in "The Agenda for Distinction." We understand that the plans developed by the four academic schools, Office of Academic Affairs, Office of Student Life, and Athletics will be consolidated into a unified operational plan that will include metrics and assessment strategies and will be linked to a long-term financial plan. We look forward to receiving evidence, through the Spring 2013 report, that the College's "financial planning, including contingency planning, is integrated with overall planning and evaluation processes" (9.9). Our standard on *Planning and Evaluation* provides this additional guidance:

The institution plans beyond a short-term horizon, including strategic planning that involves realistic analyses of internal and external opportunities and constraints. It plans for and responds to financial and other contingencies, establishes feasible priorities, and develops a realistic course of action to achieve identified objectives. Institutional decision-making, particularly the allocation of resources, is consistent with planning priorities (2.3).

The proposals submitted by Merrimack College to offer the Master of Science in Engineering (MSE) and Master of Science in Management (MSM) programs were approved, and the programs encompassed within the institution's accreditation, because the Commission finds that the proposed programs fit within the institution's mission and fulfill the relevant *Standards for Accreditation* and Commission policies.

We commend the College for its comprehensive planning that led to the development of the proposed degrees. We understand that both programs are designed for full-time students who will complete the 32 credits for their degree in a single year. Faculty in the School of Business and International Commerce and the School of Engineering are responsible for the management and engineering programs respectively; the content and format of each curriculum are at a level appropriate for a master's education. We note with favor the College's commitment to ensuring that adequate numbers of well-qualified faculty are available to teach in the programs, as well as its commitment to ensuring that library, information technology, classroom and laboratory resources are sufficient to support the programs.

We remind you that any plans to offer additional programs at the master's level will need to be reviewed by the Commission, consistent with our Policy on Substantive Change. It is generally the case that before granting general approval at the higher degree level within the institution's range of academic offerings, the Commission expects to see developed capacity at the higher degree, success with initial programs, and, as appropriate, the development of an institutional culture supporting academic programming at the higher degree.

Commission policy requires an on-site evaluation of the new programs within two years of their initiation. The report prepared for the visit in Fall 2013 should update the Commission to reflect and assess actual experience in implementing the degree program. A copy of the relevant policy and procedures is enclosed for your information.

In addition, the institution is asked, in its Fall 2013 report, to give emphasis to four matters related to our standards on *Financial Resources*, *Students*, *Faculty*, *Planning and Evaluation*, and *The Academic Program*.

The Commission understands that Merrimack College has set a goal to enroll 30 students per year for each of the first three years of the MSM program; each cohort will include "fifth-year" students from Merrimack, recent graduates – including those with baccalaureate degrees in non-

business fields – and international students. Enrollment goals for the MSE program are more modest, starting with five in the first year and growing to 20 by Fall 2015. The intended population for the engineering program comprises the College's undergraduate engineering students, recent graduates with degrees in other fields, and working engineers. The proposal submitted by the College, however, did not include the institution's plans for the targeted recruitment of non-business majors for the MSM, and we also note that working engineers may not be attracted to a full-time program that is designed to be completed in a single year. We look forward to learning, through the Fall 2013 report, of the College's success in meeting its enrollment goals for the new master's programs, as evidence that its "financial planning is realistic and reflects the capacity of the institution to depend on identified sources of revenue" (9.3).

As noted above, Merrimack College expects to enroll international students, perhaps as many as 15 per year, in the MSM program. The proposal acknowledges that these students "will require support" and notes that the College intends to "explore the use of tutors and seminars to support the academic success and comfort of international students." We understand, however, that English-language instruction is planned only for the January term, after students have completed half their program. We further note that the Career Services Office is open only until 5:00 p.m., which may not be responsive to the needs of adult students, including the "working engineers" who are among the target population for the MSE program. We are pleased to learn that the College will "evaluate the need for extended hours" for career services and make adjustments as necessary. The report prepared for the Fall 2013 evaluation will afford Merrimack College an opportunity to demonstrate that its provision of services to graduate students, including opportunities for international students to enhance their English-language skills, is sufficient and appropriate. We remind you of our standards on *Students* and *The Academic Program*:

The institution utilizes appropriate methods of evaluation to identify deficiencies and offers appropriate developmental or remedial support where necessary to prepare students for collegiate study. Such testing and remediation receive sufficient support and are adequate to serve the needs of students admitted (6.4).

The institution offers an array of student services appropriate to its mission and the needs and goals of its students, recognizing the ... differences in circumstances and goals of students pursuing degrees. In all cases, the institution provides academic support services appropriate to the student body. The institution's faculty and professional staff collectively have sufficient interaction with students outside of class to promote students' academic achievement and provide academic and career guidance. 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 (6.11).

Students completing an undergraduate or graduate degree program demonstrate collegiate-level skills in the English language (4.8).

The Commission is pleased to learn that Merrimack College has set aside funds to "foster curricular development and research productivity" among faculty teaching in the MSM and MSE programs. We note that faculty who will teach in the MSE program are "active in their respective scholarly areas" and that the College intends to "promote the pursuit of more vigorous research agendas" among MSM faculty. We anticipate being apprised, through the Fall 2013 evaluation, of the institution's success in assuring that the expectations for scholarship among its graduate faculty "exceed those expected for faculty working at the undergraduate level" and that these faculties include "experienced professionals making scholarly contributions to the development of the field" (4.23). Our standard on *Faculty* offers this additional guidance:

All faculty pursue scholarship designed to ensure they are current in the theory, knowledge, skills, and pedagogy of their discipline or profession. The institution defines the scholarly expectations for faculty consistent with its mission and purposes and the level of degrees offered. Scholarship and instruction are integrated and mutually supportive (5.21).

We note with approval that Merrimack College has developed assessment plans for the MSE and MSM programs that incorporate quantitative and qualitative measures as well as program review processes that include consultation with advisory councils. We look forward to learning, in Fall 2013, of the College's initial success in implementing these plans, in keeping with our standards on *Planning and Evaluation* and *The Academic Program*:

The institution has a system of periodic review of academic and other programs that includes the use of external perspectives (2.6).

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, and includes external perspectives. The institution devotes appropriate attention to ensuring that its methods of understanding student learning are trustworthy and provide information useful in the continuing improvement of programs and services for students (4.54).

Should Merrimack College wish to be considered for general approval to offer master's programs within the scope of the institution's mission, the report prepared in advance of the Fall 2013 evaluation should provide evidence of the College's developed capacity at the higher degree, as noted above.

Commission policy requires a fifth-year 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 fifth-year reports, the College is asked, in Fall 2016, to report on five matters related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation*, *Organization and Governance*, *The Academic Program*, *Faculty*, *Students*, and *Integrity*.

The College is asked, in the Fall 2016 report, to give emphasis to its continued success in addressing the area specified above for attention in the Spring 2013 report. The Commission recognizes that this matter does not lend itself to rapid resolution and will require the College's sustained attention over time. We ask that further information be provided in the interim report, as evidence of the College's "demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning" (2.4).

The Commission is pleased to learn that Merrimack College successfully concluded its search for a provost and has developed a plan to assure an appropriate division of responsibility for oversight of all its academic programs, including those offered through continuing education. We understand this includes a reconfiguration of the School for Advanced Studies, establishment of an Office of Graduate and Continued Studies, development of policies and procedures for graduate education, and the appointment of an Executive Director of Research and Development. The Fall 2016 report will afford Merrimack College an opportunity to update the Commission on the success of these efforts, consistent with our standard on *Organization and Governance*:

The institution's chief academic officer is directly responsible to the chief executive officer, and in concert with the faculty and other academic administrators is responsible for the quality of the academic program. The institution's organization and governance structure assure the integrity and quality of academic programming however and

wherever offered. Off-campus, continuing education, distance education, correspondence education, international, evening, and week-end programs are clearly integrated and incorporated into the policy formation, and academic oversight, and evaluation system of the institution (3.10).

We appreciate the College's candid acknowledgement that "sufficient attention has not been placed on the assessment of student learning." We are therefore pleased to learn of steps taken by the institution to support development of a culture of assessment, including the appointment of an Assessment Council and a vice provost to "champion" assessment efforts. We note with favor that the council is developing plans to educate the faculty about assessment and that the institution intends to commit funds for this effort. We understand that the General Education Committee is working on a formal assessment plan for the revised Liberal Studies program; this plan is expected to involve most faculty members in course- and program-based assessment. We look forward to learning, in Fall 2016, of the College's success in developing and implementing a comprehensive approach to the assessment of student learning, consistent with our standard on *The Academic Program*:

The institution implements and provides support for systematic and broad-based assessment of what and how students are learning through their academic program and experiences outside the classroom. Assessment is based on clear statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. Assessment provides useful information that helps the institution to improve the experiences provided for students, as well as to assure that the level of student achievement is appropriate for the degree awarded (4.48).

The institution's approach to understanding student learning focuses on the course, program, and institutional level. Evidence is considered at the appropriate level of focus, with the results being a demonstrable factor in improving the learning opportunities and results for students (4.49).

The institution's approach to understanding what and how students are learning and using the results for improvement has the support of the institution's academic and institutional leadership and the systematic involvement of faculty (4.51).

As noted in the report of the visiting team, some faculty workload issues related to the transition to a 4x4 curriculum "have yet to be settled." We note, too, that the introduction of additional master's programs will require the institution's attention to faculty workload. We are gratified to learn that the College held a "Faculty Workload Equity Forum" in February and has revised the academic program annual report format to include data about workload. Consistent with our standard on *Faculty*, the Fall 2016 report will afford Merrimack College an opportunity to provide evidence that:

Faculty assignments and workloads 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 workloads are reappraised periodically and adjusted as institutional conditions change (5.7).

Finally, the Commission notes with favor that Merrimack College has developed a multi-faceted, data-driven approach to achieve its goals to increase the diversity of its student body, faculty, staff, and Board of Trustees, and to incorporate strategies "to promote respect and culture

Dr. Christopher E. Hopey
April 17, 2012
Page 7

competency" into the curriculum and co-curriculum. We look forward to learning, in Fall 2016, of the success of these efforts, in keeping with our standards on *Faculty, Students, and Integrity*:

[C]ompatible with its mission and purposes, [the institution] addresses its own goals for the achievement of diversity among its faculty (5.4).

Consistent with its mission, the institution sets and achieves realistic goals to enroll a student body that is broadly representative of the population the institution wishes to serve and addresses its own goals for the achievement of diversity among its students (6.1).

The institution ... fosters an atmosphere within the institutional community that respects and supports people of diverse characteristics and backgrounds (11.5).

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2021 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 and reports prepared by Merrimack College and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you, Dr. Josephine Modica-Napolitano, Provost, and Dr. William Weitzer, team chair, during its deliberations.

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.

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. Brian Mitchell. The institution is free to release information about the evaluation 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,



Mary Jo Maydew

MJM/jm

Enclosure

cc: Mr. Brian Mitchell
Visiting Team