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July 11, 2017

Dr. Elaine Collins
President
Johnson State College
337 College Hill
Johnson, VT 05656-9898



Dear President Collins:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on April 21, 2017, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Johnson State College:

- that Johnson State College be continued in accreditation;
- that the on-site evaluation to assess implementation of the Fine Woodworking and Furniture Design programs scheduled for Fall 2018 be confirmed;
- that the College submit a report for consideration in Spring 2019 that gives emphasis to the institution's success in:
 1. realizing the plans for the institution to merge with Lyndon State College to create Northern Vermont University, providing financial statements for the new entity;
 2. implementing a comprehensive approach to assess student learning with evidence of using the results to improve Johnson State College's programs;

that the College submit an interim (fifth-year) report for consideration in Spring 2021;

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

1. continuing to address the items specified for attention in the Spring 2019 report;
2. achieving the enrollment goals set for Johnson State College and enhancing its financial stability;

3. ensuring sufficient staffing to support Johnson State College's programs and services;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Fall 2025.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its actions.

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

We commend Johnson State College (JSC) for its comprehensive and candid self-study that makes clear the institution's commitment to providing a highly individualized and "transformative" liberal arts education as recognized in Fall 2016 by its designation as a member of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges. Along with the visiting team, we appreciate how JSC faculty and staff work collaboratively to facilitate student success through the offering of high-impact student experiences that include an "innovative and interdependent" General Education Core Curriculum, "robust" co-curricular offerings, a variety of experiential opportunities, and enhanced academic support services to assist the College's low-income, first generation students. Particularly noteworthy is the improvement in student retention following the launch of a first-year experience that incorporates themed learning communities, as is the introduction of a chapter of the National Society of Leadership and Success that provides evidence of a campus culture focused on the development of student leadership. As demonstrated by the expansion of the President's Council that meets monthly and the launch of the President's Roundtable to facilitate communication between the institution and community leaders, the College has developed an "open, transparent, and inclusive" governance process in which everyone, including students, has an appropriate voice. We note with favor JSC's External Degree Program (EDP) that offers options for students interested in earning a degree via distance education through which about half of JSC's graduates now complete their degrees. In addition, we view positively that graduate enrollments grew 4.1% in FY2016, and that pass rates on Vermont's Teaching Licensure examination improved "dramatically" over the past three years – from 39% to 80%. We also acknowledge the College's judicious use of external consultants to supplement internal expertise that has been particularly helpful in measuring the effectiveness of its marketing campaigns and identifying new program markets. As evident from the results of its 2015 graduate survey that found 94% of respondents either employed or pursuing further study, Johnson State College is accomplishing its mission and is well positioned to continue to fulfill its role as Vermont's public liberal arts college in the years ahead.

The Commission confirms the Fall 2018 evaluation to assess Johnson State College's success in implementing its Fine Woodworking and Furniture Design programs. We refer you to our letter of March 27, 2017 that specifies matters to receive attention in the report prepared in advance of the Fall 2018 evaluation

The items the institution is asked to report on in Spring 2019 are related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation*, *Institutional Resources*, and *Educational Effectiveness*.

We are aware that in 2016 the Vermont State Colleges System (VSCS) mandated the merger of Johnson State College and Lyndon State College (LSC) to create a new institution, Northern Vermont University (NVU), a process that is expected to be completed by July 1, 2018. We understand a "powerful" integrated planning model has been developed and that an 18-member NVU Transition Team, with representatives from both campuses, is meeting biweekly to ensure a seamless unification and continued compliance with each of the *Standards for Accreditation*, with a goal to submit a substantive change proposal for review at the Commission's September 2017 meeting. With funding in excess of \$1.0 million made available by the State of Vermont to support

the transition, a number of task forces have also been formed involving JSC and LSC faculty and staff to review the “nuts n’ bolts” of becoming one University. The Spring 2019 report will enable Johnson State College to provide evidence that “[t]he institution has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning” (2.5). We also ask that financial statements for the new entity, Northern Vermont University, be submitted to ensure “[t]he institution is financially stable” (7.5). Our standard on *Institutional Resources* further notes:

... For institutions whose financial statements are included and audited as part of a larger system or corporation, the system or corporation financial statements disclose separate statements for the institution to support a determination regarding the sufficiency and stability of the institution’s financial resources (7.17).

While the visiting team reported that Johnson State College has made “modest” progress to develop a culture of assessment including conducting faculty workshops and establishing a Program Assessment Committee, the College itself recognizes that its efforts have been “slow and uneven.” We understand that undergraduate learning outcomes still vary in clarity and specificity and, in particular, a systematic approach to assess the new General Education Core Curriculum is only in the early stages of development. We therefore are pleased to learn that the College’s timeline has been “accelerated” – by a full year – with plans this spring to both assess two general education Essential Learning Outcomes and also to have all JSC academic departments involved in the development of assessment instruments and the collection and analysis of student artifacts. In addition, we note that the upcoming merger will allow JSC the opportunity to benefit from Lyndon State College’s expertise in assessment. We ask that the Spring 2019 report give emphasis to Johnson State College’s success in implementing a comprehensive approach to the assessment of student learning with evidence of using the results to improve the institution’s programs. This request is in keeping with our standards on *Planning and Evaluation* and *Educational Effectiveness*:

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 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 (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 institution integrates the findings of its assessment process and measures of student success into its program evaluation activities and uses the findings to inform its planning and resource allocation and to establish claims the institution makes to students and prospective students (8.10).

Commission policy requires an 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 interim reports, the College is asked, in Spring 2021, to give emphasis to its continued success in addressing the two areas specified above for attention in the Spring 2019 progress report. The Commission understands that these issues do not lend themselves to rapid resolution and will require the institution's continued attention over time; hence we ask that evidence of continued progress be provided in the interim report submitted for consideration in Spring 2021. In addition, the College is asked to report on two matters related to our standards on *Students; Institutional Resources; Organization and Governance; The Academic Program; and Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*.

Over the past five years, we note that Johnson State College's undergraduate enrollment declined nearly 16%, reaching 1,165 FTE in FY2016, and consequently, the Commission shares the visiting team's concern about the "urgent" need for the institution to increase enrollment through both recruitment and improved retention. The College's five-year plan for athletics that over the past three years increased the number of student athletes from 146 to 195 and improved their retention from 65% to 75% is one recent example of successful enrollment growth. At the same time, however, tuition increases have not kept up with inflation; state funding has been flat; and the College's reserves that have been used to cover budgetary shortfalls are projected to be fully expended by FY2018. While we view favorably the creation of an Enrollment and Retention Task Force and its development of a strategic enrollment plan for JSC, the projected 8% increase in FTE for FY2017 seems ambitious in light of recent enrollment declines. We do acknowledge JSC's efforts to diversify its sources of revenue by expanding its online, graduate, and early college programs and by increasing its fundraising and grant writing activities, and recognize that its unification with Lyndon State College is anticipated to reduce administrative costs thereby supporting the merger's goal to "achieve long-term financial stability." Yet, as observed by the visiting team, the probability of increased financial resources resulting from the unification is yet to be determined. We therefore look forward to being apprised, in the Spring 2021 interim report, of the institution's success in achieving Johnson State College's goals for enrollment growth and financial stability. Our standards on *Students* and *Institutional Resources* (cited above and below) provide this guidance:

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. (Statement of the Standard 5)

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'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 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).

In response to reduced financial resources resulting from fewer enrollments and less state support, over the past several years staff positions at Johnson State College have decreased and the number of full-time faculty has also declined from 46 in FY2013 to 40 in FY2016. As a result, faculty involvement in general education classes, program assessment, advising, and governance committees has been strained, and the institution's reliance on adjunct faculty has grown. In addition, among other cutbacks, the library is now open fewer hours and computer upgrades and investment in technology resources have been limited. Recent hires do include three new full-time faculty, two part-time head coaches, and the Northern Vermont University Provost who will assist with the transition. While the impending merger is intended to alleviate the "dearth of human resources" in the short term, the potential advantages to Johnson State College of the proposed unified University remain to be worked out. We therefore ask that the Spring 2021 interim report provide an update that addresses the requirements of our standards on *Organization and Governance; The Academic Program; Students; Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship; and Institutional Resources*.

.... 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).

.... The institution provides sufficient resources to sustain and improve its academic programs (4.4).

.... Personnel, facilities, technology, and funding are adequate to implement the institution's student services policies and procedures (5.17).

There are an adequate number of faculty and academic staff, including librarians, advisors, and instructional designers, 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 (6.2).

The institution employs sufficient and qualified personnel to fulfill its mission (7.1).

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).

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2025 is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years. Since the College delayed its comprehensive evaluation by a year, scheduling the next comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2025 returns Johnson State College to its original evaluation schedule.

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 Johnson State College for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you and Cynthia Huggins, team chair, during its deliberations.

Dr. Elaine Collins
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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 Ms. Martha O'Connor. 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 in New England.

If you have any questions about the Commission's action, please contact Barbara Brittingham, President of the Commission.

Sincerely,



David P. Angel

DPA/sjp

Enclosures

cc: Ms. Martha O'Connor,
Visiting team