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August 11, 2020

Mr. Mark E. Ojakian
President
Connecticut State Colleges & Universities
61 Woodland Street Rm 302
Hartford, CT 06105

Dear Mr. Ojakian:

I write to inform you that at its meeting on June 23, 2020, the New England Commission of Higher Education considered the report submitted by Connecticut State College and University System and took the following action:

that the report submitted by Connecticut State College and University System (CSCU) regarding the progress the System has made in establishing and implementing its initial plans to consolidate the 12 Connecticut State Colleges into a single Connecticut State Community College (CSCC) be accepted;

that CSCU submit a report by April 1, 2021 that updates the Commission on its progress in implementing its comprehensive consolidation plans and establishing Connecticut State Community College and that includes the following data:

- 1) enrollment figures for the 12 individually accredited community colleges for FY2019-FY2021 and projections for FY2022-FY2024 for the 12 colleges and CSCC, as well as the assumptions on which the projections are based and a discussion of the System's plans for attracting adult learners;
- 2) detailed budgets for FY2019-2021 for the 12 community colleges and budget projections for FY2022-FY2024 for the 12 colleges and CSCC;
- 3) staffing details (number of full- and part-time faculty and staff by category) for each of the 12 individually accredited community colleges, the regional offices, and the Connecticut State Community College for FY2019-2021 and staffing projections for these entities for FY2022-FY2024;

- 4) information pertaining to the transition to support services being provided by centralized operations, including admissions, enrollment, financial aid and advising, human resources, information technology, institutional research, purchasing and accounting, along with an analysis of the benefits of centralization and the concerns that have been identified;

that, in addition to the specific data requested above, the narrative of the report submitted for consideration by April 1, 2021 also provide updates on the System's progress in the following areas:

- 1) developing a strategic plan for CSCC and engaging faculty in the planning process;
- 2) transitioning to and evaluating the effectiveness of the proposed one-college organizational structure with emphasis on successfully integrating faculty into a "shared governance" model;
- 3) aligning the curriculum under the proposed one-college model and ensuring appropriate involvement of faculty in curriculum development and other areas of faculty responsibility and oversight;
- 4) implementing the Guided Pathways initiative;
- 5) assuring that the 12 individually accredited community colleges continue to meet the *Standards for Accreditation* during the consolidation process;

that representatives of the System, its governing board, leadership of Connecticut State Community College, and a representative sample of leadership of the community colleges be asked to meet with the Commission at its April 2021 meeting to discuss the report.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its actions.

The report submitted by Connecticut State College and University System was accepted because it was generally responsive to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letter of July 12, 2019. Through its report, the System reaffirmed its commitment to building a single community college that will meet the *Standards for Accreditation* by 2023 while simultaneously achieving its three strategic priorities – student success, equity, and financial stability. We appreciate the System's candid recognition that, although issues and concerns about and opposition to the Students First initiative have "frequently come up" and it may not be possible to fully accommodate the requests of all constituents, it has attempted to balance the requests of stakeholders with its commitment to decrease expenses and increase efficiencies and to ensure that the process is transparent with ample opportunities for participation. For example, members of each of the 12 community colleges have been invited to serve on various planning committees (e.g., curriculum and shared governance), and over 200 faculty members are receiving stipends to participate in curriculum development work over the summer. We also note that the new single institution – Connecticut State Community College (CSCC) – is beginning to take shape under the leadership of Interim President David Levinson who, as president of Norwalk Community College before retiring in May 2019, has been involved with the Students First initiative since its inception. Mission and vision statements have been established; a leadership team has been selected; and an organizational structure is under development. Now that the interim CSCC leadership team is in place, the focus has shifted to activities including: selecting a student information system for the College; establishing a Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning; developing programs ranging from Dual Enrollment to First Year Experience; continuing to hire permanent staff; and removing the "cumbersome administrative process" students face when transferring credit from one institution

to another within the System thereby ensuring that “the state’s 80,000 students can take advantage of all resources.”

In order that the Commission may be kept apprised of the System’s progress in implementing its plans to consolidate the 12 community colleges and establish Connecticut State Community College, we ask that CSCU submit a report by April 1, 2021 that includes data related to our standards on *Students* and *Institutional Resources*, as specified below.

As documented in the report, Connecticut State Community College plans to begin admitting students in October 2022 for enrollment in Fall 2023, and a goal has been set to increase overall community college enrollment 25% by then. However, as the System candidly acknowledges, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on enrollment is not yet known and “attracting adult learners is critical” to achieving this ambitious goal. Because the current report did not include detailed enrollment projections or the data on which the enrollment projections are based, it is not clear to the Commission that this goal is realistic. We therefore look forward, in the report submitted for consideration by April 1, 2021, to receiving the detailed enrollment information specified on the first page of this letter along with the institution’s plans for attracting adult learners as evidence that it “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). We are further informed here by our standard on *Students*:

The institution demonstrates its ability to admit students who can be successful in the institution’s academic program, including specifically recruited populations. 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).

According to the report, the System has begun the process of consolidating various departments within the 12 community colleges, including human resources, procurement, information technology, enrollment management, and financial services. While this shared service model is ultimately expected to reduce overall expenses, the System anticipates “an increase in costs on the front end.” For example, to meet the *Standards for Accreditation* at each of the 12 campuses throughout the transition to a single institution, it will be necessary to retain relevant resources on individual campuses while simultaneously providing some of those services through CSCC. The System reports that it is “on track” to achieve the annual \$23 million savings specified in its initial proposal (savings of \$10.0 million in FY2019; \$10.9 million projected in FY2020; \$16.5 million projected in FY2021) and notes it has substantial financial data that will be summarized in the substantive change report. However, the current report lacked specificity related to the financial position of each of the 12 institutions and it did not include a multi-year budget for CSCC. Therefore, as informed by our standard on *Institutional Resources*, we ask that the April 2021 report include detailed budgets for FY2019-2021 for the 12 community colleges and budget projections for FY2022-FY2024 for the 12 colleges and CSCC:

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 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 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 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'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).

We are also cognizant that the consolidation will have a significant impact on staffing across institutions: some positions at the individual colleges have been or will be eliminated or combined; other positions will be created to support the single institution model. As documented in the report, CSCU leadership worked with NCHEMS to develop an organizational structure for the proposed single Connecticut State Community College, and the organization charts submitted with the report propose a total of 141 administrative positions whereas comparable systems are staffed with 154-167 administrative positions. As noted above, a leadership team (e.g., interim President, interim CFO) is now in place at CSCC, and of the 83 positions expected to be filled in FY2021, 16 are in place; however, we also note that a 5% contingency reduction will be considered later this year after each of the 12 individually accredited institutions submit a report to the System office that details the impact of COVID-19. As this newly approved structure and interim leadership team had only been in place for several weeks at the time of the filing of the System's progress report, there was no evidence of how this model was functioning with the existing structure. As evidence that each of the 12 campuses "employs sufficient and qualified personnel to fulfill its mission" (7.1) as required by the *Institutional Resources* standard, and to demonstrate that proposed staffing is sufficient to support the single institution model, we ask that the report submitted by April 1, 2021 include documentation that specifies recent, current, and projected staffing at each of the 12 individually accredited community colleges, the regional offices, and the Connecticut State Community College for the period covering FY2019 through FY2024. We remind you also of our standard on *Institutional Resources* (cited above and below):

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*).

We appreciate the System's candid recognition that when it first presented its Students First initiative to the Commission, "efforts to consolidate were moving too quickly;" consequently, over the past two years the System has taken a "more deliberate approach" to planning with a goal of "making the transition seamless." In particular, the process of consolidating support services (e.g., admissions, enrollment, financial aid and advising, human resources, information technology, institutional research, purchasing, and accounting) will require careful management and oversight to ensure each of the 12 campuses remains in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*. Accordingly, as informed by our standard on *Institutional Resources* (cited above), we ask that the April 1, 2021 report include a detailed update on the status of transitioning these support services into the single institution model, along with an analysis of the benefits of centralization and the concerns that have been identified. Our standard on *Organization and Governance* provides this additional guidance:

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 to including the data specified above, we ask that the narrative of the report submitted by April 1, 2021 also give emphasis to the System's progress regarding four matters pertaining to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation*; *Organization and Governance*; *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*; *The Academic Program*; and *Educational Effectiveness*.

The current report notes that several of the colleges (e.g., Capital Community College; Gateway Community College; Norwalk Community College) are in the early stages of developing and/or implementing strategic plans. It is not clear, however, the extent to which these individual plans will be used to inform the Connecticut State Community College strategic planning process, and the level of faculty participation in the strategic planning process is not specified. We therefore look forward to being apprised, in the April 2021 report, of the College's success in developing a strategic plan and engaging relevant constituencies, including faculty from the 12 campuses, in the planning process. We are guided here by our standards on *Planning and Evaluation* and *Organization and Governance* (cited above):

Planning and evaluation are systematic, comprehensive, broad-based, integrated, and appropriate to the institution. They involve the participation of individuals and groups responsible for the achievement of institutional purposes and include external perspectives. Results of planning and evaluation are regularly communicated to appropriate institutional constituencies. The institution allocates sufficient resources for its planning and evaluation efforts (2.1).

The institution plans beyond a short-term horizon, including strategic planning that involves realistic analyses of internal and external opportunities and constraints. The results of strategic planning are implemented in all units of the institution through financial, academic, enrollment, and other supporting plans (2.3).

The institution 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 (2.4).

We understand from the report that while some faculty and staff have been engaged in the consolidation efforts, others have been less enthusiastic and have requested that they be removed from committees on which they served, consistent with the position of the faculty union. As noted

above, we understand that over 200 faculty members are engaged in curriculum development work over the summer of 2020; however, it remains unclear to us how many faculty across the system are engaged in the Students First initiative planning process and how they are integrated into the “shared governance” model to which the System is committed. We therefore request that the April 2021 report include an update on the System’s success in transitioning to and evaluating the effectiveness of the proposed one-college organizational structure with emphasis on successfully integrating faculty into a shared governance model. Our standards on *Organization and Governance* and *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship* are relevant here:

The institution places primary responsibility for the content, quality, and effectiveness of the curriculum with its faculty. Faculty have a substantive voice in matters of educational programs, faculty personnel, and other aspects of institutional policy that relate to their areas of responsibility and expertise (3.15).

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 considerations (3.17).

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. Responsibilities include instruction, accessibility to students, and the systematic understanding of effective teaching/learning processes and outcomes in courses and programs for which they share responsibility; additional duties may include, e.g., student advisement, academic planning, and participation in policy-making, course and curricular development, research, and institutional governance (6.2).

We understand that aligning the curriculum under the Students First initiative began several years ago with a Common Core group comprising faculty (full-time and adjunct) from each campus who were individually invited to participate in discipline-specific work groups. Campuses were given the opportunity to review and provide comments on the curriculum during the alignment process, and we note that some faculty raised questions about the completeness of the Common Core curriculum as well as the strategy for assessing it and that some campuses chose not to vote on the proposed core. However, we understand that the transitional governance structure ultimately approved the proposed curriculum and the Board of Regents approved it on May 14, 2020, creating a core curriculum of between 21-24 credits for all programs under the single-college model. We further note that work on aligning the curriculum is still underway and is expected to be completed by December 2020. In keeping with our standards on *Organization and Governance* (cited above) and *The Academic Program*, we seek to be informed, through the April 2021 report, of the institution’s success in aligning the curriculum across the colleges with emphasis on ensuring faculty have an appropriate role in curriculum development and other areas of faculty responsibility and oversight:

Programs leading to degrees or other awards have a coherent design and are characterized by appropriate breadth, depth, continuity, sequential progression, and synthesis of learning. Coherence is demonstrated through learning goals, structure, and content; policies and procedures for admission, retention, and completion; instructional methods and procedures; and the nature, quality, and extent of student learning and achievement (4.3).

The institution offering multiple academic programs ensures that all programs meet or exceed the basic quality standards of the institution and that there is a reasonable

consistency in quality among them. The institution provides sufficient resources to sustain and improve its academic programs (4.4).

Through its system of academic administration and faculty participation, the institution demonstrates an effective system of academic oversight, assuring the quality of the academic program wherever and however it is offered (4.5).

The institution develops, approves, administers, and on a regular cycle reviews its academic programs under institutional policies that are implemented by designated bodies with established channels of communication and control. Review of academic programs includes evidence of student success and program effectiveness and incorporates an external perspective. Faculty have a substantive voice in these matters (4.6).

We are further gratified to learn that “nationally proven best practices in student success,” including the Guided Pathways initiative, will be implemented to “bolster student supports” and address equity gaps. We note that the 12 Connecticut community colleges are expected to incorporate this approach through 2022, and the System anticipates hiring “dozens” of Guided Pathways Advisors in the coming fiscal year and continuing this “ramp-up” over time to achieve its goal to hire 100 additional advisors. This approach will result in a “redesign” of how advising is delivered to a model in which each student has a Guided Pathways advisor who serves as a “case manager” and a faculty advisor who will assist students in pursuing “their specific academic goals.” We look forward, in the April 2021 report, to receiving an update on the institution’s progress in implementing the Guided Pathways initiative as evidence that it “endeavors to ensure the success of its students, offering the resources and services that provide them the opportunity to achieve the goals of their educational program...” (*Students*, Statement of the Standard), and that it “demonstrates its effectiveness by ensuring satisfactory levels of student achievement on mission-appropriate student outcomes” (*Educational Effectiveness*, Statement of the Standard). Our standard on *Students* provides further guidance:

The institution systematically identifies the characteristics and needs of its student population and then makes provision for responding to them. The institution’s student services are guided by a philosophy that reflects the institution’s mission and special character, is circulated widely and reviewed periodically, and provides the basis on which services to students can be evaluated (5.8).

The institution provides advising and 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 (5.10).

Finally, through the current report and as illustrated above, we are aware that consolidation planning committees are “working in coordination” while also “respecting the accreditation of each institution.” To verify that each of the 12 individually accredited community colleges continues to meet the *Standards for Accreditation* during the transition to a single college model, we ask that the April 2021 report provide further evidence to demonstrate the institutions’ compliance with the Standards.

Please submit four paper copies and an electronic copy (single, searchable pdf file) of your report no later than April 1, 2021 to the Commission offices.

We ask that representatives of the System, its governing board, leadership of CSCC, and a representative sample of leadership of the community colleges meet with the Commission at its

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April 2021 meeting to discuss the report. Further information about the date and time for the System's meeting with the Commission will be sent at a later time.

The Commission expressed appreciation for the report submitted by Connecticut State College and University System and hopes that its preparation has contributed to future planning. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet virtually with you and David Levinson, Interim President, Connecticut State Community College; Kerry Kelley, Interim CFO, Connecticut State Community College; Alison Buckley, CSCU Vice President for Enrollment Management; Michael Stefanowicz, Interim CSCU Associate Vice President for Academic & Student Affairs; G. Duncan Harris, Campus Chief Executive Officer, Capital Community College; Michael Rooke, President, Northwestern Connecticut Community College and Mary Ellen Jukoski, President, Three Rivers Community College during its deliberations. It appreciates your cooperation with the effort to provide public assurance of the quality of higher education in New England.

You are encouraged to continue to work with Commission staff on the development of the report due in April 2021 and otherwise as may be helpful in ensuring that the issues addressed in this letter and others that may arise can be addressed in a timely and satisfactory manner.

You are encouraged to share this letter with all of the System's constituencies. It is Commission policy to inform the chairperson of the System's governing board of action on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Mr. Matt Fleury. The institution is free to release information about the report and the Commission's action to others.

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

Sincerely,



George Tetler

GT/sjp

Enclosures

cc: Mr. Matt Fleury
Dr. David Levinson, Interim President, CSCC
Dr. William T. Brown
Dr. Michelle Coach
Ms. Cheryl DeVonish, Esq.
Dr. Lisa Dresdner
Dr. Rose Ellis
Dr. Nicole Esposito
Dr. G. Duncan Harris
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Dr. Dwayne Smith