



July 10, 2023

Mr. Mike Smith
Interim President
Vermont State University
124 Admin Drive, PO BOX 500
Randolph Center, VT 05061

Dear President Smith:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on June 15, 2023, the New England Commission of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Vermont State University:

that Vermont State University be granted initial accreditation by the New England Commission of Higher Education effective July 1, 2023;

that the accreditation of Vermont State University include general approval to offer degrees from the associate's through the Master's level and to offer programming through distance education and encompass all current instructional locations as well as future instructional locations established within Vermont;

that Castleton University, Northern Vermont University, and Vermont Technical College each submit a letter relinquishing accreditation;

that all reports and visits currently scheduled for Castleton University, Northern Vermont University, and Vermont Technical College be cancelled;

that the institution submit a progress report by October 30, 2023 for consideration in November 2023 that gives emphasis to its success in:

1. accomplishing tasks and goals slated to be completed by Fall 2023, including any matters that were specified in our letter of June 17, 2022 that have not yet been achieved;
2. achieving its enrollment and financial projections;
3. hiring a longer-term interim president and implementing its faculty governance structure;
4. continuing to develop its hybrid operational model;

that the focused evaluation originally scheduled for Fall 2023 be rescheduled to Fall 2024 and that the evaluation include visits to the University's five primary campuses;

that the report prepared in advance of the Fall 2024 evaluation give emphasis to the institution's success in:

1. continuing to address the matters specified for attention in the Fall 2023 report;
2. implementing its strategic plan and undertaking campus master planning;
3. achieving financial sustainability;
4. implementing recommendations regarding athletics and library;

that Vermont State University undergo a comprehensive evaluation in Spring 2027;

that the self-study prepared in advance of the Spring 2027 comprehensive evaluation give emphasis to the institution's continued success in addressing the matters specified for attention in the Fall 2023 progress report and the Fall 2024 focused evaluation.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

Vermont State University (VTSU) is granted initial accreditation based upon the Commission's finding that the institution is in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*. The Commission thanks the University for its concise, detailed report and commends VTSU and the Vermont State College System (VSCS) on the extensive work that has been done since the Commission, in April 2022, approved the System's plans to consolidate three institutions – Castleton University, Northern Vermont University, and Vermont Technical College – into Vermont State University. As documented in the three progress reports submitted since that time, many of the tasks and goals outlined in the substantive change proposal have been accomplished, and realistic timeframes have been established for the outstanding items and for implementing the dimensions of the consolidation that will require phasing in over a longer period of time. The Commission takes favorable note of recent accomplishments that include completion of VTSU's strategic plan and approval of the plan by the VSCS Board of Trustees; completion of staffing plans for all Units; hiring of three deans and appointment of 90% of department coordinators, with plans in place to fill remaining vacancies; launching of student registration and Vermont State 101, the institution's online orientation program; implementation of the Student Success Advising model; development of a teaching guide and videos to support faculty teaching in the F2F+ modality; completion of service-level agreements for shared services; launching of the website for the Vermont State Colleges libraries as well as the vermonstate.edu website and the Vermont State University portal; and publication of the VTSU undergraduate catalog and the Unified University Handbook.

The accreditation of Vermont State University includes general approval to offer degrees from the associate's through the Master's level and to offer programming through distance education reflecting the range of degrees now offered by the separately accredited institutions and the demonstrated capacity of those institutions to offer programming through distance education. VTSU's accreditation also encompasses all current instructional locations as well as future locations established within Vermont because the separately accredited institutions have demonstrated their effectiveness in overseeing off-campus instructional locations.

Since Castleton University, Northern Vermont University, and Vermont Technical College will become part of Vermont State University on July 1, 2023, we ask that each of those institutions submit a letter requesting relinquishment of its accreditation with NECHE. All previously scheduled visits and reports for the individual institutions based on prior Commission actions will be cancelled, as the salient matters will be addressed through the ongoing monitoring of VTSU, as outlined below.

Vermont State University is asked to submit a progress report by October 30, 2023 for consideration in November 2023 that provides updates on four matters related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation*; *Students*; *Institutional Resources*; *Organization and Governance*; *The Academic Program*; and *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*.

In the progress report submitted in June 2023, Vermont State University acknowledges that there is ongoing work related to the consolidation that remain to be completed. This includes upgrades to several classrooms to provide better support for the F2F+ modality; continued development of resources for the VTSU portals (e.g., incorporation of the Handshake site); ongoing digital-first planning to “streamline the library collections and circulation processes;” securing final approval for the transfer of specialized accreditations to VTSU; completion and publication of the graduate catalog; and securing final approval for VTSU to offer federal financial aid. Our letter of June 17, 2022 (pages 4-5) also notes a number of items that, at the time VSCS submitted the substantive change proposal regarding the establishment of Vermont State University, were expected to be completed in Spring and Summer of 2023. We are gratified to learn that some of these matters (e.g., development of a unified governance structure and launch of VTSU’s website) have already been accomplished, but we also recognize that several remain to be finalized. We ask that the Fall 2023 progress report provide an update on the University’s success in accomplishing all the tasks and goals slated to be completed by Fall 2023, in keeping with our standard on *Planning and Evaluation*:

The institution has demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning (2.5).

The Commission appreciates the update provided by Vermont State University concerning its enrollment and budget projections. We understand that the University is “down” 19% in registrations for Fall 2023 and that its FY2024 budget includes a decline of 8.6% in net student revenue. As part of its efforts to reverse the enrollment decline, the University has “comprehensively restructured its tuition and scholarship practices” to support affordability and encourage additional enrollment. We appreciate learning that the System expects the Vermont General Assembly will, at its meeting in late June, approve the appropriations bill that will raise the System’s annual appropriation to \$48 million. The Commission further notes that the University’s FY2024 budget “achieves its deficit target of \$17.6 million” which will be funded through current- and prior-year state-provided bridge funding and \$5.0 million in “system carryforward.” Deficits of \$12.1 million and \$6.0 million are expected in FY2025 and 2026 respectively before the University anticipates achieving a break-even budget in FY2027. We look forward, in Fall 2023, to receiving an update on the University’s enrollment and the initial implementation of its FY2024 budget. We remind you of 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 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'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 Commission is pleased to learn that in May 2023, the Executive Committee of the VSCS Board approved the creation of a search committee to lead the search for a president to replace Interim President Mike Smith who will be leaving his position on October 31, 2023. We understand that, given the short timeframe for the search, the committee will seek a "longer-term interim to lead the University for 18 months to two years." The Commission also notes with approval that a faculty governance model has been drafted, and support for the model has been assessed through "straw polls." A "formal, final vote" to approve the model is expected in early fall with elections and implementation of the model to begin thereafter. The Fall 2023 report will afford Vermont State University an opportunity to inform the Commission of its progress toward hiring a longer-term interim president and its success with the initial implementation of its faculty governance structure. Relevant here is our standard on *Organization and Governance*:

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).

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).

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).

The Commission takes favorable note that VTSU continues to make "significant progress" in developing its hybrid operational model and has recently introduced several "university-wide digital-first procedures" such as advising, tutoring, and academic support; housing sign-up; career services; and programming to "onboard" new students. As the report notes, Fall 2023 courses will be offered through a "diversity of modalities" (63% in person, 21%

online or synchronous-remote, and 16% F2F+, hybrid, or remote-hybrid), with lower-level courses offered more frequently in person and upper-level courses, some of which would otherwise be under-enrolled, offered through other modalities. We appreciate the University's acknowledgement that "adjustments" will need to be made to the course schedule and to the systems that have been developed, and we are pleased to learn of VTSU's intention to undertake "Optimization 2.0," a process to analyze "optimal" program offerings, section sizes, and makeup of programs across the five University campuses. We look forward, in Fall 2023, to learning of Vermont State University's ongoing progress in this regard. Our standards on *The Academic Program; Students; Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*; and *Institutional Resources* will inform this portion of the report:

Courses and programs offered for credit off campus, through dual enrollment, through distance or correspondence education, or through continuing education, evening, or weekend divisions are consistent with the educational objectives of the institution. Such activities are integral parts of the institution and maintain the same academic standards as courses and programs offered on campus. Faculty and students receive sufficient support for instructional and other needs. Students have ready access to and support in using appropriate learning resources. The institution maintains direct and sole responsibility for the academic quality of all aspects of all programs and assures adequate resources to maintain quality (4.46).

The institution offers an array of student services, including physical and mental health services, appropriate to its mission and the needs and goals of its students. It recognizes the variations in services that are appropriate for residential students, at the main campus, at off-campus locations, and for distance education programs as well as the differences in circumstances and goals of students pursuing degrees (5.9).

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).

Instructional techniques and delivery systems are compatible with and serve to further the mission and purposes of the institution as well as the learning goals of academic programs and objectives of individual courses. Methods of instruction are appropriate to the students' capabilities and learning needs (6.16).

The institution endeavors to enhance the quality of teaching and learning wherever and however courses and programs are offered. It encourages experimentation to improve instruction. The effectiveness of instruction is regularly and systematically assessed using valid procedures; the results are used to improve instruction. Faculty and academic staff accept their responsibility to improve instructional effectiveness. Adequate support is provided to accomplish this task (6.17).

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).

The institution effectively uses information technology to ensure its efficient ability to plan, administer, and evaluate its program and services (7.26).

The Commission reschedules the focused evaluation originally scheduled for Fall 2023 to Fall 2024, and we ask that the evaluation include visits to all five primary campuses of

Vermont State University. We further ask that the report prepared in advance of the visit give emphasis to the institution's success in addressing four matters related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation*, *Institutional Resources*, and *Students*.

The report prepared for the Fall 2024 focused evaluation will afford Vermont State University an opportunity to update the Commission on its continued success in addressing the items specified for attention in the Fall 2023 report. We recognize that these matters do not lend themselves to rapid resolution and will require the institution's sustained attention over time; hence we ask that evidence of continued progress be provided in Fall 2024.

As noted above, the Commission is pleased to learn that the VSCS Board of Trustees has approved the strategic plan for Vermont State University, and we understand that implementation of the plan, which comprises four strategic priorities with associated objectives, initiatives, and metrics, will begin in Fall 2023. In addition, the University is engaged in a campus master planning process that will "inform" the System's capital request to the Vermont legislature for the next biennial budget. Through the Fall 2024 focused evaluation, we welcome an update on the University's progress with these matters in keeping with our standards on *Planning and Evaluation* (cited above) and *Institutional Resources*:

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 report submitted by Vermont State University candidly recognizes "the need for revenue growth in order to achieve financial sustainability," and the Commission therefore notes with approval the "variety of strategies" the institution intends to explore to achieve this growth. As detailed in the report, these include targeted marketing and resource allocation based on return on investment and public/private partnerships similar to the one already established with University of Vermont Health Network. We also appreciate that the achievement of financial sustainability will require "efficiencies and optimization" and understand that the University's plans in this regard include the Optimization 2.0 process noted above; efficiencies and cost reductions within supplies and services; and work to "right-size its full-time faculty through attrition" to attain an FTE student-faculty ratio of 17-21:1 by FY2027. We look forward to learning, in Fall 2024, of Vermont State University's continued progress toward achieving financial sustainability. Our standard on *Institutional Resources* (cited above) provides guidance for this section of the report prepared for the evaluation.

The Commission understands from the report submitted by Vermont State University that VTSU's interim president has "re-evaluated" decisions made earlier regarding the library and student athletic programming. Library layoff notices have been "rescinded," and a collaborative process involving faculty, students, and library staff has been initiated to build a "digital-first approach consistent with progressive library practices." With respect to athletics, we note that benchmarks and metrics for all campuses are being developed to evaluate athletic programs for "long-term sustainability." We anticipate being apprised, through the Fall 2024 focused evaluation, of the University's success in developing and implementing recommendations regarding student athletics and the library. Relevant here are our standards on *Students* and *Institutional Resources*:

As appropriate, the institution provides co-curricular activities and supports opportunities for student leadership and participation in campus organizations and governance (5.15).

If the institution offers recreational and athletic programs, they are subordinate to the educational program and conducted in a manner that adheres to institutional mission, sound educational policy, and standards of integrity. The institution is responsible for the control of these programs, including their financial aspects. The institution maintains the same academic expectations for and affords the same academic opportunities to student athletes as other students (5.16).

The institution provides access to library and information resources, services, facilities, and qualified staff sufficient to support its teaching and learning environments and its research and public service mission as appropriate (7.22).

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Spring 2027 is consistent with Commission policy that requires institutions granted initial accreditation to undergo a comprehensive evaluation within five years. The self-study prepared for the evaluation will provide Vermont State University with an opportunity to update the Commission on its ongoing progress to address the matters specified for attention in the Fall 2023 progress report and the Fall 2024 focused evaluation, as these will continue to require the institution's attention.

The Commission expressed appreciation for the report prepared by Vermont State University and hopes its preparation has contributed to institutional improvement. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you, Sophie Zdatny, Chancellor of the Vermont State Colleges System, and Sharon Scott, Chief Financial Officer of the Vermont State Colleges System, during its deliberations.

The Commission appreciates your cooperation with the effort to provide public assurance of the quality of higher education among institutions affiliated with the Commission.

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 Sophie Zdatny. 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 Lawrence M. Schall, President of the Commission.

Sincerely,



Russell Carey

RC/sjp

cc: Sophie Zdatny

Enclosure: Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions