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October 15, 2020

Dr. John B. Clark
President
Western Connecticut State University
181 White Street
Danbury, CT 06810-6860

Dear President Clark:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on September 24, 2020, the New England Commission of Higher Education considered the report submitted by Western Connecticut State University regarding its plans to offer a Doctor of Nursing Practice program and voted to take the following action:

that the report submitted by Western Connecticut State University be accepted and the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program be encompassed within the institution's accreditation, with an effective date of September 24, 2020;

that the institution be reminded that its accreditation at the doctoral level is limited to the DNP program and the previously approved Ed.D. programs in Nursing Education and Educational Leadership;

that an on-site evaluation of the Doctor of Nursing Practice program be scheduled for Fall 2022;

that the report prepared in advance of the Fall 2022 visit give emphasis to the institution's success in implementing the Doctor of Nursing Practice program, with particular attention to:

- 1) ensuring that the rigor of courses offered is consistent and appropriate for doctoral-level students;
- 2) ensuring the sufficiency of faculty to advise students during the on-line and on-site portions of the program, and to document and supervise the required clinical hours;
- 3) evaluating the effectiveness of the program; and

- 4) assessing student learning, including through the use of licensure examinations and final qualifying projects;

that, in the report prepared for the Fall 2022 evaluation, the institution may request general approval to offer professional doctoral-level programs within the scope of its mission.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The report submitted by Western Connecticut State University (WCSU) was accepted, and the Doctor of Nursing Practice program encompassed within the institution's accreditation, because the Commission finds that the proposed program fits within the institution's mission and fulfills the *Standards for Accreditation* and relevant Commission policies.

The Commission commends Western Connecticut State University for a thorough proposal that carefully follows the institution's planning and evaluation guidelines that assess academic rigor, regional fit/demand, and financial sustainability. As there are currently no other DNP programs in the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities system, the need for the program is well documented. The designated faculty appear to be well qualified and prepared to offer this fully on-line program, as they have successfully offered an Ed.D. program in Nursing Education in this same format since 2016. The courses and academic standards as well as the clinical hour requirements are well articulated, and the learning outcomes are specific and correlated with the standards of the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN).

We remind you that any plans to offer additional programs at the doctoral 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 program within two years of its initiation and before the first class is graduated. The report prepared for the Fall 2022 visit 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 the report prepared prior to the Fall 2022 visit to give emphasis to four matters related to our standards on *The Academic Program*; *Teaching, Learning and Scholarship*; and *Educational Effectiveness*.

With regard to ensuring that the rigor of courses offered is consistent and appropriate for doctoral-level students, WCSU's report notes the institution's intention to meet the standards defined by AACN for DNP programs including AACN's eight essentials of doctoral education for advanced practice. The Commission requests that the report prepared for the Fall 2022 visit provide further evidence of the University's success in this regard as the program gets underway, in keeping with our standard on *The Academic Program*:

The institution's graduate programs have cohesive curricula and require scholarly and professional activities designed to advance the student substantially beyond the educational accomplishments of a baccalaureate degree program. The demands made by the institution's graduate programs on students' intellectual and creative capacities are also

significantly greater than those expected at the undergraduate level; graduate programs build upon and challenge students beyond the levels of knowledge and competence acquired at the undergraduate level. The institution offering both undergraduate and graduate degree programs assesses the relationship and interdependence of the two levels and utilizes the results for improvement (4.24).

Professional, performance, or practice-oriented programs at the doctoral or master's degree levels are designed to prepare students for professional careers involving the application or transmission of existing knowledge or the development of new applications of knowledge within their field. Such programs afford the student a broad conceptual mastery of the field of professional practice through an understanding of its subject matter, literature, theory, and methods. They seek to develop the capacity to identify, evaluate, interpret, organize, and communicate knowledge, and to develop those analytical and professional skills needed to practice in and advance the profession. Instruction in relevant research methodology is provided, directed toward the appropriate application of its results as a regular part of professional practice. Programs include the sequential development of professional skills that will result in competent practitioners. Where there is a hierarchy of degrees within an area of professional study, programs differ by level as reflected in the expected sophistication, knowledge, and capacity for leadership within the profession by graduates (4.26).

Programs encompassing both research activities and professional practice define their relative emphases in program objectives that are reflected in curricular, scholarly, and program requirements (4.27).

While the University's report references the qualifications of its existing nursing faculty and states the program will "primarily use existing faculty," it does not address the question of the sufficiency of faculty to advise students during the on-line program, in the on-site meetings, and to supervise and appropriately document the required clinical hours. We look forward, through the Fall 2022 evaluation, to receiving further information about this matter. The Commission refers you to our standards on *The Academic Program* and *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*:

Faculty responsible for graduate programs are sufficient by credentials, experience, number, and time commitment for the successful accomplishment of program objectives and program improvement. The scholarly expectations of faculty exceed those expected for faculty working at the undergraduate level. Research-oriented graduate programs have a preponderance of active research scholars on their faculties. Professionally-oriented programs include faculty who are experienced professionals making scholarly contributions to the development of the field (4.22).

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).

As noted in the proposal submitted by WCSU, the DNP program will be incorporated into the University's program review process and will also be subject to the Connecticut Board of Regents review process for new programs. We anticipate being apprised, in Fall 2022, of the initial progress with these reviews. Relevant here is our standard on *The Academic Program*:

The institution undertakes academic planning and evaluation as part of its overall planning and evaluation to enhance the achievement of institutional mission and program objectives.

These activities are realistic and take into account stated goals and available resources. Additions and deletions of programs are consistent with institutional mission and capacity, faculty expertise, student needs, and the availability of sufficient resources required for the development and improvement of academic programs. The institution allocates resources on the basis of its academic planning, needs, and objectives (4.7).

The Commission also requests that the report prepared for the Fall 2022 evaluation include updated information on WCSU's success in assessing student learning, including through the use of measures such as retention rates and the final qualifying projects. The Commission looks forward to learning, through the institution's assessment of these final projects, how effectively students have been able to demonstrate both their mastery of skills and the impact they have had on nursing practice through their evaluation of a health care program or their identification of clinical strategies for improving quality control and patient care. We remind you of our standards on *The Academic Program* (cited above and below) and *Educational Effectiveness*:

Students who successfully complete a graduate program demonstrate that they have acquired the knowledge and developed the skills that are identified as the program's objectives (4.28).

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 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 results of assessment and quantitative measures of student success are a demonstrable factor in the institution's efforts to improve the learning opportunities and results for students (8.8).

Should Western Connecticut State University wish to be considered for general approval to offer professional doctoral programs within the institution's mission, the report prepared in advance of the Fall 2022 evaluation should provide evidence of the College's developed capacity at the higher degree.

The Commission expressed its appreciation for the report submitted by Western Connecticut State University and hopes its preparation 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 and the head of the state system on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Matt Fleury and Mark Ojakian. The institution is free to release information about this report and the Commission's action to others, in accordance with the enclosed policy on Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions.

Dr. John B. Clark
October 15, 2020
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If you have any questions about the Commission's action, please contact Lawrence Schall,
President of the Commission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "George Tetler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping "G" and a distinct "T" and "E".

George Tetler
GT/sjp

Enclosures: Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions,
Procedures for the Substantive Change Evaluation

cc: Matt Fleury
Mark Ojakian