



May 27, 2026

Dr. Jesse M. Bernal
President
Western Connecticut State University
181 White Street
Danbury, CT 06810-6860

Dear President Bernal:

I write to inform you that at its meeting on April 23, 2026, the New England Commission of Higher Education considered the report submitted by Western Connecticut State University, as well as the report of the visiting team, and took the following action:

- that the report submitted by Western Connecticut State University be accepted;
- that the Notice of Concern that Western Connecticut State University is in danger of not meeting the standard on *Organization and Governance* be removed;
- that a continued Notice of Concern be issued to Western Connecticut State University that it is in danger of not meeting the standards on *Institutional Resources* and *Educational Effectiveness*;
- that the institution be asked to submit an Annual Report on Finance and Enrollment (ARFE) by December 1, 2026 for consideration in Spring 2027;
- that Western Connecticut State University (WCSU) submit a progress report by January 15, 2028, for consideration in Spring 2028, that gives emphasis to the institution's success in addressing the concerns that led to the issuing of a continued Notice of Concern for *Institutional Resources* and *Educational Effectiveness* and includes WCSU's FY2027 audited financial statements and the Commission's Finance and Enrollment forms;
- that the interim (fifth-year) report with focused evaluation visit scheduled for Fall 2028 be confirmed.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its actions.

The report submitted by Western Connecticut State University was accepted because it was responsive to the issues raised by the Commission in its letter of March 15, 2024.

The Commission commends Western Connecticut State University (WCSU) for:

- stabilization of its leadership, with “a strong permanent president and provost in place.” The visiting team noted positively the leadership’s focus on “build[ing] team and organizational hope and spirit” in addition to “assur[ing] stability.”
- its successful efforts to leverage its “existing tools and processes” to improve shared governance through “predictable, inclusive decision routines” and a “shared leadership operating rhythm.”

- development of *Western Rising*, WCSU's 2024-2030 strategic plan. Building on its strengthened shared governance structure, the institution has developed its *Focused Strategy* as the "execution layer" of its strategic plan, with "new commitment and strategy teams" responsible for implementation and reporting.
- its enrollment growth of almost 10%, from 4,169 in Fall 2024 to 4,573 in Fall 2025. WCSU expects to meet its Fall 2026 target of 4% year-over-year enrollment growth – with 850 new first-year students and 400 transfers – based on increased deposits received to date. WCSU attributes the increase in part to its revised marketing strategies, including enhanced outreach to prospective students in New Jersey and New York. In addition, in Fall 2026 WCSU anticipates 100% occupancy in student housing.
- its U.S. Department of Education five-year Student Support Services grant of \$1.3 million. WCSU utilized a portion of the grant to launch a student success early-alert pilot in February 2026, initially focusing on EAP/Pre-College, high-risk, and TRIO students and plans to scale the program in Fall 2026.

Remove Notice of Concern: Standard no longer at Risk of Non-Compliance

Organization and Governance (Standard 3): WCSU has made significant progress in shared governance, achieving improved transparency, communication, and accountability; internal shared governance "was no longer a significant concern" for any of the groups that met with the visiting team. In addition to establishing a "shared leadership operating rhythm," the creation or reinstatement of groups – such as the President's Council, Budget Advisory Group, the Strategic Enrollment and Student Success Council, focus groups, and new university budget and strategy groups – demonstrates the institution's commitment to maintaining a "system of governance [that] involves the participation of all appropriate constituencies and includes regular communication among them" (3.2).

Continued Notice of Concern

If the Commission finds that the concerns related to the issuing of a Notice of Concern have not been sufficiently addressed, it will continue the formal Notice of Concern. An institution issued a continued formal Notice of Concern is subject to further monitoring which may include a progress report, Annual Report on Finance and Enrollment (ARFE), or focused evaluation. The Commission will assess the results of that monitoring no later than two years after the continued formal Notice of Concern is issued.

A continued formal Notice of Concern is not made public by the Commission.

At the prerogative of the President of the Commission, staff will ask to meet within 90 days with broad-based representation of the institution's leadership, including the President and the chair of the governing board.

Standards at Risk of Non-Compliance: *Institutional Resources (Standard 7) and Educational Effectiveness (Standard 8)*

Institutional Resources (Standard 7)

While Western Connecticut State University has experienced recent enrollment growth, financial sustainability remains the institution's "biggest challenge." Although WCSU ended FY2025 with a \$5.8 million surplus, the institution candidly acknowledged that without one-time support from ARPA (\$17.6 million) and the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities

system office (\$6.6 million in “bridge” funding), the FY2025 result would have been an operating deficit of \$18.4 million and that, going forward, “[w]ithout mitigation, WCSU would face recurring structural deficits.” In its *Western Rising Focused Strategy*, WCSU has set a “clear target” to eliminate an estimated \$12.4M structural deficit by FY30, with 50% of the deficit to be eliminated by FY2027. The institution’s multi-year “financial glidepath” includes a “Fiscal Resilience Blueprint” with 18 levers covering revenue growth, cost efficiencies, and system/state support. Near-term mitigation measures include administrative restructuring (projected \$1.7 million in savings) by the end of FY2026 and academic portfolio reorganization beginning in Fall 2026. As recognized by the institution, “WCSU’s next phase is less about planning and more about disciplined implementation under real constraints.”

Educational Effectiveness (Standard 8)

The visiting team noted positively that Western Connecticut State University “has made significant progress in establishing assessment infrastructure and processes.” Further progress will be demonstrated by WCSU “operationalizing” its assessment framework and using the results from its assessment processes to inform decision-making and “improvement actions.” In Fall 2025 the institution began its first two-year General Education assessment cycle and faculty work groups “have made meaningful progress in rubric selection and sampling plans.” In addition, having “identified retention as the single greatest opportunity to improve both student outcomes and fiscal sustainability,” WCSU established a multi-year (2025-2030), 44-point retention plan that it expects will be completely rolled out by the time of the Fall 2028 interim report site visit.

So that the institution can update the Commission on its continued progress to strengthen its financial sustainability and eliminate its structural deficit by FY2030, Western Connecticut State University is asked to submit an Annual Report on Finance and Enrollment (ARFE) by December 1, 2026 for consideration in Spring 2027. The purpose of the ARFE report is to help the Commission determine whether the University continues to meet its standard on *Institutional Resources*. The report narrative should include an explanation of the institution’s enrollment history and its future projections; assessment of the institution’s cash flow and liquidity position; and analysis of its operating results (surplus or deficit) to include trends in net tuition (*Students*, Statement of the Standard; 7.4, 7.5, 7.6, 7.14).

Consistent with its Policy on Notice of Concern, as part of its monitoring of Western Connecticut State University’s progress in achieving its goals, the Commission asks WCSU to submit a Progress Report by January 15, 2028, for consideration in Spring 2028, that gives emphasis to the institution’s success in addressing the matters that led to the issuing of a continued Notice of Concern for *Institutional Resources* and *Educational Effectiveness*. In addition, we ask that the Spring 2028 report include the institution’s FY2027 audited financial statements and the Commission’s Finance and Enrollment forms as further evidence of WCSU’s progress toward achieving the goals of its *Western Rising Focused Strategy* and eliminating its structural deficit by FY2030.

The Commission expressed appreciation for the report prepared by Western Connecticut State University and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you and Stephen Hegedus, Provost and VP for Academic Affairs, and Martin Guay, Board of Regents Chair, during its deliberations.

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 and the head of the system of action on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Ari Santiago, Karen Buffkin and Natalie Braswell.

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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.

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Michael Whelan".

Michael Whelan
Commission Chair

MW/mrc

cc: Ari Santiago
Karen Buffkin
Natalie Braswell

Attachments: Guidelines for Preparing the Annual Report on Finance and Enrollment (ARFE)
Guidelines for Preparing Progress Reports
Policy on Notice of Concern
Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions