

Richard S. Lapidus, Ph.D.

PRESIDENT

TO: Dr. Lawrence M. Schall, President of the Commission
New England Commission of Higher Education

FROM: Dr. Richard S. Lapidus, President
Fitchburg State University

DATE: June 30, 2022

RE: Fitchburg State University Response to Visiting Team Report, 2022 Comprehensive Review

We would like to recognize our visiting team led by Dr. Frank Sánchez for taking the time to participate in our comprehensive NECHE reaccreditation process. We value their thorough review of our institutional self-study and their attentive and careful dialogue with campus constituents during the March 2022 campus visit. In addition, we want to acknowledge the NECHE staff who responded to our questions throughout the two-year process. Their guidance and support were greatly appreciated.

As our self-study documented, Fitchburg State University engaged in a transparent and inclusive process using data to allow our reflections to reveal areas of strength and areas for continuous improvement. In this memorandum, we first respond to noted areas of concern contained within the visiting team report followed by responses to feedback within each of the standards.

Areas of Concern

Divisional long-term planning/Finance: The university has made progress on the development of divisional long-term plans. For example, in the Standard Two section of this response the Academic Affairs divisional plan that was in process during the NECHE site visit is now fully approved and operational. The visiting team's report specifically noted the lack of plans in finance. While multi-year financial projections, based on detailed modeling are regularly used for decision-making and shared with the campus, the university understands that a more comprehensive financial plan that ties divisional plans together is needed.

With that in mind, the university is more tightly connecting divisional plans to the strategic plan with particular emphasis on the enrollment plan, the staffing plan, and the academic portfolio. In our self-study, we committed through a projection that university leadership, led by the VP for Finance and Administration, will create a long-term sustainable business model to be submitted to the Board of Trustees in FY25 (page 135, self-study).

While the university has experienced declining enrollment in recent years, its historically conservative fiscal practices, accumulation of financial reserves, and recent allocation of HEERF funds, provide the financial resources necessary to fill the structural deficit gap in its day undergraduate program while longer-term planning continues. University leadership is committed to continuing to make the budget process and its overall financial position as transparent, and understandable, as possible. In addition to the traditional budget presentations done at the president's open forums, the plan is to continue the campus-wide financial forums that the president and VPFA started last year. Most recently, on June 22, a detailed presentation on the budget process and components was prepared for the Board of Trustees. This presentation will be shared with the campus in the fall.

Board of Trustee subcommittees: The Board of Trustees, when fully appointed, has 11 members of which nine are selected by the Governor. Over many years of the NECHE evaluative period, one or more member seats have gone unfilled. This has created challenges with populating some subcommittees as specified in the board's bylaws. As a result, the board elected to address subject matter that might have been addressed in subcommittees at regular board meetings as a committee of the whole. Nonetheless, the board has decided that in calendaring future years' board meetings, it will formally include subcommittee meetings. The next academic year's calendar is in the process of final approval with the tentative meeting schedule available on our [website](#).

School of Graduate, Online and Continuing Education (SGOCE) Program Assessments: The programs and courses offered through the School of Graduate, Online and Continuing Education are administered in collaboration with the academic departments. The visiting team noted that they did not see evidence of evaluative measures for learning outcomes for our non-externally accredited (non-licensure) education programs. Although we agree that assessment specifically linked to non-licensure programs could be improved, most of these programs have both licensure and non-licensure concentrations. Because these programs have licensure concentration companions, they do conduct very similar assessments and evaluate the same program components with the exclusion of those associated with the educator practicum. For example, our master's program in Educational Leadership and Management (EDLM) has a licensure concentration, which falls under the DESE and CAEP review. The EDLM program also has a non-licensure concentration that is outside of those external accreditors purview and should, therefore, be included under the university's seven-year program review cycle. We acknowledge that this has caused some confusion resulting in inconsistent attention to the non-licensure concentrations of education programs. We agree that additional clarity is needed on the assessment activities through annual reports and full program review to substantiate achieved student learning outcomes. You will see specifically how we intend to address this in our response under Academic Programs.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: Fitchburg State embraces a commitment to diversity, inclusion, belonging, and social justice. We honor and accept the uniqueness of each individual on our campus, recognize and respect the differences amongst us, and remain mindful of those things, which connect us all. Our [DEI webpage](#) states our commitments and provides specific resources for our community, most notably our students. We appreciate the team's recognition of our emphasis on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion and understand that continued work is needed. Specifically, let us highlight some of the current initiatives beyond those highlighted in the self-study. Our Leading for Change Committee included four subcommittees this past year, including a "We Are All Educators" programming series. Our April 2022 program included panels of diverse students sharing their experiences allowing community members to hear what is needed to support their experience and improve their sense of belonging. Professional development on this topic is regularly provided by other groups outside of Leading for Change as well as through Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and Human Resources. In addition, the university has instituted a Faculty Academy professional development program in which members work in small cohorts over three years to build a holistic approach to teaching. This includes active learning, brings "real talk" to the classroom, and establishes a sense of belonging.

A new identity-based programming fund was established. From this funding source, Latinx Heritage Month, LGBTQ+ Month, Black History Month, and Women's Herstory Month each received \$2,500. In addition, any individual or group can apply for these funds to support identity-based programming. Our self-study discussed our work to conduct policy reviews with a DEI lens. Since the visit, the university awarded funding to the Leading for Change Policy Audit subcommittee to provide consulting support to assist departments with this work. In addition, we have scheduled a session during our summer academic department chairs retreat with our director for Student Diversity, Equity and Belonging Programs. He will collaborate with academic department chairs to assist them in understanding how to create an inclusive and equitable climate within their departments. We value an equity-minded perspective as a foundation of leadership.

One additional recent powerful example is our support of faculty in the adoption and creation of open educational resources that are intentionally inclusive and representative of underrepresented students that reflect and honor their

lives. The university is part of a six-campus, grant-funded project that will provide resources to create these course materials. The first round of faculty grants was awarded this June, so faculty have begun this work.

Response to Feedback by Standards

Standard One, Mission and Purpose: We are pleased that the visiting team supports our institutional self-study projection to formally establish a review cycle for our mission, vision, and core values. This cycle of review will be presented through the university governance process in fall 2022 with an anticipated approval before the end of the academic year. This will set the university up to conduct the mission review in the 2023/2024 academic year in advance of strategic planning with attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion along with a focus on the increased graduate and online student populations.

Standard Two, Planning and Evaluation: One factual error was not corrected in this section, which is important to note in this archival document. The third of our six university strategic plan goals reads: “be an engine of social, economic, civic **and cultural development in our city and region**” (page 38, self-study). The bold phrase was not included in the team report.

We are pleased to report great progress on the development of a tracking system to inventory and track action items and metrics for our strategic plan and NECHE self-study projections. Our chief information officer was able to build an internal software system we have labeled the Campus Achievement Reporting System (CARS) that will greatly facilitate the work of the Office of Institutional Research and Planning. This user-friendly program will allow stakeholders across all divisions to enter work related to strategic plan goals and metrics as well as action items/projections outlined in our NECHE self-study. This system will allow views at many disaggregated levels. In addition, since it will include the lead staff responsible for various actions, the system will send automatic reminders to hold us accountable to our work. As we move forward with this new technology tool, we will be able to use it for submission of departmental and divisional reports as well, mapping annual assessment reports to strategic plan goals and metrics.

Fitchburg State has committed to the consistent development of divisional plans that will be created following the adoption of each new university plan. At the time of the NECHE visiting team review, the Academic Affairs divisional plan was on its way to finalization and approval. We are pleased to report that this plan has now been fully approved through campus governance. Attention to the priorities of this plan, which is aligned with the strategic plan, will also be tracked in our new CARS system.

Motivated by our NECHE visiting team’s feedback, the president and his executive cabinet have returned to the goals and metrics of the strategic plan to reassess our priorities, confirm our metrics, and make any appropriate adjustments. This group met in early June and is currently reviewing an updated version of the key performance indicators. Through the university’s strategic funding budget system, the Office of Institutional Research and Planning has secured funds to move to a more-robust survey system. We will move from Select Survey to Qualtrics, greatly enhancing our ability to analyze important data critical to our strategic plan and institutional priorities while allowing greater control over survey volume, thus limiting the risk of survey fatigue. In addition, we are working with EAB to implement Edify, a data integration and visualization platform that will bring together data that currently exists in various systems to one technological solution resulting in a single central data source to inform university leadership.

The Office of Institutional Research and Planning is at the center of all research, planning, and assessment work. We agree with the visiting team’s assessment that this office is essential to executing the strategic plan, the NECHE accreditation recommendations, and all assessment work. The office is running at full capacity. Therefore, the university has budgeted funds in its FY23 budget to add a staff member to that office.

Standard Three, Organization and Governance: As noted in the self-study, our Board of Trustees completes a bi-annual self-assessment evaluation. We have committed, through a projection, to further assessment by engaging an external

perspective and look forward to this additional feedback. Working with the board chair, the president will finalize a plan with an anticipated review in spring 2023 (page 50, self-study).

The university holds regular forums that explain the budget development and decision-making process. While on campus, the team heard from some faculty that they seek additional discussion opportunities on the budget. This past year, the president and the vice president for administration and finance held separate meetings with faculty union representatives to conduct deeper dives into the budget. Following those meetings, the presentation was shared with the campus. In addition, the finance office has [posted the decisions](#) of departmental strategic funding requests for improved transparency.

Standard Four, The Academic Program: The visiting team categorized Fitchburg State’s academic programs into four categories: undergraduate day, undergraduate evening, graduate, and graduate programs offered through extended campus contractual relationships. In category two, undergraduate evening programs overseen by the School of Graduate, Online and Continuing Education (SGOCE), they stated that courses are taught by adjunct faculty. Because there is a separate faculty contract overseeing programs offered through SGOCE, all faculty teaching in those programs receive individual “adjunct” contracts for each course taught. However, many full-time university faculty teach in these programs as overload, so to categorize all faculty as adjunct may be misleading. The consistent participation of our full-time faculty to teach in these programs is a long-standing demonstration of our academic departments’ commitment to these programs.

We appreciate the team’s support of our stated commitment to continue work on the distinction between the BA and BS degree. Our academic deans will collaborate with academic departments to pursue curricular redesign that differentiate the BA from the BS beyond the language requirement beginning in AY22 (projection, page 70, self-study).

The visiting team concluded that “non-externally accredited programs online degree, courses/programs and accelerated courses/programs, whether taught by FSU or Extended Partners, are not being measured for comparability to campus-based programs or against a main component of Standard 4—“Institutions develop the systematic means to understand how and what students are learning and to use the evidence obtained to improve the academic program.” As noted by the visiting team, Fitchburg State has a robust and well-developed system of assessment. We require all programs to complete an annual assessment report and undertake a complete program review every seven years. For those programs that adhere to external accreditation standards, they follow that accreditation’s reporting cycle. Most of the education department’s programs have fallen under either the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) or the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education licensure standards requirements. Although the courses within the non-externally accredited education programs are the same as those within the externally accredited programs, our non-externally accredited programs should nonetheless follow our internal institutional seven-year program review cycle, and as noted by the visiting team, there is a lack of consistency in doing so. We have taken the following actions since the NECHE visit to ensure that these programs are more consistently reviewed:

1). The university’s seven-year program review currently includes all education programs with the exception of Educational Studies and Early Education and Care together under their CAEP umbrella. To ensure those non-externally accredited education programs are assessed regularly going forward, they have been explicitly added to the university’s program review schedule. Due to the significant level of overlap, all education programs and courses, inclusive of all modalities and locations, will be reviewed concurrently during the AAQEP (moving from CAEP to AAQEP) preparation year in 2023-2024 and then in conjunction with the next DESE review. These reviews will include an external perspective. See schedule of programs posted to our website [here](#).

2). This review schedule, along with corresponding processes, were developed by the SGOCE and education deans in conjunction with the AVP in the OIRP. A detailed plan for the assessment of all non-licensure programs and courses will be formalized over the summer of 2022 and preparation for the 2023-2024 review will take place over AY23. The AY24

self-study will serve as the framework for assessment work moving forward, including the development of an Action Plan during AY25.

3). The SGOCE dean has been added to the University Assessment and Research Committee (UARC). This committee was established in 2017 to sustain and improve Fitchburg State's academic programming, accreditation requirements, and overall performance, through a systematic approach to assessing student learning outcomes, student success measures, and institutional performance measures. This will provide campus level of accountability to assess all programs.

In the visiting team's report, they noted some confusion regarding the number of contractual relationships. To help provide some clarity, we would like to point out that the Institutional Characteristics Form on page 5 of the self-study lists seven partnerships because they meet the definition of those contractual relationships as defined on that form. Our institutional self-study noted 32 contractual partnerships within Standard Four, which had grown to 37 by the time of the March visit. Contractual partnerships beyond the seven do not meet the definition of "offered for a Title IV-eligible degree or certificate," but are instead partnerships offering courses.

The team again supported one of our commitments to review our course numbering system. We have already explicitly made a projection noting that, "academic departments will undertake an evaluation of program course numbers beginning in AY23 to ensure numbers are consistently applied to indicate lower and upper-level courses" (page 70, self-study).

The team also noted that we are currently in the process of creating assessment tools for all of the learning outcomes in the new General Education Program. As described in both Standards Four and Eight, the university has approached the development and assessment of this new General Education Program, just launched in fall 2021, with significant structural processes and allocation of resources that will result in an effective assessment plan that is planned to be presented to governance in AY23.

The team acknowledged our reflection and intention to develop research opportunities for our graduate students. In fact, our intention was made as a commitment through a projection that states, "SGOCE will work with graduate chairs to explore the need for additional opportunities for student participation in research grant-writing and conference participations. A multi-disciplinary recommendation will be developed by May 2023 and presented to the Provost" (page 71, self-study).

Standard Five, Students: The team acknowledged enrollment declines while noting the university's plans to further develop their strategic enrollment and marketing plan. We are pleased to report progress on the development of our strategic and marketing plans. Since the writing of the self-study, and with the new associate vice president of enrollment management in place, the Marketing and Integrated Communications office has added two staff members to that division. With a full staff in place, a review of all existing communication plans, a review of past and current academic scholarships, and assessment of traditional marketing efforts has been completed. This work is the first step to document existing practices and identify available resources to develop multi-year strategic plans. We anticipate leadership review of draft plans in fall 2022.

The team report indicated that a new division of the university had been created to focus on the student experience in non-traditional learning modalities. The university has historically had a division of graduate and continuing education. The "new" refers to the renaming and elevation of this division to the School of Graduate, Online and Continuing Education. There has been dialogue and attention to services for our non-traditional and online students. Our self-study projection that states, "In fall 2022, SGOCE and OIRP will administer a survey to identify services used and desired by graduate students. In spring 2023 a team of staff and administrators will develop recommendations, keeping in mind

fees associated with varied student services” (page 94, self-study) is further evidence of our attention to support this student population.

The team’s report remarked on the university’s shift to provide health services through an off-campus provider. Our self-study has committed, through a projection, to assess the effectiveness of students accessing healthcare through our partner. The survey referenced in our projection (page 94, self-study) is already being constructed for planned dissemination in fall 2022.

Our institutional self-study described our work on diversity, equity and inclusion throughout the document. In the team’s comments within Standard Five, they note that they learned during their visit conversations around the potential creation of a chief diversity officer. Those conversations remain active and will take further shape when the university welcomes a new provost in July.

Our self-study reported a drop of residence hall students over the past 10 years, which can be attributable to multiple factors. The visiting team acknowledged conversations with several students who described dissatisfaction with the residence hall experience. Residence hall leadership continues to solicit feedback about the students’ experiences and is an active partner in retention efforts.

The team recognized our attention to support student athletes. Our self-study included a projection that committed the university to explore and develop strategies to support academic success (page 94, self-study). Since the writing of the report, we piloted a student athlete study hall for football in spring 2022. We are building on that experience to expand to other sports. Planning and piloting will continue in 2022/2023.

Standard Six, Teaching, Learning and Scholarship: We are grateful that the team recognized and acknowledged the close and warm relationships among faculty and staff. Those close and supportive relationships are visible between faculty, staff, and students. Students are at the center of our work, and our passion for servicing students is a palpable part of our community.

The team’s report references numbers in our self-study related to possible gender salary gaps. The salary gaps outlined in the self-study note the differences at the professor level and not at point-of-hire. Years of service and application rates for post-tenure review are potential variables. In accordance with the Massachusetts Equity Pay Act, HR will conduct a pay-equity study for faculty and staff to assess whether there is statistical evidence of a gap in salary associated with gender or minority status (page 106, self-study).

We are also gratified for the team’s acknowledgement of our additional attention to student advising. The university’s expansion of professional development and resource support, as described in this chapter of the self-study, is critical for supporting our students’ success. The team did report that some students expressed concern about having limited access to faculty advisors and their reliance on DegreeWorks. SGOCE will continue to conduct bi-annual assessment of student perspectives to understand advising and support service needs. Although we do not want a single student to have issues related to access to his or her advisor, we do not believe this to be a widespread issue.

Standard Seven, Institutional Resources: The report states Fitchburg State is fiscally challenged, but it should be noted that the university concluded the current fiscal year, and most years leading up to this evaluation, with positive balances in all three net asset categories. While we acknowledge that HEERF funds played a role in the most recent balances, our conservative fiscal stance has been, and will continue to be, a guiding principle for the university. As noted in our projection, it is our intention to have a more-comprehensive financial plan approved by the BOT for FY25. The effort will be led by the VPFA but will necessitate, in particular, a collaboration with the incoming provost and Office of Human Resources as prioritization of the academic portfolio, and staffing considerations will be necessary to right-size the undergraduate day division. Further consideration of staff positions throughout the institution, although noted by the

review team in some areas as already being thin, will also need to be part of the analysis and planning. As personnel make up nearly half of the total budget, this is going to be a challenging exercise to ensure that both the integrity of academic programs and support services remain intact and at the same time compliance is maintained within each of our collective bargaining agreements. Long-term planning will be significantly guided by the enrollment plan and success in attracting and retaining both undergraduate and graduate-level students.

Deferred maintenance will continue to be a challenge given the age of the campus and the resources allocated to the campus by the state. The university, as noted in the report, has been creative with project planning thus allowing for the maximization of available state funding. As noted in the projections, Capital Planning and Maintenance will be updating their five-year deferred maintenance plan, which will be submitted to the state in FY23.

Standard Eight, Educational Effectiveness: We are pleased that the visiting team could verify evidence through our self-study and through campus visit interviews that the university has created a robust culture of assessment across the university. This has been done through years of dedicated and consistent attention to this essential work. With a system of assessment firmly in place, we recognize that there is room for continuous improvement to make sure all programs implement their required assessments.

Although 100% of departments submitted annual assessment reports, the team noted two reports that were incomplete and one that used indirect methods. Explanations were provided by the three departments that specify these departures for a particular year in review. For example, the sociology program explained the impact of the pandemic contributing to the lack of usual assessments while mathematics noted chair leadership transition and is already reporting to the return to their direct assessment. We do not see these as systematic issues, but it is important for us to pay attention to them. As always in such cases, we work with departments when reports are incomplete. Our self-study describes how the University Assessment and Research Committee (UARC) reviews these reports annually and provides feedback. The team reports that our director of assessment has no recourse when an academic department does not comply with the policies in place. As a staff of one, that may be the case. However, this director has the support of the associate vice president of institutional research and planning and UARC to reinforce compliance, as well as the deans and provost.

In a review of other assessment reports, the team found examples of reports that did not include all required components. The team noted that assessment of certificate programs is not apparent. While there are some certificate programs that need to develop full assessment plans and have now been added to the program review cycle, there are certificate programs that are regularly assessed, such as the Applied Behavior Analysis Certificate (external Behavior Analyst Board) and the Autism Spectrum Disorders and Reading Specialist Certificates (reviewed by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education).

The report also states that assessment of graduate programs is in the development stage with the exception of the MBA program. This is not accurate. The university's seven-year program review cycle includes all graduate programs. We acknowledged earlier in this response that non-externally (non-licensure) accredited programs, all in education, have been missed in previous review cycles. However, other programs have included graduate program review at the same time they are conducting review of their undergraduate programs (i.e. History, English, and Applied Communications). Our graduate counseling program conducts systematic assessment as documented in annual reporting and program review. Our education licensure programs are externally accredited with required robust assessments. Our graduate nursing program provides assessments to its external accreditor.

The team noted that SLOs for the baccalaureate and master's programs of history are nearly identical. The deans for SGOCE and arts and sciences plan to work with the academic department to address this in the coming academic year.

The visiting team was also seeking data to confirm similar program quality for programs that are offered through our extended campus programs, as well as online and accelerated modalities. This issue was raised within Standard Four as well, specifically about the program review process for non-externally accredited programs through extended campus contractual relationships. As detailed in the response under Standard Four, the university is committed to addressing this gap with a specific plan to make certain these programs are part of the regular assessment review process. We are confident that good progress will be made over the next few years.

The team was also seeking evidence of data comparison for programs that are offered both in person as well as online. The programs that offer modality options to students do submit assessment reports for those programs. However, improvement is needed to disaggregate the data between those student populations in addition to the overall program assessment results.

We appreciate that the team was able to see the results of our development of co-curricular assessments and the substantial progress made by the departments within Student Affairs. Developing learning outcomes and key performance indicators for the co-curricular experiences of our students is critical to our institutional effectiveness.

As noted by the visiting team and provided in the data first forms and electronic evidence room, Fitchburg State collects retention and graduation data disaggregated by demographic information. This data has now been made available via the [OIRP website](#).

Standard Nine, Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure: Fitchburg State's commitment to integrity, transparency, and public disclosure was evident to the visiting team. We appreciate the team's support of areas we identified for continuous improvement.

The report noted that the Student Government Association sought to create a bias-related team. A Bias Incident Response Team was created in the 2020/2021 academic year and is fully functioning as noted on page 90 of the self-study.

We recognize that our intentional decision to develop an external facing website has created some gaps in servicing our internal community. As stated in the projections on page 183 of the self-study, the president will convene a committee by fall 2022 to explore ways to serve internal users' information needs, such as a portal.

The report noted that the OIRP website had limited historical or archived data. Prior to the NECHE visiting team review, this had been intentionally removed in response to some criticism that there was too much information on the webpage. This historical and archived data has now been placed back on the [webpage](#) and organized appropriately.

Concluding Statement

Fitchburg State University has created a process to ensure action on our own NECHE projections, as well as the additional visiting team's feedback, that will hold us accountable to the work. We are confident that appropriate progress will be made on these continuous improvement commitments and we look forward to sharing updates with the Commission.