



July 21, 2021

Mr. Terrence Cheng
President
Connecticut State Colleges & Universities
61 Woodland Street
Hartford, CT 06105

Dear President Cheng:

I write to inform you that at its meeting on June 24, 2021, 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 its progress to implement its plans to consolidate the 12 Connecticut Community Colleges into a single Connecticut State Community College (CT State) be accepted;

that the report prepared for CSCU's substantive change request that the Commission accredit Connecticut State Community College in lieu of twelve separately accredited colleges provide an update on the data submitted in June 2021 and demonstrate how CT State plans to meet the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation* giving particular attention to:

1. *Organization and Governance*: ensuring that CT State's organizational structure clearly defines the authority, roles, and responsibilities of its board, administration (system, college, regional, and campus levels), and faculty, and that its internal governance systems are inclusive with appropriate involvement of faculty in curriculum development and other areas of faculty responsibility and oversight;
2. *Planning and Evaluation*: developing and implementing an inclusive strategic planning process for CT State that will result in a comprehensive and integrated plan for the consolidated institution;
3. *Students*: providing evidence that its goals for student enrollment and retention are realistic, with emphasis on its adoption of a Guided Pathways model to promote student success;

4. *Institutional Resources*: assessing the ability of CT State to support its 12 colleges while achieving long-term financial sustainability;

that representatives of the System, its governing board, leadership of CT State, and a representative sample of leadership of the component community colleges be asked to meet with the Commission when the proposal is scheduled for review in Spring 2022.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its actions.

The report submitted by Connecticut State College and University System on its progress to consolidate the state's 12 community colleges into a single Connecticut State Community College was accepted because it was generally responsive to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letter of August 11, 2020.

The Commission recognizes that, since the initial submission of Connecticut State College and University System's request in Spring 2018 to consolidate its 12 community colleges into one accredited institution – Connecticut State Community College (CT State) – considerable work has been done to achieve financial stability and to improve student success without closing any of the System's 12 campuses, the goals of CSCU's "Students First" proposal. We understand from the report that despite the disruptions brought about by the pandemic, the System's plans remain on track to admit the first CT State students in Fall 2023. We note that, over the past twelve months, CT State's interim leadership team has been put in place to manage the transition, and an Executive Strategic Planning Council has been formed. In addition, administration of federal financial aid has been standardized across the 12 colleges, and Service Level Agreements have been developed for Enrollment Management and Student Affairs. To support CT State as a single institution, shared services were also introduced for finance, human resources, and information technology, and a three-year project was launched to implement a single Student Information System along with other online enrollment management tools. Progress to align the academic programs of the 12 colleges by December 2021 (with the exception of math and English that have until May 2022) has also continued with some 90 systemwide discipline/program faculty groups participating in the development of what will become CT State's curriculum. Thirty-two programs have completed the transitional review process and will be presented to the Board of Regents for approval in June 2021; 23 programs will be sent to the 12 colleges for review/feedback in August 2021; and slightly more than 40 disciplines and programs are still in the faculty development stage. While, as CSCU acknowledges, the merger continues to be controversial and a number of faculty and staff have chosen not to engage in the transition, we nonetheless appreciate that these and other tangible steps were made possible by the work of dozens of faculty and staff who have participated in the groups and committees created to shape the formation of CT State consistent with its stated "mission, vision, guiding principles, and priorities ... as delineated by the Connecticut Board of Regents of Higher Education" (*Executive Strategic Planning Charge*).

While the substantive change report that CSCU anticipates it will submit for Commission review in Spring 2022 will need to demonstrate that, as a single entity, Connecticut State Community College meets each of the *Standards for Accreditation*, we draw your attention to particular issues related to our standards on *Organization and Governance, Planning and Evaluation, Students, and Institutional Resources*.

We support CSCU's decision to consult with the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) to benchmark the staffing of its new consolidated community college. To assure the Commission about the sufficiency of its administrative capacity, the progress report submitted by CSCU further documented proposed staffing levels through FY2024 and notes that the number of faculty, who will be assigned to statewide academic departments in

Fall 2023, is “expected to remain constant ... unless enrollment declines warrant reductions” and that the number of staff, after two years of decreases – from 1,412 to 1,318 – resulting from the implementation of shared services, is estimated to grow primarily due to the addition of 182 Guided Pathway advisors who will be funded using \$39.5 million of federal and state pandemic relief funding. We also are aware that the draft of an initial organizational structure for CT State that outlines system, college, regional, and campus level roles and reporting lines was issued in May 2020 and that an updated organizational chart incorporating the input received from various stakeholder groups will be released in late Summer 2021. With respect to internal governance, CSCU candidly admitted in its report that it has been challenged to build consensus around a system of shared governance for CT State. We understand that a workgroup comprised of 12 elected members (one from each of the colleges) and six at-large members developed a Shared Governance proposal that included a process for curriculum development and approval and clarified that “curriculum remains the primary domain of faculty.” After a period of public comment (November 2020 to January 2021), the proposal was endorsed by only one of the 12 colleges with eight voting not to endorse and three abstaining. Consequently, the workgroup has continued to meet to “review the feedback and will incorporate that feedback into ongoing proposal revisions.” We therefore ask CSCU to give emphasis, in its substantive change report, to how CT State will be structured to meet our standard on *Organization and Governance* that specifies:

The authority, responsibilities, and relationships among the governing board, administration, faculty, staff, and sponsoring entity (if any) are clearly described in the institution’s by-laws, or an equivalent document, and in a table of organization that displays the working order of the institution. The board, administration, staff, faculty, and sponsoring entity understand and fulfill their respective roles as set forth in the institution’s official documents and are provided with the appropriate information to undertake their respective roles (3.1).

The institution’s organizational structure, decision-making processes, and policies are clear and consistent with its mission and support institutional effectiveness. The institution’s system of governance involves the participation of all appropriate constituencies and includes regular communication among them (3.2).

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 relative to the mission of the institution (3.6).

The chief executive officer, through an appropriate administrative structure, effectively manages the institution so as to fulfill its purposes and objectives and establishes the means to assess the effectiveness of the institution ... The chief executive officer assures that the institution employs faculty and staff sufficient in role, number, and qualifications appropriate to the institution’s mission, size, and scope (3.12).

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).

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).

We are pleased to learn that the effort to develop a strategic plan for CT State began in Fall 2020 with a review of the individual plans of the 12 colleges to “identify commonalities.” To lead the creation of a consolidated plan for the launch of CT State in Fall 2023, an Executive Strategic Planning Council was then formed consisting of 50 faculty, staff, students, and other external stakeholders from nine of the 12 constituent colleges even though all had been encouraged to participate. To further enhance CT State’s planning and evaluation capacity, an Interim Associate Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness and Planning was appointed and has begun to work with the regional and campus institutional research staff to “forge a path to a merged office” that will, at the college level, be comprised of “functional teams for greater specialization” while local campus-based and regional institutional research directors will continue to serve the research needs and responsibilities of their respective constituencies. In its substantive change report, we look forward to receiving an update on CSCU’s plans to ensure CT State will meet the requirements of our standard on *Planning and Evaluation*, including:

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).

Institutional research is sufficient to support planning and evaluation. The institution systematically collects and uses data necessary to support its planning efforts and to enhance institutional effectiveness (2.2).

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).

CSCU asserts in its report that “large-scale” system change is needed to “improve opportunities for all students, particularly students of color and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.” In response to the Commission’s request, we appreciate that the enrollment projections included in CT State’s 2019 three-year plan required “significant reassessment” in response to the effect the pandemic had on community college enrollment nationwide. Therefore, after considering a number of scenarios, the revised baseline now takes into account a COVID “bounce” as well as positive enrollment growth from the State’s free college program and its use of federal relief funds to forgive the debt of some 10,000 students. In addition, based on the results achieved by other systems that have implemented a similar approach, CSCU projects that the adoption of the Guided Pathways model, which includes the addition of 182 Guided Pathway advisors, will lead to increased student enrollment and retention thereby contributing to CT State’s long-term financial stability. In support of the initiative, in April 2020 the Board of Regents endorsed Holistic Case Management Advising and set a goal to improve CT State’s student-to-advisor ratio from 750:1 to

250:1 by Fall 2023. We are also encouraged by the efforts planned to reverse the decline in adult learner enrollment that include offering accelerated seven-week terms, adding evening hours, and providing support to help students complete college-level math and English coursework within their first year (or 24 credits). Based on these assumptions, total enrollment is estimated to grow 26% over the next three years – from 23,230 in FY2021 to 29,246 in FY2024. The substantive change report will provide an opportunity for CSCU to share further evidence that its enrollment growth projections for CT State are realistic and in keeping with our standard on *Students*:

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).

Consistent with its mission, the institution describes the characteristics of the students it seeks to serve. This description informs recruitment and admissions activities and the academic and other support programs and services available to students (5.2).

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).

The institution ensures a systematic approach to providing accessible and effective programs and services designed to provide opportunities for enrolled students to be successful in achieving their educational goals. The institution provides students with information and guidance regarding opportunities and experiences that may help ensure their educational success (5.7).

The institution provides advising and academic support services appropriate to the student body (5.10).

In providing services, in accordance with its mission and purposes, the institution adheres to both the spirit and intent of equal opportunity and its own goals for diversity, equity, and inclusion (5.12).

We understand that 70% of the revenue currently received by the 12 Connecticut community colleges comes from the State with four of the colleges having negative reserves. CSCU therefore maintains that it requires the ability to “combine resources as a system” to have the needed “cash and budget flexibility” that system-level reserves and a shared operating fund would provide. To ensure CT State “is in a far better fiscal position,” as noted above, CSCU intends to generate savings by introducing shared services and eliminating duplicated positions and by implementing a number of initiatives designed to grow overall enrollment. While the report assured that the saving from the economies of scale achieved through these shared services along with those “generated from the strategic management of attrition in non-student facing positions” exceeded the administrative cost of the merger in FY2019 and FY2020, the actual amounts as well as those projected going forward were not entirely clear, nor did the report provide information about CT State's plans for the future allocation of funds among its 12 campuses. We therefore anticipate receiving additional details on these matters in the substantive change report to demonstrate CSCU's plans for CT State are consistent with our standard on *Institutional Resources*, including:

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).

Opportunities identified for new sources of revenue are reviewed by the administration and board to ensure the integrity of the institution and the quality of the academic program are maintained and enhanced. The institution planning a substantive change demonstrates the financial and administrative capacity to ensure that the new initiative meets the standards of quality of the institution and the Commission's Standards (7.15).

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 ask that representatives of the System, its governing board, leadership of CT State, and a representative sample of leadership of the component community colleges meet with the Commission when the review of the System's substantive change proposal to accredit Connecticut State Community College in lieu of twelve separately accredited colleges is scheduled for review in March 2022.

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 with you and Matt Fleury, Chair, Connecticut Board of Regents of Higher Education; David Levinson, Interim President, Connecticut State Community College; Michael Rooke, Interim Provost & Vice President of Academic Affairs, Connecticut State Community College and President, Northwest Connecticut Community College; Kerry Kelley, Interim Vice President of Finance and Administration, CFO, Connecticut State Community College; Alison Buckley, Vice President for Enrollment Management, Connecticut State Community College; and G. Duncan Harris, Chief Executive Officer, Capital 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 prepared for the substantive change request from the Connecticut State College and University System's and otherwise as may be helpful.

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 Matt Fleury. The institution is free to release information about the report and the Commission's action to others.

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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 cursive script that reads "George Tetler".

George Tetler

GWT/sjp

Enclosure

cc: Mr. Matt Fleury
Dr. David Levinson
Dr. William T. Brown
Dr. Michelle Coach
Ms. Cheryl DeVonish, Esq.
Dr. Lisa Dresdner
Dr. Nicole Esposito
Dr. G. Duncan Harris
Dr. Karen Hynick
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