April 6, 2016

Dr. David P. Angel
President
Clark University
212 Geography Building
950 Main Street
Worcester, MA 01610-1477

Dear President Angel:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on March 4, 2016, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Clark University:

that Clark University be continued in accreditation;

that the University submit an interim report for consideration in Fall 2020;

that, in addition to the information included in all interim reports, the University give emphasis to its success in:

1. integrating programs offered through the College of Professional and Continuing Education into the University’s academic oversight and governance structures;

2. strengthening its data systems and processes to enhance the efficient and consistent collection and dissemination of data across the University;

3. assessing student learning outcomes in all programs and using the results to make improvements, with emphasis on the Liberal Education and Effective Practice program;

4. achieving its enrollment goals in master’s degree programs;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Fall 2025.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

Clark University is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be substantially in compliance with the Standards for Accreditation.
The Commission commends Clark University (Clark) for its outstanding self-study that documents the University’s many accomplishments over the last decade. We are especially gratified to learn of Clark’s commitment to its distinctive mission “to prepare students to meet the challenges of a complex and rapidly changing society” through two clearly defined dimensions: research and liberal arts. Guided by two over arching goals – elevating Clark’s reputation as an institution of consequence and strengthening its resource base – Clark is successfully connecting its high-quality liberal arts curriculum with the “real world” through its Liberal Education and Effective Practice (LEEP) model. Further, we join the visiting team in praising the University for its notable strengths that include: a highly qualified and competent Board of Trustees, leadership team, faculty, and staff; a comprehensive and integrated approach to mission-focused planning; a governance structure that is an integral part of the organizational infrastructure; and a student-centered culture that supports collegiality and open communication. Clark’s deep, sustained engagement with the Main South and City of Worcester community, a partnership of more than 30 years that is “an important dimension of the University’s character,” is especially noteworthy, as is Clark’s commitment to encourage and support research that “connects across disciplines, connects faculty with students, and connects the institution with communities beyond the institution.” Further, it is heartening to learn that Clark “intentionally adopted” the self-study process to use as a springboard to develop Clark’s 2017-2021 strategic plan. With a campus community that is passionate about the institution’s value-centered mission and purposes, Clark is well positioned to continue driving positive change to further its mission and support its motto: “Challenge Convention. Change Our World.”

Commission policy requires an interim report of all institutions on a decennial evaluation cycle. Its purpose is to provide the Commission an opportunity to appraise the institution’s current status in keeping with the Policy on Periodic Review. In addition to the information included in all interim reports the University is asked, in Fall 2020, to report on four matters related to our standards on Organization and Governance, Planning and Evaluation, The Academic Program, and Students.

We understand from the visiting team that several programs, including three master’s-level programs, offered through the College of Professional and Continuing Education (COPACE) are outside of Clark’s departmental and collegiate structure. While the team confirmed that COPACE programs are delivered at the same level of rigor and high quality as all Clark programs, they also note that learning outcomes and assessment plans have not yet been established for COPACE programs. Therefore, we appreciate the University’s candid acknowledgment that there are opportunities to “improve efficiency and best practices,” such as aligning COPACE programs with other parts of the University, and Clark has taken steps to increase attention to COPACE program quality and assessment. We are especially gratified to learn that the recently created position of Associate Dean of Professional Studies and Online Education is responsible for connecting the oversight of COPACE programs with the Academic Administration, faculty governance, and the Graduate Board. We look forward, in the interim report submitted in Fall 2020, to learning of Clark’s continued success in integrating COPACE programs into the University’s academic oversight and governance structures. Our standard on Organization and Governance is relevant here:

The institution’s chief academic officer is directly responsible to the chief executive officer, and in concert with the faculty and other academic administrators is responsible for the quality of the academic program. The institution’s organization and governance structure assure the integrity and quality of academic programming however and wherever offered. Off-campus, continuing education, distance education, correspondence education, international, evening, and week-end programs are clearly integrated and incorporated into the policy formation, and academic oversight, and evaluation system of the institution (3.10).
Faculty exercise an important role in assuring the academic integrity of the institution’s educational programs. 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 (3.12).

As the team notes in its report, and we concur, Clark is to be commended for the progress it has made over the past ten years in strategic planning and in developing metrics that track specific initiatives. Notable is the development of a “roadmap” for graduate education that includes formalized procedures to propose, develop, and evaluate the effectiveness of new graduate programs; protocols are in place for non-academic units to “regularly plan and set benchmarks” and to evaluate the effectiveness of plans; and a faculty governance structure devoted to research was established to support faculty scholarship, planning, and evaluation across the institution. However, the team also observed that there are opportunities to strengthen systems and processes that facilitate the efficient and consistent collection and dissemination of data across the University. In keeping with our standard on Planning and Evaluation, we welcome, in the Fall 2020 interim report, an update on Clark’s continued success in this area as evidence that “[t]he institution systematically collects and uses data necessary to support its planning efforts and to enhance institutional effectiveness” (2.2).

As Clark candidly acknowledges in its self-study, while the University has made progress in assessing learning outcomes, “at the department level more infrastructure is needed not only in terms of automated processes, but also human support.” We are therefore gratified to learn that, since the team visit, the University has hired a new Director of Institutional Research who is “deeply engaged” in defining student learning outcomes. It is also worth noting that faculty have collaborated to develop “specific developmental expectations for student behaviors” associated with the LEEP learning outcomes; “pilots of direct assessment” began in 2014; and faculty are in the process of voting on a LEEP program capstone course designed for students to “demonstrate capacity.” We appreciate that Clark is intent on developing learning outcomes that reflect “what it means for students to flourish” and, therefore, we understand that the assessment of LEEP learning outcomes is a “work in progress.” The Fall 2020 interim report will provide Clark an opportunity to update the Commission on its continued progress in assessing student learning outcomes in all programs and using the results to make improvements, with emphasis on the LEEP program. Our standard on The Academic Program will inform this section of the report:

The institution implements and provides support for systematic and broad-based assessment of what and how students are learning through their academic program and experiences outside the classroom. Assessment is based on clear statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. Assessment provides useful information that helps the institution to improve the experiences provided for students, as well as to assure that the level of student achievement is appropriate for the degree awarded (4.48).

The institution’s approach to understanding student learning focuses on the course, program, and institutional level. Evidence is considered at the appropriate level of focus, with the results being a demonstrable factor in improving the learning opportunities and results for students (4.49).

We understand that over the last five years, enrollment in Worcester-based master’s programs has increased by 22%, from 158 students to 215 students, and there has also been an increase in enrollment (from 219 students in AY2014 to 245 students in AY2015) in master’s programs offered through Clark’s partnership with the University of Social Science in Poland and through its agreement with Astrakhan State University, in Astrakhan, Russia. Further, Clark anticipates that the University will expand its master’s-level degree offerings over the next five years, with plans to increase enrollment from 800 students to 1,200 students by AY2020. The Fall 2020
interim report will afford the University an opportunity to document the institution’s success in achieving its enrollment goals in master’s degree programs as evidence that “the institution sets and achieves realistic goals to enroll a student body that is broadly representative of the population the institution wishes to serve” (6.1).

We remind you that the Standards for Accreditation have been revised, and the new standards go into effect on July 1, 2016. Therefore, the interim report prepared by Clark University for consideration in Fall 2020 should reference the 2016 standards.

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2025 is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years.

You will note that the Commission has specified no length or term of accreditation. Accreditation is a continuing relationship that is reconsidered when necessary. Thus, while the Commission has indicated the timing of the next comprehensive evaluation, the schedule should not be unduly emphasized because it is subject to change.

The Commission expressed appreciation for the self-study prepared by Clark University and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you, Dr. Davis Baird, Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, and Dr. A. Lee Fritschler, team 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 of action on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Mr. Steven Swain. The institution is free to release information about the evaluation and the Commission’s action to others, in accordance with the enclosed policy on Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions.

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 in New England.

If you have any questions about the Commission’s action, please contact Barbara Brittingham, President of the Commission.

Sincerely,

Patricia Maguire Meservey

PMM/jm

Enclosure

cc: Mr. Steven Swain
    Visiting Team