Dear Alumni, Families and Friends,

This year, Clark University will participate in its ten-year accreditation review. Clark is accredited by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE) of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC).

Founded in 1885, NEASC/CIHE is the oldest quality assurance agency for higher education in the world. As one of six regional accreditors, NEASC/CIHE accredits approximately 240 colleges and universities in the New England region, ranging from private research universities, such as Clark, to community colleges, public universities, and institutions with specialized higher education missions (for example, art or music colleges).

Accreditation is a peer review-based system of evaluation by which colleges and universities agree to be held accountable to a set of rigorous standards of quality and effectiveness. The purpose of accreditation is to ensure quality and promote institutional improvement with a particular focus on student learning. In the United States, there are two types of accreditors: regional accreditors, such as NEASC/CIHE, accredit institutions as a whole, while specialized accreditors, typically national or international in scope, accredit particular program areas, such as business, pharmacy, or engineering. For example, in addition to Clark’s accreditation by NEASC/CIHE, our management programs are accredited by a specialized business accreditor, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business. The United States Department of Education, working under the auspices of the Higher Education Act, recognizes accreditors such as NEASC/CIHE as a “reliable authority as to the quality of education.” Colleges and universities must be accredited in order for their students to participate in federal financial aid programs.

Accreditation is based on a set of standards that specify the dimensions of institutional quality a college must meet. These standards cover all aspects of the mission and purposes of the university, including planning, organization, governance, academic programs, faculty, students, financial and technological resources, and policies to support public disclosure and institutional integrity. While universities are evaluated against these standards on a continuing basis, every ten years each accredited institution must undergo a comprehensive evaluation. Clark is being reviewed this academic year. We began the review process a year and a half ago by preparing an institutional self-study; this report is complete and will be available for review by the Clark community. Later this fall, a team of reviewers from peer institutions will visit the campus to validate the findings of this review and make recommendations for ways in which we can strengthen our performance relative to the standards of accreditation. The report of the visiting team is submitted to NEASC/CIHE, which then formally votes to renew Clark’s accreditation. This final vote will take place in spring 2016.

Visiting teams bring a wealth of external insight and perspective on best practices. Typically, the visiting team is chaired by the president of another college or university, and includes a chief financial officer, chief academic officer and faculty members from peer institutions in the region. The findings of the visiting team allow us to benchmark our performance not only against the standards of accreditation, but also against the levels of success being achieved by our peer institutions.

Currently, I serve as vice chair of NEASC/CIHE. This volunteer position affords me important insights into accreditation at a critical time for higher education. In general, I have found the accreditation process to be an effective platform for institutional review and self-improvement. Still, some people question whether accreditation is fully accomplishing its fundamental purpose of ensuring the quality of our colleges and universities. You may have read news reports, for example, questioning how accreditation could be awarded to a college that has a very low student graduation rate or whose graduates have a very high default rate on student loans. Others question whether accreditation is too costly a process (one more contributor to escalating costs of education) or an obstacle to truly innovative educational practices.

NEASC/CIHE is now undertaking a comprehensive review of its standards to ensure that they reflect and anticipate new developments in higher education. While a peer review-based approach to accreditation has its critics, I have not seen a better method to ensure the quality of higher education. One of the great strengths of American higher education is the diversity of its colleges and universities. The task of evaluating quality and promoting excellence across the breadth of mission and purposes of these institutions does not lend itself to “arms-length” regulation against a simple set of metrics. It depends upon thoughtful and careful examination of the accomplishments of the particular institutional mission in the context of agreed-upon standards of excellence. We at Clark University look forward to our participation in the accreditation process and are confident that it will provide much insight into ways in which we can enhance the excellence of our university.

Sincerely,

David P. Angel
President