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Mary Ellen Petrisko

July 7, 2014

Dr. Sharon Hart
President
Northern Marianas College
P.O. Box 501250
Saipan, MP 96950

Dear President Hart:

At its meeting on June 18-20, 2014, the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) considered the report of the Special Visit for Initial Accreditation team that conducted an on-site review to Northern Marianas College (NMC) April 29 – May 2, 2014. The Commission also had access to the Special Visit report submitted by the college prior to the visit and your response to the team report, dated June 9, 2014. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the visit with you and your colleagues Amanda Allen, Accreditation Liaison Officer and Distance Education Coordinator; and Barbara Merfalen, Dean, Academic Programs and Services. Your observations were very helpful in informing the commission's deliberations.

The Special Visit was occasioned by NMC's application to seek accreditation with the WASC Senior College and University Commission which, if granted, would lead NMC to request a voluntary withdrawal from its current accrediting agency, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC). WSCUC has been working with NMC by collaborating with ACCJC to oversee NMC's operations as related to its bachelor's degree in education since 2001.

Since NMC is currently accredited in good standing with ACCJC, WSCUC directed NMC to prepare a comprehensive self-study report under each of its Standards and Criteria for Review, allowing the team to make a holistic judgment about the readiness of the institution to be awarded Initial Accreditation by WSCUC. This is in keeping with the WSCUC policy "Initial Accreditation for Institutions Currently Accredited by a USDE-Recognized Agency" (termed "Pathway B" for WSCUC usage). The institution also prepared an application to initiate a new bachelor's degree in business management, which was reviewed during the site visit.

The team's report portrays an institution characterized by professionals committed to the success of their students. This dedication on the part of many qualified faculty, staff, and administrators in a geographically isolated and financially pressed environment was not taken for granted by the team. As the team evaluated NMC in the light of each of the CFRs, the institution's noted achievements, as well as the remaining challenges, became evident.

The Commission joins the team in affirming a number of notable achievements. These include the work of the entire community in developing more effective governance

structures and decision-making processes and creating more broadly participatory planning activities in fulfillment of the institution's mission. The team also commended the institution for making difficult yet effective decisions about faculty qualifications, Board of Regents composition and roles, and the formation of future-oriented policies and strategic priorities. The team also commended the work of the student services team in establishing measurable outcomes, goals, and assessment strategies. A series of unqualified audits was also noted as a credit to the Regents, the administration, and the financial services office.

The Commission endorses the major recommendations of the team that call for NMC's continuing attention, which are summarized here:

Faculty roles and development. In recognition of the critical role of the faculty in achieving its mission, the institution is urged to ensure that the faculty: (1) demonstrate collective ownership over the curriculum in service of effective student learning; (2) are provided with the necessary and budgeted resources and professional development to achieve these goals; and (3) can work within clearly defined role expectations and evaluative criteria aligned with their varied responsibilities to the institution. (CFRs 2.4, 2.9, 3.2, 3.3, 3.10)

Research and data-supported decisions. The Commission expects NMC to continue to develop its research infrastructure in order to track and analyze key quality metrics and to support decision-making at all appropriate levels. Qualified persons with requisite skills in obtaining, analyzing, and disseminating critical data should be appointed to oversee these functions. (CFRs 4.1, 4.2)

Assessment of Learning. Building on the assessment infrastructure developed to date, the Commission expects the faculty to implement program-level assessments in support of periodic and effective program reviews. Toward this end, the faculty need to ensure that learning outcomes in all programs, including for General Education, are progressive and lead to the desired levels of culminating competency at or near the time of graduation. (CFRs 2.2, 2.2a, 2.6, 2.7, 4.3, 4.4)

Student Success. While taking into account the challenges associated with an open admissions policy, the institution is urged to pursue diligently initiatives designed to increase the number of students who complete a degree program at NMC. This will be essential with the development of several new bachelor's-level degrees and their associated demands for persistence and achievement. (CFRs 2.10, 2.11, 2.13)

In view of the above, the Commission acted to:

1. Receive the report of the Special Visit for Initial Accreditation team and grant Initial Accreditation for a period of six years, through June 2020
2. Schedule the Offsite Review for fall 2019 and the Accreditation Visit for spring 2020
3. Request an Interim Report in spring 2017 to address progress in the four areas identified in this letter
4. Schedule the Mid-Cycle Review for spring 2018

In taking this action to grant Initial Accreditation, the Commission confirms that Northern Marianas College has addressed the three Core Commitments to Student Learning and Success; Quality and Improvement; and Institutional Integrity, Sustainability, and Accountability and has demonstrated substantial compliance with the 2013 Standards of Accreditation. Between this action and the time of the next review, the institution is encouraged to continue its progress, particularly with respect to student learning and success.

The Commission stipulates that this action encompasses the degree programs being offered by NMC at the time of this action and as listed in Appendix A. In keeping with the WSCUC policy on Degree Level Approval, NMC is currently designated as having an “I” (Individual) status for each of the degree levels being offered. This means that all new degree programs initiated by NMC will require prior approval through the WSCUC Substantive Change process.

WSCUC will add the institution to its website listing of accredited institutions and invoice for dues effective from the date of this action. The database will reflect that the Saipan campus is the main campus, with Tinian and Rota designated as off-campus locations.

This action permits the institution to designate WASC Senior College and University Commission as its primary accreditor. NMC is advised at the appropriate time to withdraw its accreditation from ACCJC WASC and name WASC Senior College and University Commission as its accreditor of record for Title IV and other purposes. The College will need to notify the U.S. Department of Education of these plans and submit a statement of voluntary withdrawal of accreditation to ACCJC. The effective date for the withdrawal should be concurrent with the date when the School Participation Management Division of the Department recognizes the change of accreditor, and as will be communicated by the Department to NMC. As soon as this date has been determined, it should be communicated to both WASC agencies. Effective on that date, ACCJC will withdraw the institution's listing from its website and post a Public Disclosure Notice explaining the circumstances and indicating that NMC is now regionally accredited by the WASC Senior College and University Commission.

In accordance with Commission policy, a copy of this letter will be sent to the Chair of the institution's governing board in one week. It is the Commission's expectations regarding disclosure that the team report and this action letter will be widely disseminated throughout the institution to promote further engagement and improvement and to support the institution's response to the specific issues identified in these documents.

The team report and this action letter will also be posted on the WSCUC website immediately following its receipt by the institution. If the institution elects to publish a response to this action on its own website, WSCUC will publish a link to the response as posted on the institution's website.

As the institution works on the issues cited in this letter, it should be mindful of the expectations that it will need to meet at the time of its next comprehensive review, which will take place under the Standards of Accreditation and institutional review process in the *2013 Handbook of Accreditation*. These expectations build on past practice and include, for example, a deeper focus on student success; quality improvement processes such as assessment and program review; planning; and financial sustainability. The *2013 Handbook* also includes a focus on specific expectations: the meaning, quality,

and integrity of degrees; student performance in core competencies at the time of graduation; and institutional planning for the changing landscape in higher education. NMC is encouraged to familiarize itself with the *2013 Handbook* and to approach its challenges in ways that will address these expectations.

Finally, the Commission wishes to express its appreciation for the extensive work that Northern Marianas College undertook in preparing for and supporting this accreditation review. WSCUC is committed to an accreditation process that adds value to institutions while assuring public accountability, and we are grateful for your continued support of our process. Please contact me if you have any questions about this letter or the action of the Commission.

Sincerely,



Mary Ellen Petrisko
President

MEP/rw

cc: Harold Hewitt, Jr., Commission Chair
Frank Rabauliman, Chairperson, NMC Board of Regents
Barbara Beno, President, ACCJC
Herman Bounds, Director, Accreditation Group, USDE
Richard Winn, WSCUC Staff Liaison