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November 21, 2016

Mr. Matthew Derr
President
Sterling College
16 Sterling Drive
Craftsbury Common, VT 05827

Dear President Derr:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on September 22, 2016 the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Sterling College:

that Sterling College be continued in accreditation;

that the College submit an Annual Report of Finance and Enrollment by December 1, 2017 for consideration in Spring, 2018;

that the College submit a report for consideration in Fall, 2018 that gives emphasis to the institution's success in:

- 1) continuing to enhance its financial stability;
- 2) implementing a comprehensive approach to the assessment of student learning and using the results for improvement;
- 3) achieving its goal to improve retention rates for first-time, full-time students;
- 4) addressing issues related to faculty workload, salaries, and professional development;

that the College submit an interim (fifth-year) report for consideration in Spring, 2021;

that, in addition to the information included in all interim reports, the College give emphasis to its continued success in addressing the matters specified for attention in the Fall 2018 report;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Spring, 2026.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its actions.

Sterling College is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be substantially in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*.

The Commission commends Sterling College for its preparation of a comprehensive self-study that reflects the “broad-based awareness and openness” of the campus community. We concur with the visiting team that the strengths of the College include its “singular, highly specific mission” that informs “every aspect” of the institution; collaborative planning processes; a community governance model that is characterized by mutual trust between faculty and administration; educational programs that integrate personal and intellectual development; and a “bright new website” that conveys in a clear and compelling way what the College has to offer. We are gratified to learn of the “strong sense of belonging and engagement” engendered among the student body and of the many opportunities students have to develop leadership skills through participation in student organizations and the College’s weekly community meeting as well as membership on the College’s standing committee and student activities committee. We note with favor the investment of over \$2 million in facilities and technology infrastructure during the past three years as well as the development of a Campus Master Plan to identify the highest priority projects for future improvements. The Commission shares the judgment of the visiting team that, with the support of a “passionate and mission-committed” Board of Trustees, an innovative president who empowers strong staff, and a “dedicated, altruistic, and committed faculty,” Sterling College is well-positioned to continue its institutional development and address its challenges.

Sterling College is asked to submit an Annual Report on Finance and Enrollment (ARFE) by December 1, 2017, so that the Commission may monitor the institution’s success in achieving the goals it has established to enhance its financial position. As acknowledged in both the self-study and the report of the visiting team, long-term financial stability is one of Sterling College’s “most critical needs,” and the institution has established goals to: increase FTE enrollment, 113.2 at the time of the team’s visit, to 120 students; reduce the discount rate from 50% to 40-45%; double annual giving; and increase endowment support through careful investment and the addition of \$1.5 million in new endowment gifts. We are gratified to learn of Sterling College’s initial progress toward achieving these goals but share the judgment of the visiting team that the “newness” in key revenue streams and the College’s dependence on student revenue create a sense of vulnerability for the institution. The December 2017 ARFE report will afford the College an opportunity to update the Commission on its further progress on achieving these financial and enrollment goals. We ask that the report include the FY2017 audited financial statements, with the management letter, as verification of the institution’s financial position. The institution’s response to the management letter is requested so that the Commission may understand how the institution is addressing any issue(s) raised in that letter. Our standards on *Students* and *Institutional Resources* provide guidance for the preparation of the ARFE report:

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).

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).

The institution and its governing board regularly and systematically review the effectiveness of the institution's financial aid policy and practices in advancing the institution's mission and helping to ensure that the institution enrolls and supports the student body it seeks to serve (7.10).

The items the institution is asked to report on in Fall, 2018 are related to our standards on *Students, Institutional Resources, Educational Effectiveness, and Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*.

We ask that the report prepared for consideration in Fall 2018 give emphasis to the institution's continued success in enhancing its financial stability. The Commission recognizes that this matter does not lend itself to rapid resolution and will require the institution's sustained attention over time; hence, we ask for an update in Fall 2018. We remind you of our standards on *Students* and *Institutional Resources* (cited above).

The Commission notes with approval that Sterling College has identified 12 college-wide competencies, aligned with its mission, that reflect the "skills, knowledge, and experiences" students are expected to develop throughout their education. We share the concern of the visiting team, however, that at the time of the team's visit, these competencies were treated as "implicit" in the curriculum and that the institution had yet to engage in "systematic, documented assessment" of student achievement of these competencies. We are, therefore, gratified to learn that the assessment of student learning at Sterling has undergone a "significant revision" and that the associate dean has been given a reduced teaching load in order to work with faculty on a review of the competencies and the means to assess them. We look forward to learning, in Fall 2018, of the College's success in implementing its plans to develop "robust, effective, and regular systems" for the assessment of student learning and using the results for improvement, as specified in our standard on *Educational Effectiveness*:

Assessment of learning is based on verifiable statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. The process of understanding what and how students are learning focuses on the course, competency, program, and institutional level. Assessment has the support of the institution's academic and institutional leadership and the systematic involvement of faculty and appropriate staff (8.3).

The institution uses a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods and direct and indirect measures to understand the experiences and learning outcomes of its students, employing external perspectives including, as appropriate, benchmarks and peer comparisons (8.5).

The institution defines measures of student success and levels of achievement appropriate to its mission, modalities and locations of instruction, and student body, including any specifically recruited populations. These measures include rates of progression, retention, transfer, and graduation; default and loan repayment rates; licensure passage rates; and employment (8.6).

The institution uses additional quantitative measures of success, such as further education, civic participation, religious formation, and others, as appropriate to its

mission, to understand the success of its recent graduates. Information from students and former students is regularly considered (8.7).

The results of assessment and quantitative measures of student success are a demonstrable factor in the institution's efforts to improve the learning opportunities and results for students (8.8).

The Commission also looks forward to learning, in Fall 2018, of Sterling College's progress toward achieving its goal to increase retention rates for first-time, full-time students by 3-5% each year. We appreciate the institution's candid acknowledgment that success rates for first-time, full-time students typically lag behind those for students who transfer into Sterling. We understand that the institution has recently adopted a new Student Orientation and Engagement Plan that begins with "A Sense of Place" (ASOP), a two-week intensive orientation experience. The institution anticipates that ASOP, other "scaffolding experiences," and services provided by the Enrollment Council will improve student persistence. This section of the Fall 2018 report should be informed by our standards on *Students* and *Educational Effectiveness* (cited above and below):

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).

Finally, the Commission shares the judgment of the visiting team that issues related to faculty workload, salaries, and professional development have been a concern. Therefore, we are pleased to learn that Sterling College appointed a task force, led by a member of the Board of Trustees, to conduct a benchmark analysis of faculty workload, compensation, and benefits. The task force report includes several recommendations for increasing salaries, improving health care benefits, reducing workload from 21 to 18 credits per year, and establishing faculty professional development grants. We understand that the College has acted on a first set of recommendations and expects to continue implementation over the next few years. The Fall 2018 report will afford Sterling College an opportunity to update the Commission on its continued efforts to address these issues, in keeping with our standard on *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*:

Salaries and benefits are set at levels that ensure the institution's continued ability to attract and retain appropriately qualified faculty and academic staff whose profiles are consistent with the institution's mission and purposes. Faculty and academic staff are provided with substantial opportunities for continued professional development throughout their careers (6.6).

Faculty assignments are consistent with the institution's mission and purposes. They are equitably determined to allow faculty adequate time to provide effective instruction, advise and evaluate students, contribute to program and institutional assessment and improvement, continue professional growth, and participate in scholarship, research, creative activities, and service compatible with the mission and purposes of the institution. Faculty assignments and workloads are reappraised periodically and adjusted as institutional conditions change (6.7).

Commission policy requires an interim (fifth-year) 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 fifth-year reports the College is asked, in Spring, 2021, to report on its continued success in addressing the matters specified for emphasis in the Fall 2018 report. The Commission recognizes that these matters will also require the institution's sustained attention over time. Therefore, we ask for further information in the Spring 2021 interim report.

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Spring, 2026 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.

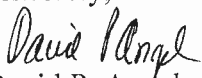
The Commission expressed appreciation for the self-study prepared by Sterling College and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you and Helen Ouellette, team chair, during its deliberations.

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. Jonathan Larsen. 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,


David P. Angel

DPA/sjp

Enclosure

cc: Mr. Jonathan Larsen
Visiting team