



May 15, 2024

Dr. Donald L. Birx  
President  
Plymouth State University  
MSC #1 - Speare Building, 17 High Street  
Plymouth, NH 03264

Dear President Birx:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on April 18, 2024, the New England Commission of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Plymouth State University:

that Plymouth State University be continued in accreditation;

that the institution be asked to submit a report August 15, 2026 for consideration in Fall 2026 that gives emphasis to the institution's success in:

- 1) continuing to implement and evaluate its Strategic Plan (2022-2027) and aligning the Strategic Plan with the University's Eight Areas of Emphasis;
- 2) establishing a comprehensive, systemic evaluation process for the Cluster Learning Model (CLM) and continuing to promote a campus-wide understanding of the model;
- 3) ensuring its diversity policies are integrated and effective in furthering efforts to remove barriers to access and success;
- 4) achieving its retention goals, particularly its retention goals for BIPOC students;

that the institution submit an interim (fifth-year) report by August 15, 2028 for consideration in Fall 2028;

that, in addition to the information included in all interim reports, the institution give emphasis, in the Fall 2028 report, to its continued success in addressing the four areas identified for attention in its Fall 2026 report;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Fall 2033.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its actions.

Plymouth State University (PSU) is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*.

The Commission commends Plymouth State University for its thorough and well-written self-study. We note with favor that the University's current Strategic Plan (2022-2027) was the result of an inclusive planning process and identifies four major areas: Teaching & Cluster Model; Student Success; Diversity & Community; and Sustainable University. We acknowledge that the University is "repositioning itself from being a comprehensive regional university to an innovative, trailblazing institution" as evidenced by its signature Cluster Learning Model, initially adopted in 2015 and described as an "interdisciplinary collaboration among programs and with outside partners" which provides "students with high impact learning opportunities." Undergraduate cluster majors include Climate Studies, Digital Music Production and Entrepreneurship, Forensics Science, Game Design, and Sustainability Studies. The Commission agrees with the visiting team that financial planning has been a strength of PSU as the University has developed a 10-year directional plan based on estimated enrollment changes, successfully mitigated the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, closed under-enrolled majors; enacted several innovative student-facing initiatives including the merger of the offices of academic and career services; and has not incurred a deficit "in recent history." The Commission also takes favorable note of the widespread use of data across the institution to inform planning, assessment, and institutional change. With its visionary president and senior leadership team, supportive board, innovative and caring faculty and staff, and a campus community that is "highly active and engaged," Plymouth State University is well positioned to enable "students to connect their academic and extra-curricular interests with real-world projects, global challenges, and diverse cultures while fostering personal growth from their first days on campus until long after graduation as engaged alumni."

The items the institution is asked to report on in Fall 2026 are related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation*; *Educational Effectiveness*; *Students*; and *Integrity, Transparency and Public Disclosure*.

The Commission understands that in concert with its Strategic Plan (2022-2027), PSU has articulated Eight Areas of Emphasis (EAE) "devised as tactics to implement the strategic plan." Areas covered by the EAE include retention, undergraduate admissions, graduate programs, and summer and winter offerings. However, we share the concern raised by the visiting team that they were "unable to find evidence" of the alignment between the EAE and the Strategic Plan. The Commission is gratified to note, therefore, that the University plans to "explicitly align[]" the Eight Areas of Emphasis with the Strategic Plan to create "a cohesive and seamless evaluation process." We look forward to learning, in the Fall 2026 report, of Plymouth State University's success in continuing to implement its Strategic Plan and aligning the Plan with the Eight Areas of Emphasis. We are guided here by our standard on *Planning and Evaluation*:

The institution undertakes planning and evaluation to accomplish and improve the achievement of its mission and purposes. It identifies its planning and evaluation priorities and pursues them effectively. The institution demonstrates its success in strategic, academic, financial, and other resource planning and the evaluation of its educational effectiveness (*Planning and Evaluation*, Statement of the Standard).

The institution regularly and systematically evaluates the achievement of its mission and purposes, the quality of its academic programs, and the effectiveness of its operational and administrative activities, giving primary focus to the realization of its educational objectives. Its system of evaluation is designed to provide valid information to support institutional improvement. The institution's evaluation efforts are effective for addressing its unique circumstances. These efforts use both quantitative and qualitative methods (2.6).

The Commission applauds the innovative approach Plymouth State University has adopted through its Cluster Learning Model and understand that implementation of the Model is guided by a Transformation Timeline that includes 230 action items. We understand that, as of Spring 2023, “72% of items had been completed, 23% were in progress and only 6% had not been started.” Yet, in its discussions with faculty, staff, and students, the visiting team was “unable to come to a consensus as to what the Cluster Learning Model is.” And, while the University “places heavy dependence” on NSSE survey results, a comprehensive and systematic evaluation of the Cluster Learning Model using direct assessments and student success indicators has not yet been undertaken. We are gratified, therefore, to learn that Plymouth State University is gathering information that will be used to “define and report on a variety of measures of student success to assess the efficacy of Clusters” and plans to develop a “formal process” to assess the learning outcomes and operational impacts of the Cluster initiatives. The Fall 2026 report will provide PSU with an opportunity to update the Commission on its success in this matter. This request is in keeping with our standards on *Planning and Evaluation* and *Educational Effectiveness*:

The institution’s principal evaluation focus is the quality, integrity, and effectiveness of its academic programs. Evaluation endeavors and systematic assessment are demonstrably effective in the improvement of academic offerings, student learning, and the student experience. Systematic feedback from students, former students, and other relevant constituencies is a demonstrable factor in institutional improvement (2.7)

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 Commission is pleased to learn that, in 2022, Plymouth State University hired its first Chief Diversity Officer (CDO), a cabinet level position, and that in 2023, the Center for Diversity, Equity, and Social Justice was renamed the Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access (IDEA) Center. We understand that the CDO and IDEA Center staff are addressing diversity in many areas such as “race/ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation/gender identity, and neurodiversity.” We acknowledge from the report of the visiting team that there is a concern relating to the “integration of new diversity policies with established policies,” and the CDO plans to collaborate with various University departments to address this matter. As informed by our standards on *Students and Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure*, the Commission looks forward to learning, as part of the Fall 2026 report, of the University’s success in ensuring that its diversity policies are integrated and effective in furthering efforts to remove barriers to access and success.

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).

Truthfulness, clarity, and fairness characterize the institution’s relations with all internal and external constituencies. Adequate provision is made to ensure academic honesty. Appropriate policies and procedures are in effect and periodically reviewed for matters

including intellectual property rights, the avoidance of conflict of interest, privacy rights, and fairness in dealing with students, faculty, and staff. The institution's educational policies and procedures are equitably applied to all its students (9.2).

The institution adheres to non-discriminatory policies and practices in recruitment, admissions, employment, evaluation, disciplinary action, and advancement. It fosters an inclusive atmosphere within the institutional community that respects and supports people of diverse characteristics and backgrounds (9.5).

The Commission acknowledges PSU's continued efforts to improve student retention, and we note with favor that one of the University's goals is to achieve a 75% retention rate by 2028. As noted in the Data First Forms, while the institution's retention rate fell from 70% in FY2021 to 64% in FY2022, retention increased to 68% in FY2023. Given the fact that retention rates "for students of color in all categories lag well behind" the rate for white students, we are pleased to learn that one of the key priorities for the Chief Diversity Officer is to reduce the achievement gaps between White and BIPOC students. We understand that a Diversity and Equity Plan for January 2024 to May 2026 has recently been released, and we note with favor the critical role the IDEA center plays in student retention by providing and supporting initiatives including the Diversity Scholars program, as well as "multicultural events[] and hosting a variety of affinity groups." The Fall 2026 report will provide an opportunity for the institution to update the Commission on its success in achieving its retention goals with particular attention to its retention goals for BIPOC students. Our standard on *Students* provides guidance here:

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 systematically identifies the characteristics and needs of its student population and then makes provision for responding to them. The institution's student services are guided by a philosophy that reflects the institution's mission and special character, is circulated widely and reviewed periodically, and provides the basis on which services to students can be evaluated (5.8).

Please upload the requested report to the NECHE Institution Portal by August 15, 2026, using the F2026 Progress Report review.

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. The University is asked, in the Fall 2028 report, to give emphasis to its continued success in addressing the four areas specified above for attention in the Fall 2026 report. The Commission recognizes that these matters do not lend themselves to rapid resolution and will require the University's sustained attention over time; hence, we ask that further information be provided in the Fall 2028 report.

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2033 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.

Dr. Donald L. Birx  
May 15, 2024  
Page 5

The Commission expressed appreciation for the self-study prepared by Plymouth State University and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you and Lourdes B. Avilés, Associate Provost and NECHE Accreditation Liaison Officer, 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 and the head of the system of action on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Catherine Provencher and Alexander Walker. 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.

If you have any questions about the Commission's action, please contact Lawrence M. Schall, President of the Commission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Russell Carey". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Russell Carey

RC/sjp

cc: Catherine Provencher  
Alexander Walker  
Visiting team

Enclosures: Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions