



November 6, 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 September 26, 2024, the New England Commission of Higher Education considered the report submitted by Plymouth State University regarding its plans to offer 96-credit Applied Bachelor's degrees in Outdoor Adventure Leadership, Police Studies, Business Administration, Robotics, and Cybersecurity and voted the following:

that the proposal to offer 96-credit Applied Bachelor's degrees in Outdoor Adventure Leadership, Police Studies, Business Administration, Robotics, and Cybersecurity be approved;

that approval to offer baccalaureate degrees of fewer than 120 credits be limited to the 96-credit Applied Bachelor's degrees in Outdoor Adventure Leadership, Police Studies, Business Administration, Robotics, and Cybersecurity, and the University be reminded that any plans to offer other such programs need to be submitted to the Commission for review in keeping with the Policy on Innovation;

that a visit to assess implementation of the 96-credit Applied Bachelor's degrees in Outdoor Adventure Leadership, Police Studies, Business Administration, Robotics, and Cybersecurity be scheduled for Spring 2027;

that the report prepared in advance of the Spring 2027 site visit give emphasis to the institution's success in implementing its 96-credit Applied Bachelor's degrees with particular emphasis on:

1. evaluating the impact of the 96-credit programs on the institution's traditional four-year baccalaureate programs;
2. ensuring the institution's disclosure language includes explicit, accurate information about Title IV eligibility for students who want to return for a 120-credit bachelor's degree after completion of a 96-credit Applied Bachelor's degree;

that the interim report scheduled for consideration in Fall 2028 be confirmed.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The proposal submitted by Plymouth State University to offer 96-credit Applied Bachelor's degrees in Outdoor Adventure Leadership, Police Studies, Business Administration, Robotics, and Cybersecurity was approved because it provided evidence that the proposed degrees will be offered in accordance with the Commission's Policy on Innovation and our Guidance for Institutions Preparing Proposals to offer Baccalaureate Degrees of Fewer than 120 Credits.

The Commission thanks Plymouth State University (PSU) for submitting its proposal under the Commission's Policy on Innovation that details the institution's mission-centric plans to launch the five 96-credit Applied Baccalaureate degree programs noted above beginning in Fall 2025. We appreciate that the 96-credit degrees were developed through an inclusive process with faculty and administration, resulting in programs that are "student friendly and academically thoughtful," "pragmatically precise," and "easily assessable." The Commission also notes that the prefix "applied" captures the "ethos of PSU's Cluster Model," and thanks PSU for sharing the disclosure language that will be included in all marketing materials as well as on its website and social media platforms. The Commission is further gratified to learn of the thorough assessment and evaluation plan for the programs that, in addition to more traditional measures such as retention, persistence, and graduation rates, will include "real-time feedback mechanisms." Lastly, we acknowledge that the Applied Bachelor's degree programs include the same core courses in both the major and General Education as their traditional counterparts, and students will be able to "seamlessly shift to a four-year, 120-credit PSU degree" if interested.

We remind you that Plymouth State University's approval to offer baccalaureate degrees of fewer than 120 credits is limited to the 96-credit Applied Bachelor's degrees in Outdoor Adventure Leadership, Police Studies, Business Administration, Robotics, and Cybersecurity and that any plans to offer other such programs need to be submitted to the Commission for review in keeping with its Policy on Innovation.

In keeping with Commission policy, an on-site evaluation to assess implementation of the five 96-credit Applied Bachelor's degree programs will be scheduled for Spring 2027. A copy of the relevant procedural statement is attached for your information and use.

As noted in the attached Procedures for the Substantive Change Evaluation Visit, the report prepared in advance of the Spring 2027 evaluation should reflect and assess the institution's experience in implementing the five Applied Bachelor's degree programs including its success in:

1. Achieving the enrollment and financial goals set for the initiative;
2. Ensuring sufficient faculty and staff to oversee the quality of the initiative;
3. Providing adequate resources and student services to support the initiative;
4. Implementing relevant approaches to assess student achievement and success.

The standards on *Students*; *Institutional Resources*; *The Academic Program*; *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*; and *Educational Effectiveness* will inform these sections of the 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'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 undertaking substantive changes ... demonstrates its capacity to undertake and sustain such initiatives and to assure that the new academic programming meets the standards of quality of the institution and the Commission's Standards and policies. ... The institution recognizes and takes account of the increased demands on resources made by programs offered at a higher degree level (4.8).

There are an adequate number of faculty and academic staff, including librarians, advisors, and instructional designers, whose time commitment to the institution is sufficient to assure the accomplishment of class and out-of-class responsibilities essential for the fulfillment of institutional mission and purposes (6.2).

The preparation and qualifications of all faculty and academic staff are appropriate to the nature of their assignments. Qualifications are measured by advanced degrees held, evidence of scholarship, advanced study, creative activities, and teaching abilities, as well as relevant professional experience, training, and credentials (6.3).

The institution offers an array of student services, including physical and mental health services, appropriate to its mission and the needs and goals of its students. It recognizes the variations in services that are appropriate for residential students, at the main campus, at off-campus locations, and for distance education programs as well as the differences in circumstances and goals of students pursuing degrees (5.9).

The institution provides advising and academic support services appropriate to the student body. The institution's faculty and professional staff collectively have sufficient interaction with students outside of class to promote students' academic achievement and provide academic and career guidance (5.10).

The institution has sufficient and appropriate information, physical, and technological resources necessary for the achievement of its purposes wherever and however its academic programs are offered. It devotes sufficient resources to maintain and enhance its information, physical, and technological resources (7.21).

The institution provides access to library and information resources, services, facilities, and qualified staff sufficient to support its teaching and learning environments and its research and public service mission as appropriate (7.22).

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

In addition, in the report prepared in advance of the Spring 2027 site visit, the institution is asked to give emphasis to two other matters related to our standards on *Planning and*

Evaluation, The Academic Program, and Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure.

The Commission appreciates that PSU expects that “many students” will find the 96-credit Applied Bachelor’s degree program option an “appealing, more affordable alternative,” and that some traditional students may also “opt into” the programs once they arrive on campus. At the same time, we understand that the programs will “run[] parallel” with the University’s 120-credit degree programs thereby ensuring they will be “cost-effective” regardless of the demand for either degree program. As PSU implements its 96-credit Applied Bachelor’s degree programs, it will nonetheless be important to evaluate the impact of the programs on PSU’s traditional 120-credit baccalaureate degree programs. The Commission looks forward to learning, as part of the report prepared in advance of the Spring 2027 site visit, of the institution’s success in this matter. Our standards on *Planning and Evaluation* and *The Academic Program* are relevant here:

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 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).

The institution has a demonstrable record of success in using the results of its evaluation activities to inform planning, changes in programs and services, and resource allocation (2.8).

The institution offering multiple academic programs ensures that all programs meet or exceed the basic quality standards of the institution and that there is a reasonable consistency in quality among them. The institution provides sufficient resources to sustain and improve its academic programs (4.4).

As noted above, the Commission appreciates the planned disclosure language that PSU developed for its print and electronic media. The proposed language, however, did not include information regarding Title IV eligibility for students who would like to return to complete a 120-credit baccalaureate degree program after completion of a 96-credit Applied Baccalaureate degree program. This section of the report, prepared in advance of the Spring 2027 site visit, should be informed by our standard on *Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure*:

The information published by the institution on its website is readily accessible and sufficient to allow students and prospective students to make informed decisions about their education. The institution’s public website includes the information specified elsewhere in this Standard (9.17-9.25) (9.11).

The institution publishes information about the total cost of education and net price, including the availability of financial aid and the typical length of study. The

expected amount of student debt upon graduation and the institution's cohort default and loan repayment rates are published to help students and prospective students make informed decisions (9.23).

Commission policy requires an interim (fifth-year) report of all institutions on a decennial evaluation cycle. The purpose of the Fall 2028 interim report is to provide the Commission an opportunity to appraise the institution's current status in keeping with the policy on Periodic Review. We remind you of our letter of May 15, 2024 that identifies areas of emphasis for the Fall 2028 interim report.

The Commission expressed appreciation for the report submitted by Plymouth State University and hopes its preparation has contributed to institutional improvement. We appreciate your cooperation with the effort to provide public assurance of the quality of higher education.

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 Michael J. Pilot and Catherine Provencher. The institution is free to release information about the report and the Commission's action to others, in accordance with the enclosed policy on Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions.

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

Sincerely,



Michael Whelan

MW/sjp

cc: Michael J. Pilot
Catherine Provencher

Attachments: Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions
Procedures for the Substantive Change Evaluation Visit
Policy on Innovation