May 9, 2008

Dr. Morton Owen Schapiro
President
Williams College
880 Main Street
Williamstown, MA 01267

Dear President Schapiro:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on April 17, 2008, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Williams College:

that Williams College be continued in accreditation;

that the College submit a fifth-year interim report for consideration in Fall 2012;

that, in addition to the information included in all interim reports, the College give emphasis to its success in:

1) achieving its goals for diversifying the faculty and student body and assuring the quality of the educational experience for all students;

2) continuing to implement a comprehensive approach to the assessment of student learning, with particular emphasis on assessment of major programs of study and concentrations;

3) implementing the institutional plan developed through the “2020 Project;”

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Fall 2017.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

Williams College is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be substantially in compliance with the Standards for Accreditation. We commend the College for its preparation of an exceptionally candid self-study, and we are gratified to learn that the self-study process enabled the institution to identify
important priorities. We concur with the visiting team that Williams College has a well-deserved reputation as one of the finest liberal arts colleges in the United States. Its highly qualified faculty provide students with a rich set of curricular opportunities within an institutional culture that values both intellectual rigor and the development of personal character. The College benefits from an inclusive and consultative planning process that helps it focus its considerable financial resources to support its mission. All members of the campus community—students, faculty, staff, administrators, trustees, and alumni—are dedicated to the College and work collaboratively to ensure its success.

Commission policy requires a fifth-year interim 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 Fall 2012, to report on three matters related to our standards on Faculty, Students, Integrity, The Academic Program, and Planning and Evaluation.

The Commission commends Williams College for the initiatives and programs it has implemented to achieve its goals to enhance the diversity of its faculty and student body and to foster an “inclusive” campus culture. These include the appointment of diversity officers; changes to the faculty hiring process; creation of a mentoring system for faculty of color; summer pre-enrollment programs in the sciences, humanities and social sciences; and outreach programs for high school students and doctoral candidates. It is to the College’s credit that, despite the considerable success of these efforts, the institution has committed to further work in this area and has established diversity as a major campus-wide priority. We are gratified to learn that the institution has initiated an interview project to understand the experiences of its students, including students of color, and intends to use the results to assure the quality of the Williams College experience for all students. We look forward to learning, in Fall 2012, of the results of this initiative and others designed to further the institution’s commitment to diversity. Relevant here are our standards on Faculty, Students, and Integrity:

The institution ensures equal employment opportunity consistent with legal requirements and any other dimensions of its own choosing; compatible with its mission and purposes, it addresses its own goals for the achievement of diversity of race, gender, and ethnicity (5.4).

Consistent with its mission, the institution enrolls a student body that is broadly representative of the population the institution wishes to serve (6.1).

The institution … fosters an atmosphere within the institutional community that respects and supports people of diverse characteristics and backgrounds (11.5).

The Commission concurs with the visiting team that Williams College is developing a “culture of critical review” and has taken noteworthy steps to assess student learning at the institutional level. We are pleased to learn that the College intends to supplement this work with the implementation of a more regular review schedule for its academic majors and concentrations, including consideration of learning outcomes for each program. The Fall 2012 report will provide an opportunity for the College to report on the success of these endeavors, consistent with our standards on Planning and Evaluation and The Academic Program:

The institution has a system of periodic review of academic and other programs that includes the use of external perspectives (2.5).

The institution’s approach to understanding student learning focuses on the course, program, and institutional level. Data and other evidence generated through this
approach are considered at the appropriate level of focus, with the results being a
demonstrable factor in improving the learning opportunities and results for students
(4.45).

The institution’s system of periodic review of academic programs includes a focus on understanding what and how students learn as a result of the program (4.48).

The Commission understands that Williams College has begun a participatory, comprehensive strategic planning process through which it will develop a vision for the College in the year 2020 and identify priorities and initiatives needed to achieve that vision. We look forward to learning, in Fall 2012, of the status of the “2020 Project,” as evidence of the College’s ability to engage in planning and evaluation that are “systematic, comprehensive, broad-based, integrated, and appropriate to the institution” (2.1).

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2017 is consistent with the Commission’s policy of requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation 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 Williams College and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you and Dr. Charles Long, team representative, 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. Robert I. Lipp. The institution is free to release information about the evaluation and the Commission’s action to others, in accordance with Commission policy.

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, Director of the Commission.

Sincerely,

J. Gordon
Judith R. Gordon

JRG/jm

Enclosure

cc: Mr. Robert I. Lipp
    Visiting Team