



April 7, 2022

Dr. Laurie A. Leshin
President
Worcester Polytechnic Institute
100 Institute Road
Worcester, MA 01609-2280

Dear President Leshin:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on March 4, 2022, the New England Commission of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Worcester Polytechnic Institute:

that Worcester Polytechnic Institute be continued in accreditation;

that the institution submit an interim report for consideration in Fall 2026;

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

- 1) developing and evaluating the effectiveness of strategies and initiatives to support the health and well-being of its campus community;
- 2) evaluating the campus-wide impact of enrollment growth on student services, institutional resources, and the overall campus culture;
- 3) implementing its strategic and financial plans with emphasis on managing institutional debt as well as the cost of attendance;
- 4) evaluating the effectiveness of its internal governance structures with attention to clarifying the roles of its Schools and Deans in academic governance and ensuring that members of the campus community have an appropriate voice and/or role in governance;
- 5) conducting reviews of its graduate-level programs and clarifying the role of the Institutional Research Office in supporting this work;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Fall 2031.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

Worcester Polytechnic Institute is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*.

The Commission joins the visiting team in commending Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) on its exemplary self-study that documents the many ways in which the Institute is achieving its mission to “transform lives, turn knowledge into action to confront global challenges, and revolutionize STEM through distinctive and inclusive education, projects, and research.” A strong culture of planning and evaluation is characterized by the “near completion” of the objectives identified in WPI’s *Evaluate Impact 2015-2018 Strategic Plan* and the inclusive strategic planning process that resulted in the development of the Institute’s current Board-approved strategic plan, *Lead with Purpose 2021-2026*, that will continue to inform WPI’s top priorities: student success, well-being, and outcomes; purpose-driven education and research; and “who we are and how we work.” WPI’s success in increasing overall enrollment from 5,604 FTE in Fall 2017 to 6,279 FTE in Fall 2021 is particularly impressive, as is its success in maintaining graduation rates that ranged from 92% to 95% during this same period. The Institute’s \$650 million endowment and the implementation of sound fiscal policies and practices contribute to WPI’s strong financial health. The team also confirmed that faculty and staff alike are deeply committed to the intellectual growth and well-being of their students and that they take seriously their roles as educators and mentors. We support the team’s observation that WPI’s student-centered culture, its hallmark project-based curriculum with a global focus, and its outstanding Board, leadership, faculty, staff, students, and alumni contribute to WPI’s distinction as an exemplary institution in New England and beyond. Finally, the Commission understands that President Laurie Leshin, WPI’s first female President, is stepping down, and WPI’s Provost will serve as Interim President during the search for the institution’s 17th President. As documented in the self-study and verified by the visiting team, the Commission shares WPI’s confidence that it is well-positioned to address its challenges and achieve its goals during this leadership transition and well into the future.

Commission policy requires an interim (fifth-year) report of all institutions on a decennial evaluation cycle. The purpose of Worcester Polytechnic Institute’s Fall 2026 interim report 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 interim reports, the Institute is asked to report on five items related to our standards on *Students; Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure; Institutional Resources; Planning and Evaluation; Organization and Governance; and The Academic Program*.

As Worcester Polytechnic Institute candidly acknowledges, the institution has experienced significant challenges related to the mental health of its students due, in part, to the institution’s culture of academic achievement and innovation combined with the stressors caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We are therefore gratified to learn of WPI’s steadfast commitment to “creating a well community;” evidence of WPI’s “rigorous approach” to ensuring the health and wellness of its students, faculty, and staff includes the addition of ten new staff members to support its plans and initiatives in this area and the establishment of a 35-member health and well-being task force that falls under the leadership of the Director of WPI’s Center for Well Being. To date, the taskforce has held 15 Town Hall “listening sessions” and administered various surveys to gather information that will inform the development of strategies and initiatives to support the overall well-being of all members of the institution. We look forward to receiving, through the Fall 2026 interim report, an update on WPI’s success in this area as evidence that its “student services, including physical and mental health services, [are] appropriate to its mission and the needs and goals of its students” (5.9), and that it “fosters an inclusive atmosphere within the institutional community that respects and supports people of diverse characteristics and backgrounds” (9.5). We are further informed here by our standard on *Students*:

Through a program of regular and systematic evaluation, the institution assesses the effectiveness of its efforts to achieve an equitable educational experience for all of its students and the appropriateness and effectiveness of its student services to advance institutional purposes. Information obtained through this evaluation is used to revise these efforts and services and improve their achievement (5.20).

As planned, enrollment in undergraduate programs at Worcester Polytechnic Institute grew from 3,537 students in 2010 to 4,804 in 2020 (a 35% increase), and the institution exceeded its FY2022 goal to enroll 5,000 undergraduates by 72 students. The Institute candidly acknowledges, however, that ensuring students have access to sufficient support services and institutional resources can be challenging during times of rapid growth, and the institution is sometimes in a position where it has to “catch up.” We note with favor that the Institute recently opened a new 12,000 square foot building with “flex spaces” to facilitate and enhance collaboration among students, and additional housing for 250 students was recently acquired. Further, students articulated to the team during its visit that they strongly value the close ties to one another made possible by a smaller institution; hence, we concur with the team’s observation that as WPI continues to implement its plans to increase enrollment, it will be essential to closely monitor the campus-wide impact of enrollment growth on student services, institutional resources, and the overall campus culture. In keeping with our standard on *Students* (cited above), the Fall 2026 interim report will provide WPI an opportunity to include an update on its success in ensuring that WPI “has sufficient and appropriate information, physical, and technological resources necessary for the achievement of its purposes wherever and however its academic programs are offered ... [and that I]t devotes sufficient resources to maintain and enhance its information, physical, and technical resources” (7.21).

Although enrollment growth has contributed to WPI’s strong financial health, we also note that the Institute has increased its long-term debt from \$278 million at the end of FY2019 to \$409 million at the end of FY2020 thereby increasing its debt-to-net assets ratio from 0.41 to 0.63. We understand that WPI does not anticipate incurring additional debt, and by implementing strategic debt management strategies (e.g., refinancing a \$42 million bond to take advantage of a lower interest rate), the institution expects to reduce its debt by \$70 million over the next five to six years. At the same time, Worcester Polytechnic Institute is on track to achieve its fundraising goal of \$500 million that will provide additional support for student aid, thereby lowering the overall cost of attendance, which is currently around 20% higher than peer institutions. As evidence that WPI “has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning” (2.5), we look forward, in Fall 2026, to learning of the Institute’s success in implementing its strategic and financial plans with emphasis on managing institutional debt levels and the cost of attendance. Our standard on *Institutional Resources* is also relevant here:

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 institution’s financial planning, including contingency planning, is integrated with overall planning and evaluation processes. The institution demonstrates its ability to analyze its financial condition and understand the opportunities and constraints that will influence its financial condition and acts accordingly. It reallocates resources as necessary to achieve its purposes and objectives (7.14).

We understand that WPI has recently established a new “Global School,” and each of its four schools is led by a Dean. In addition, several new departments (e.g., Robotics Engineering and Aerospace Engineering) have evolved out of established disciplines (e.g., Mechanical Engineering). Through this restructuring, with the continued oversight of the Provost, Deans are now “empowered” to lead WPI’s strategic vision. We look forward to being apprised, through the Fall 2026 interim report, of WPI’s success in evaluating the effectiveness of its internal governance structures as evidence that it “provides for the appropriate participation of its constituencies, promotes communications, and effectively advances the quality of the institution” (3.13).

We appreciate learning that WPI’s Office of Institutional Research, housed within the Office of Strategic Initiatives, is intent on making more direct connections between data analysis and the

strategic direction of the Institute, and the recently implemented executive-level COVID dashboards greatly enhanced the capacity for strategic decision-making around the pandemic. However, except for programs with specialized accreditation, it was not evident to the team that graduate-level program reviews occur on a regular cycle. Further, the role of the Office of Institutional Research in supporting this work was not clear. As specified in our standard on *The Academic Program* we look forward, in Fall 2026, to being updated on this matter:

The institution develops, approves, administers, and on a regular cycle reviews its academic programs under institutional policies that are implemented by designated bodies with established channels of communication and control. Review of academic programs includes evidence of student success and program effectiveness and incorporates an external perspective. Faculty have a substantive voice in these matters (4.6).

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2031 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 Worcester Polytechnic Institute and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you, Winston Soboyejo, Provost, Michael Horan, Chief Financial Officer, and David Munson, 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. Jack Mollen. 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,



Russell C. Carey

RCC/jm

cc: Mr. Jack Mollen
Visiting Team

Enclosure: Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions