April 29, 2013

Mr. Michael B. Alexander
President
Lasell College
1844 Commonwealth Avenue
Newton, MA 02466

Dear President Alexander:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on March 7, 2013, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Lasell College:

that Lasell College be continued in accreditation;

that the College submit a fifth-year interim report for consideration in Fall 2017;

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

1. evaluating undergraduate degree programs to ensure that the allocation of general education credits is consistent with the expectations articulated in the Commission’s standards;

2. continuing to develop and implement plans to assess student learning outcomes in undergraduate and graduate degree programs;

3. strengthening academic rigor across the curriculum;

4. assessing the effectiveness of retention initiatives and achieving institutional goals for retention and graduation rates;

5. achieving its goals for enrollment growth and diversification of revenue;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Fall 2022.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.
Lasell College is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be substantially in compliance with the Standards for Accreditation.

The Commission commends Lasell College (Lasell) for its preparation of a well-conceived, well-written, and thorough self-study. We concur with the visiting team that Lasell is a dynamic, focused, adaptive, flexible, student-centered institution which has grown, extended its mission, and expanded its programs while, at the same time, remaining true to and honing its philosophy of Connected Learning — a pervasive educational experience in which students are involved in the actual work of their fields of study. We are gratified to learn that Lasell’s mission and values are known and shared by the campus community and, in particular, that the institution has made notable progress in establishing a college-wide, mission-centric, planning process. Lasell’s capable leadership, committed faculty, staff, and trustees are commended for their spirit of innovation and commitment to student achievement as demonstrated by the number of new academic programs and strategic initiatives, as well as the thorough integration of Connected Learning principles into both traditional and online delivery formats. Also noteworthy is the institution’s success in establishing a general culture of assessment where faculty and administration are well versed in the importance of assessment and use of data results for continual improvement. We appreciated learning from the team that faculty are included in governance and program development and are excited about recent changes and growth in the College. The team verified through their visit that the institution offers a wide array of resources and student services and that “[s]tudent services at Lasell College are truly student and service oriented.” We share the judgment of the visiting team that the achievements of the past decade, coupled with experienced leaders, a dedicated faculty and staff, and a supportive Board of Trustees, position Lasell College well to meet the challenges of the future and to achieve the ambitious institutional goals outlined in the strategic plan.

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 2017, to report on five matters related to our standards on The Academic Program, Planning and Evaluation, Students, and Financial Resources.

We are gratified to learn from the visiting team that the College is in the process of revising its general education program to better reflect the educational philosophy of Connected Learning and to connect it to 14 recently articulated institutional learning outcomes. However, the Commission shares the concern of the team that the number of credits in the general education curriculum, currently 30 to 35 credits, is not consistent with the Commission’s standards. In the interim report submitted in Fall 2017, we seek assurance “that all undergraduate students complete at least the equivalent of forty semester hours in a bachelor’s degree program, or the equivalent of twenty semester hours in an associates degree program in general education” (4.18).

We are pleased to learn that Lasell “incorporates, both implicitly and explicitly, feedback from student learning outcomes” to support academic initiatives as demonstrated by the implementation of a common writing rubric across the undergraduate curriculum where assessment results were analyzed to make improvements in the curriculum. It is also notable that each department within Graduate and Professional Studies has established assessment goals, developed learning outcomes for each goal, and is now working to develop competencies and rubrics that will map to learning outcomes. As Lasell acknowledged in its self-study, and we concur, the College’s institutional assessment plans are in their beginning stages and we are gratified that the College will “rely on continuing analysis to maintain programs’ quality, integrity, and effectiveness.” We look forward to learning, in the interim report submitted in Fall 2017, of Lasell’s continued success in developing and implementing plans to assess student
learning outcomes in undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Our standard on The Academic Program is relevant here:

The institution implements and provides support for systematic and broad-based assessment of what and how students are learning through their academic program and experiences outside the classroom. Assessment is based on clear statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. Assessment provides useful information that helps the institution to improve the experiences provided for students, as well as to assure that the level of student achievement is appropriate for the degree awarded (4.48).

The institution’s approach to understanding student learning focuses on the course, program, and institutional level. Evidence is considered at the appropriate level of focus, with the results being a demonstrable factor in improving the learning opportunities and results for students (4.49).

Graduate degree programs are designed to give students a mastery of a complex field of study or professional area. Programs have an appropriate rationale; their clarity and order are visible in stated requirements, in relevant official publications, and in the demonstrated learning experiences of graduates. Learning objectives reflect a high level of complexity, specialization, and generalization (4.21).

Students who successfully complete a graduate program demonstrate that they have acquired the knowledge and developed the skills that are identified as the program’s objectives (4.29).

We appreciate the College’s candid acknowledgment of “the perception of a lack of academic rigor at the institution,” identified through analysis of the outcomes of the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education. We are gratified to learn of the College’s commitment to “raise levels of academic rigor in courses” and take favorable note of initiatives developed to address this issue, including professional development workshops for faculty, redesign of the first-year seminar, introduction of “academically demanding” capstone experiences, and undergraduate research opportunities. We understand that the College has begun an in-depth review of syllabi to assure appropriate levels of rigor. The Commission appreciates that it will take time to fully implement and assess the effectiveness of these initiatives and we look forward, in the interim report submitted in Fall 2017, to an update on Lasell’s progress in strengthening academic rigor across the curriculum. Our standards on Planning and Evaluation and The Academic Program, cited above and below, are relevant here:

The institution regularly and systematically evaluates the achievement of its mission and purposes, giving primary focus to the realization of its educational objectives. Its system of evaluation is designed to provide relevant and trustworthy information to support institutional improvement, with an emphasis on the academic program. The institution’s evaluation efforts are effective for addressing its unique circumstances. These efforts use both quantitative and qualitative methods (2.5).

Each educational program demonstrates coherence through its goals, structure, and content; policies and procedures for admission and retention; instructional methods and procedures; and the nature, quality, and extent of student learning and achievement. 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 program (4.3).
Institutions offering degrees at multiple levels demonstrate that expectations for student achievement, independent learning, skills in inquiry, and critical judgment are graduated by degree level and in keeping with generally accepted practice (4.4).

We understand from the self-study that, while the “institutional goal to grow enrollment ... has been very successful,” Lasell “continues to struggle to reach its goal of consistent cohort retention.” While we appreciate the College’s observation that the IPEDS graduation rate is not the best measure of student success at Lasell, we concur with the visiting team that graduation rates have been an “ongoing concern,” with rates fluctuating from 45% in 2010 to 51% in 2011 and 47% in 2012, and rates of 44% and 52% projected for 2013 and 2014, respectively. We commend the institution for its commitment to developing alternative measures to assess student success and to supplement retention efforts with the use of predictive analytical and data management software. Lasell has also adopted a number of initiatives designed to increase student retention, including Lasell’s Early Action Partnerships for Student Success (LEAPS), the Office of International Student Services, and the recent hiring of a Learning Specialist, which we note favorably. The interim report submitted in Fall 2017 will provide the College an opportunity to update the Commission on its continued success in implementing these initiatives as well as its progress in achieving its goals for retention and graduation rates and other measures of student achievement. We remind you of our standards on The Academic Program (cited above), Planning and Evaluation (cited above and below), and Students:

Based on verifiable information, the institution understands what its students have gained as a result of their education and has useful evidence about the success of its recent graduates. This information is used for planning and resource allocation and to inform the public about the institution (2.7).

The institution demonstrates its ability to admit students who can be successful in the institution’s academic program, including specifically recruited populations. It 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 academic goals. The institution provides students with information and guidance regarding opportunities and experiences that may help ensure their academic success (6.5).

The institution measures student success, including rates of retention and graduation and other measures of success appropriate to institutional mission (6.6).

Measures of student success, including rates of retention and graduation, are separately determined for any group that the institution specifically recruits, and those rates are used in evaluating the success of specialized recruitment and the services and opportunities provided for the recruited students (6.7).

The Commission commends Lasell College for managing enrollment growth in line with its strategic initiatives. We understand that current enrollment is about 1,645 full-time residential undergraduate students and the College will soon achieve its desired undergraduate enrollment of 1,750-1,800. Enrollment goals for graduate programs are more ambitious, with plans to grow enrollment to 300. We appreciate Lasell’s commitment to support growth, including the investment in staff and the enhanced functionality of administrative systems. However, we share the judgment of the visiting team that, with the College’s traditional enrollment soon to peak, diversification of revenue beyond tuition and fees will be needed to support new programs and facilities. We anticipate being apprised, in Fall 2017, of the institution’s progress in achieving its goals for enrollment growth and diversification of revenue. Our standard on Financial Resources is relevant here:
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. The governing board reviews and approves the institution’s financial plans based on multi-year analysis and financial forecasting (9.3).

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2022 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 Lasell College and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you, Dr. James Ostrow, Vice President for Academic Affairs, and Mr. Thomas Galligan, 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. Richard Blankstein. 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,

Jean A. Wyld

JAW/jm

Enclosure

cc: Mr. Richard Blankstein
    Visiting Team