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January 17, 2018

Dr. Clifford Scott, OD, MPH  
President  
The New England College of Optometry  
424 Beacon Street  
Boston, MA 02115-1129

Dear President Scott:

I write to inform you that at its meeting on November 16, 2017, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education considered the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by The New England College of Optometry and voted to take the following action:

that the interim report submitted by The New England College of Optometry be accepted;

that the College submit a report for consideration in Fall 2018 that gives emphasis to the institution's success in:

1. accomplishing the goals of its Strategic Plan 2015-2020;
2. transitioning to a new president;
3. assessing the effectiveness of the student services provided;

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Fall 2022 be confirmed;

that, in addition to the information included in all self-studies, the self-study prepared in advance of the Fall 2022 evaluation give emphasis to the institution's success in:

1. developing and implementing its Strategic Plan 2021-2025;
2. continuing to meet its enrollment goals;
3. demonstrating student success as measured by the employability of its graduates;
4. ensuring sufficient funding to support faculty research.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The interim (fifth-year) report submitted by The New England College of Optometry was accepted because it responded to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letters of May 14, 2013 and March 31, 2015 and addressed each of the nine standards, including a reflective essay for Standard 8: *Educational Effectiveness* on student learning and success.

We commend The New England College of Optometry (NECO) for its continued commitment over the past five years to “excellence in optometric education, innovation, research, and patient care.” We are pleased to learn of the collaborative process that engaged the entire College community, including students, in the development of the institution’s comprehensive Strategic Plan 2015-2020 and its accompanying plans for finance, admissions, the library, campus planning and facilities, technology, and development. We view positively the College’s implementation of technology throughout the institution to aid teaching, learning, and scholarship, and recognize the work of the Group for Innovation in Learning and Teaching to pursue best practices that “drive student success.” We note with approval that NECO achieved the “strongest financial position in the institution’s history” in FY2017 through prudent planning with operating margins of 14%, a “superb” cash position, and an endowment that grew from \$14.6 million in August 2015 to \$22.0 million in June 2017, while holding annual tuition increases to 1.5% over the past three years. In addition, we note favorably the investment of over \$1.0 million to renovate the main lecture halls and the Community Commons at the College’s Beacon Street campus, and the additional \$2.5 million, financed entirely through reserves, expended to develop NECO’s main clinical campus on Commonwealth Avenue. To further underscore that patient care is an integral part of NECO and to reinforce the connection between the College and its two “flagship” owned-and-operated New England Eye clinics (Commonwealth Avenue and Roslindale, MA), these clinics were “rebranded” in 2017 as NECO Centers for Eye Care. At the same time, the College’s network of strategic clinical partnerships that offer fourth-year student externships now includes more than 150 sites nationwide and in three other countries and was renamed the NECO Clinical Network.

From the institution’s reflective essay, we are assured that “measurement of educational effectiveness permeates all departments” and serves as the key component of continuous quality improvement. Assessment at NECO is “solidly” faculty driven, and program learning outcomes are aligned with the competencies established by the Accreditation Council on Optometric Education. Faculty are supported by assessment workshops and technology tools, and syllabi templates help to ensure that measurable learning outcomes are included and consistent across courses. Outcome measures include graded assessments, rubrics developed to gauge student success after pre-clinic and clinical rotations, preceptor feedback, and student results on the National Board of Examiners in Optometry (NBEO) exam which, for NECO, was a pass rate of 84.3% in 2016 for students taking the exam for the first-time. We also take favorable note that a Student Success and Retention Task Force was established to analyze student pass rates on the NBEO exam, as well as to “help evaluate factors” that lead students to leave the program.

The items the institution is asked to report on in Fall 2018 are related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation, Organization and Governance, Students, and Educational Effectiveness*.

NECO’s development of its Strategic Plan 2015-2020, that is centered around its three core activities – teaching and learning, research, and patient care and clinical education – and includes goals, an analysis of resources needed, and measures to assess success, is a notable accomplishment of the past five years. Among the ten goals included in the plan are: founding a Center for Vision Enhancement that will focus on biomedical and translational research and prevention; creating a Center of Optometric Teaching Excellence; and providing unique educational experiences and opportunities for students to participate in research. To evaluate progress, the Institutional Planning Committee of the Board is assisted by three task forces, one for each core activity. In addition, we observe that the 2017 faculty retreat focused on

implementation of the strategic plan. In the Fall 2018 report, we look forward to learning of the College's success in accomplishing its strategic planning goals as evidence that "[t]he institution has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning" (2.5). Our standard on *Planning and Evaluation* provides this additional guidance:

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 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 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).

We understand that the NECO Board of Trustees has started the process to recruit and select the College's next president. Given that the transition is planned for June 2018, the Fall 2018 report will also afford the institution an opportunity to provide an update on the success of the College's search for a new president and its transition to new institutional leadership. Our standard on *Organization and Governance* is relevant here:

The board appoints and periodically reviews the performance of the chief executive officer whose full-time or major responsibility is to the institution (3.10).

The board delegates to the chief executive officer and, as appropriate, to others the requisite authority and autonomy to manage the institution compatible with the board's intentions and the institution's mission. In exercising its fiduciary responsibility, the governing board assures that senior officers identify, assess, and manage risks and ensure regulatory compliance (3.11).

As noted above, we appreciate that students play an active role in governance at NECO through the Student Council, as well as representation on the Student Affairs Committee of the Board of Trustees and the Curriculum Committee among other groups. Given the nature of the student body, a variety of career resources and events are provided to connect current students with practicing alumni thereby creating a network of optometrists and strengthening their ties to the institution. We view positively that the College's student services staff is now beginning to assess the effectiveness of the services provided for NECO students, with plans to document "how different activities have impacted students and their career paths." In keeping with our standards on *Students* and *Educational Effectiveness*, we welcome further information in the Fall 2018 report on the results of this initiative:

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).

Through a program of regular and systematic evaluation, the institution assesses the appropriateness and effectiveness of its student services to advance institutional purposes. Information obtained through this evaluation is used to revise these goals and services and improve their achievement (5.20).

The institution with stated goals for students' co-curricular learning systematically assesses their achievement (8.4).

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. The items the Commission asks to be given special emphasis within the self-study prepared for the comprehensive evaluation are matters related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation, Students, Educational Effectiveness, and Institutional Resources*.

We understand that The New England College of Optometry is set to begin the next phase of its strategic planning process in Fall 2018 with the development of its Strategic Plan 2021-2025 that will be designed to "... connect past success with the future direction of the College." As informed by our standard on *Planning and Evaluation*, the Fall 2022 self-study will afford the institution the opportunity to reflect on these efforts:

Planning and evaluation are systematic, comprehensive, broad-based, integrated, and appropriate to the institution. They involve the participation of individuals and groups responsible for the achievement of institutional purposes and include external perspectives. Results of planning and evaluation are regularly communicated to appropriate institutional constituencies. The institution allocates sufficient resources for its planning and evaluation efforts (2.1).

The institution plans beyond a short-term horizon, including strategic planning that involves realistic analyses of internal and external opportunities and constraints. The results of strategic planning are implemented in all units of the institution through financial, academic, enrollment, and other supporting plans (2.3).

The institution plans for and responds to financial and other contingencies, establishes feasible priorities, and develops a realistic course of action to achieve identified objectives. Institutional decision-making, particularly the allocation of resources, is consistent with planning priorities (2.4).

A concern noted by NECO in its interim report is the increased competition for optometry students resulting from the entry of new schools into the market and the expansion of existing programs. While NECO enrolled 145 students in Fall 2016 – its largest class ever – with an acceptance rate of less than 50%, 132 enrolled in Fall 2017 with a quarter of the class coming from Canada. We therefore find admirable the efforts the College is making to "define an enrollment strategy that meets enrollment and applicant quality targets" including enhancing its recruitment appeal by highlighting its commitment to patient care through the rebranding initiative and by investing in its clinical campus network. In addition, to broaden its visibility, the College has expanded its presence at graduate and professional school fairs and increased its presentations to pre-optometry and pre-health clubs. The Fall 2022 self-study will enable the institution to provide evidence of the success of these and other recruitment initiatives in helping the College to meet its enrollment goals. We remind you of our standard on *Students*:

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 has an orderly and ethical program of recruitment and admission that complies with the requirements of legislation concerning equality of educational opportunity. Its admission and retention policies and procedures are clear, consistent with its mission and purposes, and available to all students and prospective students in appropriate printed and digital institutional publications (5.3).

With "gainful employment" in the field of optometry a primary goal for NECO students, the average retention and graduation rates of the institution's Doctor of Optometry (DO) students,

both of which exceed 90%, are impressive. We note positively that the Office of Student Services conducts a yearly post-graduate survey that indicates that 100% of the respondents have obtained jobs in the field. A further outreach project of DO graduates from 2009 to 2013, that used external resources (e.g., 2017 Blue Book of Optometrists, LinkedIn, and student emails), also showed high rates of employment – on average 92.6% – spread over 30 states and 5 Canadian provinces. As acknowledged in its strategic plan, we note with approval that NECO recognizes the need to regularly survey its students post-graduation to “obtain timely and accurate information about the success of its graduates.” Consistent with our standard on *Educational Effectiveness*, the 2022 self-study will afford the institution an opportunity to report on its progress in this regard:

The institution defines measures of student success and levels of achievement appropriate to its mission, modalities and locations of instruction, and student body, including any specifically recruited populations. These measures include rates of progression, retention, transfer, and graduation; default and loan repayment rates; licensure passage rates; and employment (8.6).

The institution uses additional quantitative measures of success, such as further education, civic participation, religious formation, and others, as appropriate to its mission, to understand the success of its recent graduates. Information from students and former students is regularly considered (8.7).

The New England College of Optometry is commended for its commitment to supporting research in the field as one of its three core priorities, and, as noted above, for its strategic goal to create a Center for Vision Enhancement. We are aware that federal grant funding for faculty research has been an important source of non-tuition revenue (\$868,903 in FY2017), and also share the institution’s concern that going forward it is likely that government funding will be less available. The steps taken by NECO to continue the support of faculty research, to include setting aside internal research funding for pilot projects, are therefore laudable. As specified in our standard on *Institutional Resources*, we ask that the self-study prepared in advance of the College’s Fall 2022 comprehensive evaluation provide an update on the success of NECO’s efforts to ensure sufficient funding is available to support faculty research:

The institution is financially stable. Ostensible financial stability is not achieved at the expense of educational quality. Its stability and viability are not unduly dependent upon vulnerable financial resources or an historically narrow base of support (7.5).

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 Commission expressed appreciation for the report submitted by The New England College of Optometry and hopes the evaluation process has contributed to institutional improvement. It appreciates your cooperation in the effort to provide public assurance of the quality of higher education in New England.

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. Pano Yeracaris. 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.

Dr. Clifford Scott, OD, MPH  
January 17, 2018  
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If you have any questions about the Commission's action, please contact Barbara Brittingham,  
President of the Commission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David P. Angel". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "D".

David P. Angel

DPA/jm

Enclosure

cc: Mr. Pano Yeracaris