HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION

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April 2, 2019

Interim President John Green
University of Akron
302 Buchtel Common
Akron, OH 44325-4702

Dear Interim President Green:

The interim report you submitted to our office has now been reviewed. The staff analysis of the report is attached.

On behalf of the Higher Learning Commission staff received the report on shared governance and communication. No further reports are required on this topic.

The institution's next reaffirmation of accreditation is scheduled for 2022– 2023.

For more information on the interim report process contact Lil Nakutis, Accreditation Processes Manager, at lnakutis@hlcommission.org. Your HLC staff liaison is John Marr (jmarr@hlcommission.org); (800) 621-7440 x 104.

Thank you.

HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION

STAFF ANALYSIS OF INSTITUTIONAL REPORT
DATE: April 2, 2019
STAFF LIAISON: John Marr
REVIEWED BY: Steven Kapelke

INSTITUTION: University of Akron, Akron, OH

EXECUTIVE OFFICER: John Green, Interim President

PREVIOUS COMMISSION ACTION AND SOURCES: An interim report is required by 12/31/2018 on shared governance and communication.

This interim report derives from the Team Report of the institution's 2017 Comprehensive Evaluation. The report should document that the Institution has continued to rapidly act on its plans for improving shared-governance structures and communication.

REPORT PRESENTATION AND QUALITY: The University of Akron (UA) interim report on shared governance consists of a clearly written narrative supplemented with extensive attachments related directly or indirectly to the governance issues described in the report. The supporting materials include several policy documents "*vetted*" by the University Council and examples of curriculum changes recommended by the Faculty Senate, among many others. Indications are that the report is thorough and candid.

REPORT SUMMARY: The report begins with an overview of two primary governance bodies at the institution, the University Council (UC) and the Faculty Senate, summarizing the primary roles of each. Here the report notes that the UC is a consultative body, while the Faculty Senate has the authority to make curriculum recommendations to the Board of Trustees through the University President.

The report goes on to describe a major point of contention within the institution pertaining to shared governance, specifically the process by which were implemented Academic Program Review (APR) recommendations resulting from the recent (AY2017-2018) comprehensive set of program reviews. In general, the tension results from decisions on program elimination ("*phase-out*") that were determined by the administration with no input from the faculty, though the faculty did have a say in the investment portions of the APR recommendations.

While the report acknowledges the disagreement and how it was derived, the document notes that the timing of program elimination decisions was critical, having both short and long-term financial, student enrollment, and "*public relations*" implications. It appears, based on what can be inferred from the report, that the timing issue was the primary reason these determinations were not more broadly reviewed.

Conversely, every academic unit has had the opportunity to propose new/revised degree programs during the Three-Year Action Plan process, the report citing an example from the College of Engineering wherein a single Ph.D program would supplant three current doctoral programs in Engineering.

Here the report provides several examples of how shared governance—and related issues in communication--has improved. These include recent efforts on the part of the current President to involve the campus community in decisions regarding the reorganization of some UA colleges. Another example is the decision of the Board of Trustees to expand considerably representation on the President's search committee, a search and screen process scheduled to begin in Spring 2019.

The last major point in the report narrative pertains to the institution's strategic planning process. Recognizing that some form of planning was necessary to provide a basis for the development of the FY2020 budget, the institution decided on the creation of a Three-Year Action Plan, "*which rests on unit-level plans that were developed in October/November 2018.*" The plan draft was widely vetted, with consideration given to all "*comments and suggestions.*" Following endorsement by the University Council on December 4th, 2018, the Board of Trustees approved the plan the following day.

REPORT ANALYSIS: It is evident from the materials presented in the UA interim report that the University has in place structures for shared governance that appear consistent with good practice and are memorialized appropriately in policy. In that regard, entities such as the Faculty Senate and the University Council play essential roles in governance--the UC through its consensual role with regard to general University policies; and the Faculty Senate through its stewardship of the curriculum and related academic matters.

Indications are that the primary concern pertaining to shared governance, as set forth in the interim report, is the process employed by the University in making determinations for program closure based on recommendations from the comprehensive Academic Program Review (APR) process that took place in AY2017-2018. According to the faculty as represented by the Faculty Senate, this was a breach of policy set forth in University Board Rules. Review of the extensive supporting documentation provided in the interim report includes this *First Item* from the report of the Academic Policy Committee of the Faculty Senate, dated December 6, 2018.

APC Statement on APR and Shared Governance

At the November 2018 Senate meeting, Senators directed the APC to revise its statement on APR to focus on shared governance. The following document makes those revisions:

APC recommends that Faculty Senate vote to formally object to the procedures used in the recent Academic Program cuts on the grounds that administration did not share governance in the final decision-making phase of the process. Specifically, administration did not:

1) use appropriate and available mechanisms to ensure that information used to make decisions was factually correct,

2) allow the University community the opportunity to respond before supposedly irreversible actions were taken,

3) allow individual programs to address items unique to their programs that would have resulted in better-informed decisions, or

4) act in accordance with its own numerous verbal assertions that no cuts would be made on the basis of the outcomes of this process.

In its *Rationale*, the document cites, among other policies, University Board Rule 3359-20-05.2, which addresses specific aspects of curriculum change and in particular an action "*preventing students from entering a program [which] is a defector deletion of courses and programs, at least temporarily, and would require a change to the bulletin description.*"

According to the interim report, the administration and the faculty have basically agreed to disagree on the results of the APR process. Indications are that the administration and the Board of Trustees are attempting to ameliorate lingering concerns among the faculty by taking steps to improve communication and, at the Board level, expanding representation on the current President's Search Committee. Also, based on the information provided in the report, the process resulting in the creation of the Three-Year Action Plan was informed substantially by unit-based reports, suggesting a broad level of involvement in a critical organizational initiative.

Analysis Concluding Statement: A primary question facing the University of Akron in the wake of the institution's decision to eliminate a significant number of academic programs based on recommendations stemming from the AY2017-2018 APR was how to heal possible "wounds" related to institutional governance.

To that end, the administration and the Board of Trustees have, it appears, been pro-active. One example of the University's attempt to improve communication is the President's efforts to engage the entire community in discussions around reorganization of several UA colleges; and, as noted in the Report Summary section above, the Board

of Trustees has responded positively to requests from various University constituent groups with regard to the President's Search Committee.

These are salutary actions on the part of the administration and the Board and, if continued in kind, should work to re-establish confidence in shared governance. However, an "*agree to disagree*" posture on decisions as critical as those related to program closure, will not, in the long run, serve the institution well as a precedent. While the administration/Board decisions made sense with regard to concerns about enrollment, finances and the fallout from negative publicity, they left remaining questions about their commitment to shared governance.

One remaining issue pertains to policies governing such decisions, as cited by the Academic Policy Committee of the Faculty Senate in its December 6, 2018 report. A question: Is there disagreement about what the policies actually mean and is therefore a matter of interpretation? A review of the policies is one possible initiative the University could undertake as a means to avoid future tension on related issues.

The Higher Learning Commission will not require additional reporting on this topic, but shared governance will require additional, continued attention on the part of the organization, as indicated in the Staff Finding section below. The University should assume that the HLC Peer Review Team conducting its AY2022-2023 Comprehensive Evaluation will examine carefully the institution's continued progress with regard to shared governance.

STAFF FINDING:

Note the relevant Criterion, Core Component(s) or Assumed Practice(s): Core Component 5.B pertaining to shared governance

Statements of Analysis (check one below)
_ Evidence demonstrates adequate progress in the area of focus.
X Evidence demonstrates that further organizational attention is required in the area of focus.
_ Evidence demonstrates that further organizational attention and HLC follow-up are required.
_ Evidence is insufficient and a HLC focused visit is warranted.

STAFF ACTION: Receive the report on shared governance and communication. No further reports are required on this topic.

The institution's next reaffirmation of accreditation is scheduled for 2022– 2023.