



CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

Katherine Bergeron
President

August 10, 2018

Barbara Brittingham, President
New England Commission on Higher Education
3 Burlington Woods Drive, Suite 100
Burlington, MA 01803

Dear President Brittingham,

I want to begin by thanking not only the Commission for enabling a very thoughtful decennial review of Connecticut College but also President McCartney for leading the fine team that came to New London in April. The whole campus was impressed by their diligence and determination.

The mission of higher education depends on external peer review. It is essential for advancing scholarship; for advancing faculty through the tenure process; for advancing the work of departments and programs; and, above all, for advancing the excellence of our institutions as a whole. It never fails to impress me that our own colleagues take on this work so regularly and so willingly. The collaboration benefits us all, of course, and yet the generosity of spirit is nonetheless quite moving. I know I speak for everyone at the College when I say how grateful we are for the work completed by members of the visiting team, for their presence on our campus, and especially for their discernment. The team approached its work with admirable seriousness and collectively came to understand the special ethos that defines Connecticut College. This letter offers our response to the findings of the team report.

Strengths and Challenges

The report noted areas of strength as well as challenges. Among the strengths, the team expressed admiration for the outstanding education we offer at the College and the faculty who make it happen. They were impressed by the integrity and vitality of our new curriculum, Connections, as well as by our strategic plan, *Building on Strength*, informed by the curriculum's unique integrative vision. They praised the excellence of our Board, our student body, and our campus culture more generally, a culture informed by our nearly 100-year-old honor code. And they took special note of the time and energy that our faculty and staff commit, often with zeal, in service to the long-term future of the College, describing this as a "tremendous asset" in the College's ongoing development. We are pleased that these special aspects of the Connecticut College culture were so evident to the team during the visit.

The major concerns raised in the report echoed the same challenges we ourselves expressed in our self-study: financial constraints brought about by enrollment competition and increased financial aid; aligning faculty and staff resources to the size of our student body; and accelerating our work on assessment of student learning, especially in light of the new curriculum. The team also encouraged us to build on our visible commitment to equity and inclusion — and the recent achievements in increasing the diversity of the faculty and student body — by undertaking a campus climate survey. In keeping with the College's strong tradition of shared governance, they asked the College to pay close attention to the newly revised format of

the monthly faculty meeting to ensure that it is realizing institutional goals. Finally, the report reminded us that it will be important to resolve the question of the future of our Master of Arts in Psychology program. We find all the report's suggestions valuable and in line with the work we are already doing to advance the College through our strategic plan. We are especially eager to intensify the efforts we have undertaken on direct assessment of student learning, in support of not only departmental learning goals but also the integrative learning goals associated with Connections.

Additional Improvements

It is fair to say that the team came to Connecticut College during a very dynamic year. Some of the academic highlights were noted in our self-study and in the team report: the significant advances made on Connections; the new initiatives in career education; the launch of a novel dual-degree program (B.A./B.S.) in environmental engineering offered in partnership with Worcester Polytechnic Institute; and the opening of the Walter Commons for Global Study and Engagement. All these initiatives are recorded in the [second annual progress report on *Building on Strength*](#), published after the team's visit.

The College managed to break a few institutional records this year, as well, the results of which are already shifting some of the financial assumptions discussed during the team visit. Along with record applications, for example, we experienced a record year for first-year enrollment. We anticipate welcoming a first-year class of over 510 students at the end of this month, the largest incoming class ever and a notable increase over last year's class of 444. We experienced the single best fundraising year in our history, too, with \$53 million in new gifts and pledges recorded by July 2018. Both of these results, realized after the April team visit, were communicated to President McCartney. Because they speak to some of the concerns expressed in the report, we offer a few additional comments here.

A strong incoming class in FY19 certainly puts us in a stronger financial position, by temporarily stabilizing enrollment patterns. Nonetheless, the College is continuing to take steps to reduce operating costs to achieve greater financial stability. Strategic cost-savings have ensured a balanced cash budget for FY18 and we are projecting the same for FY19. Because the FY19 budget was built on a projected incoming class size of 475, current net tuition revenue estimates are already positive to budget. In addition to increased net tuition revenue, the voluntary retirement offer we implemented in the spring resulted in a higher take rate than anticipated, with a total of 65 employees electing to retire from the College on June 30. After rehires, the savings projected will exceed \$3.5 million annually starting in FY20. In light of the cost saving measures, increased enrollment, and fundraising results, Moody's recently reaffirmed the College's A2 stable rating.

We are making good progress, as well, in addressing deferred maintenance, undertaking key projects to improve the academic and residential experience in alignment with our strategic plan. In addition to the opening of the Walter Commons this year, we renovated Hamilton House as our first residence hall dedicated entirely to first-year students. Over the last two years, in fact, over 200 student rooms have been renewed and upgraded into two-room doubles for first-years. Feedback from our students about what they now call the "new dorm" was so positive that we have just now completed the renovation of Morrison House in the same vein to be ready for the class of 2022. Together with Connections, these residential interventions have helped boost not only admissions but also retention. After a 2 percent increase in first-year-to-sophomore persistence rates last year, we are projecting those same rates to improve by yet another percentage point this year.

More capital projects are anticipated. The Connecticut College Board of Trustees approved a new Campus Master Plan during their annual spring meeting in May, another major project discussed during the team's visit. Key priorities of this plan include renovating the Crozier-Williams Student Center and Palmer

Auditorium; enhancing athletic facilities; revitalizing academic and career spaces; and improving student dining and living accommodations. These initiatives will be supported through aggressive fundraising associated with our next comprehensive campaign, which began its “silent” phase in July 2017. The College has already raised \$79 million toward its goal, including two \$10 million gifts received in spring 2018 for the renovation of Palmer Auditorium.

Conclusion

Connecticut College has seen, in short, notable improvements in enrollment and fundraising in the past year, while also taking judicious steps to contain operating expenses and address deferred maintenance. This work is ongoing and is key to ensuring our long-term sustainability. We are very encouraged by the progress and look forward to another year with strong operating results.

Once again, I would like to thank President McCartney and the visiting team for the time they devoted to thinking about the future of Connecticut College and offering their “honest and forthright assessment of institutional strengths and weaknesses,” in accordance with the Commission’s expectations. From my perspective, Connecticut College profited greatly from the conversation, which has provided important external validation of our most valuable assets and suggestions for continuing improvement.

We look forward to speaking with the Commission about the report in November.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Katherine Bergeron". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent flourish at the end.

Katherine Bergeron
President