REPORT OF A REQUESTED FOCUSED VISIT FOR CHANGE

Assurance Section

TO

Central Michigan, University
Mount Pleasant, Michigan

October 15-16, 2007

The Higher Learning Commission
A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

EVALUATION TEAM

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ASSURANCE SECTION

I. CONTEXT AND NATURE OF VISIT

A. Purpose of Visit

A focused visit was conducted on the campus of Central Michigan University (CMU) to review the institution's request to change its stipulations of affiliation status to include the online delivery of existing and future CMU undergraduate and master's degree programs.

B. Accreditation Status

Central Michigan University was initially accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) as Central State Teachers College in 1915. The institution's statement of affiliation status was approved by the HLC in 1991 to offer extended degree programs nationally and in Canada. The last comprehensive HLC visit in 2005, resulted in reaffirmation of accreditation.

C. Organizational Context

Located in Mount Pleasant, Michigan, a city of approximately 25,000, CMU is classified by the Carnegie Foundation as a doctoral research university. The on-campus student population is approximately 20,000. In addition, over 7,000 students are enrolled in courses and programs delivered to 68 off-campus sites in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. The first online course was taught in 1999. There are now 124 courses offered online. The institution plans to offer 20 programs either partially or fully online by 2010. Historically, distance learning programs were offered through a separate academic unit known as the College of Extended Learning (CEL). This arrangement posed challenges for the institution in coordination and communication. To overcome these problems, the College of Extended Learning was dissolved, and responsibility for academic oversight was returned to the deans of the academic colleges on the CMU campus. The CEL was replaced with Professional Education Services (ProfEd), which is a service unit that assists in the planning and delivery of all distance courses. This unit is under the direction of the Vice President for ProfEd, who reports to the CMU Provost.

D. Unique Aspects of Visit

Two team members were scheduled for the visit which occurred on October 15-16, 2007. Two flights were cancelled for one team member, making it impossible for that individual to participate in the site visit. The challenge of conducting a one-person review was less daunting due to the existence of a well-organized and comprehensive change request that was prepared by CMU officials. The contents of this document clearly confirmed that in their planning, CMU faculty and administrators conducted a candid and thorough appraisal of institutional strengths and challenges associated with the
proposed expansion of online programs. This document also includes an extensive set of appendices that are user-friendly and easily accessible via the CMU Website.

E. Interactions with Organizational Constituencies

During the visit, the following individuals and groups were interviewed:

1. President
2. Interim Provost
3. Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, Vice Provost for Academic Administration, and Vice President for ProfEd
4. Chief Information Officer, Interim Chief Financial Officer
5. Deans of the following colleges: Education and Human Services; Business Administration; Health Professions; and Graduate Studies
6. Department Chairs for: Psychology; Political Science; and Educational Leadership
7. Director of the MA degree program in Education, the Director of Nutrition, and the Director of Undergraduate Programs.
8. Faculty teaching online courses (14)
9. Help Desk Manager
10. Director of the Center for Instructional Design, Director of the Faculty Center for Innovative Teaching
11. Members of the Learning Management System Group (6)
12. Associate Dean of Libraries, Director of Off-Campus Library Services
13. Director of Assessment and Members of the Assessment Council (7)
14. Chair of the Academic Senate
15. Students Who Have Completed Online Courses (8)
16. Distance/Distributed Learning Group (8)

F. Approvals Obtained

Approval of all courses and programs (whether on- or off-campus) are the responsibility of the members of the CMU faculty. Prior to consideration by campus committees, proposals for new programs and/or conversion of programs to online delivery must first be approved by the Academic Planning Council. This body evaluates the adequacy of resources, the potential impact on students, and whether the proposed program is consistent with the CMU mission, and institutional goals. Procedures and policies that govern the approval process are outlined in the CMU Curricular Authority Document (CAD). New degree programs must be approved by the CMU Board of Trustees, followed by written notification to the Council of the State Universities of Michigan.

G. Principal Documents, Materials, and Web Pages Reviewed

1. CMU Change Request Document – August 2007
2. Selected Online Courses Via Global ID
3. Curriculum Vitae of Online Faculty
4. Minutes of Curriculum Approval Committees for degree programs in business, psychology, nutrition/dietetics, educational leadership, and educational technology
II. EVALUATION OF DOCUMENTATION SUPPORTING ORGANIZATION’S REQUEST FOR CHANGE

A. Evaluation of Request

1. Evidence that demonstrates adequate preparation and planning

a. **Mission.** An early leader in distance education, CMU has been offering educational programs to off-campus locations for more than 35 years. This is compatible with the CMU mission to offer high quality programs to students in remote locations, and to working adults. The expansion of distance learning opportunities is also linked to goals in previous and current strategic planning documents. Distance education offerings attract a significantly larger number of underrepresented students in comparison to on-campus courses. Based on this experience, it is anticipated that the delivery of additional programs online will contribute to the institutional priority for achievement of greater diversity among students and faculty. A plan is in place to assess the climate for diversity in online courses. This will be very important to achievement of the institution’s goals to enhance diversity and global perspectives as outlined in the current strategic planning document (CMU 2010).

b. **Program Planning.** Qualified faculty and administrators have been involved in the development of courses that meet the guidelines for best practice in electronic course delivery. A large number of staff members who provide support for technology and course design are available and serve as the point of first contact for faculty as they convert courses from the traditional approach to an online format. The Vice President of Professional Education Services (ProfEd) has oversight responsibility for all administrative details associated with the delivery of off-campus courses. The ProfEd staff who support the work of students and faculty for 68 off-campus sites play a vital role in assisting academic administrators as they seek to determine instructional needs in each region. Academic administrators frequently seek the assistance of ProfEd
personnel in conducting market research. Staff in ProfEd also provide academic administrators with current information regarding specific state licensing requirements, and assist with financial planning. Discussions with the manager of the help desk revealed that careful records of student and faculty concerns are maintained and regularly analyzed. Faculty and administrators interviewed confirmed that they review this information, and that it is valuable to them as they engage in decision-making relative to course/program revision.

c. Courses/Programs. Serious concerns were raised in the 1996 report of the Higher Learning Commission regarding the lack of integration between courses offered on- and off-campus. A variety of steps were taken to address this challenge. Chief among them was the replacement of the College of Extended Learning, an independent academic college, with Professional Education Services (ProfEd), which is a service unit for online and off-campus operations. The Vice President for ProfEd meets regularly with an advisory committee consisting of the associate deans of each college. The deans of the colleges and the Provost maintain oversight responsibility for the quality of on-campus and off-campus courses and programs.

d. Student Services. All off-campus students have full access to financial aid, advising, delivery of course materials, placement, and all other services that are available to on-campus students. Orientation materials to prepare students for enrollment in online courses are easily accessible via the ProfEd Website. Particularly impressive is “Writing Center Online”, a service unit that allows students to submit writing assignments for critique by Writing Center staff in the same manner as is done by students in traditional courses. Prospective students who are considering enrollment in an online course will find the CMU Website a rich source of information about technology and course requirements and advising services. To provide further insight into the institution’s offerings potential students have the opportunity to log-in for a preview of an existing course.

e. Institutional Commitment: Interviews with faculty, administrators, and support personnel, confirmed that the offering of high quality online courses and student success were their highest priorities. It is their belief that in light of CMU’s long history with distance learning, the delivery of programs in a online format is a natural next step for the institution. Some of the students interviewed had completed a combination of traditional and online courses. When asked to compare them, most noted that the online courses were more time-intensive, and that the rigor was a least equal to or higher than traditional courses. The results of a recent survey that attracted responses from 374 students proved helpful in evaluating the level of satisfaction with existing online courses. Students were appreciative of the fact that courses were offered at times convenient for them. Several also praised the opportunity to take courses online so that they could graduate on time while maintaining employment in order to meet educational expenses. Students also noted that online courses allowed for a different form of interaction with faculty and classmates that enhanced their ability to understand and apply what they had learned. Several CMU faculty members who had been teaching online courses also reported that online courses allowed them to be more innovative and to better understand the way students learn. These individuals reported
that they would be interested in teaching more online courses if appropriate incentives were in place.

f. Administrative Support Units. The institution provides an impressive array of support units to facilitate the offering of online courses. The interaction of staff in the Center for Instructional Design (CID) and the Faculty Center for Innovative Teaching (FaCIT), is unique and worthy of emulation on other campuses. Directors and staff members are housed on the fourth floor of Park Library, in an arrangement that facilitates easy communication between each unit and the faculty members they serve. Staff members in these units assist faculty in course development and the adoption of pedagogical strategies that maximize the effectiveness of online courses.

g. Funding. An analysis of financial information presented in the change request document confirmed that the resources required for the successful launch of online programs are adequate and available. Through interviews with the Chief Technical Officer, the directors of IT and the Learning Management System, and the manager of the help desk it was confirmed that the Provost and President have provided the necessary technology and staffing infrastructure required for delivery of online programs. Administrators interviewed confirmed that as more programs go online, there will be a need to expand staffing and technology infrastructure. The services of the ProfEd staff in providing market research and financial planning are an integral part of the preparation of new programs to ensure effective fiscal management of these offerings.

h. Library. Off-Campus Library Services, a separate support unit for distance learners, has a long history of providing library services for distance education students. Based on interviews with students, faculty, and administrators, including the Associate Director of Libraries and the Director of Off-Campus Library Services, online learners have access to the same library holdings as on-campus students. Students who have completed online courses describe the library as comprehensive and user-friendly. Ample access to library materials is provided both online and by telephone. An extensive inventory of full-text books and journals is available electronically. Appropriate policies are in place for the maintenance of copyright security.

2. Evidence that demonstrates that further organizational attention is required.

a. Faculty Development. Opportunities for faculty to acquire the knowledge and skills required for teaching online are provided through workshops and online tutorials. It was noted, however, that participation is not required of faculty who are planning to teach their first online course. Appropriate pre-service development of online faculty is essential to the achievement of consistency in the design and delivery of courses. The institution should require completion of a comprehensive orientation program by all faculty members preparing to teach their first course online.

b. Assessment. Based on interviews with the institutional Director of Assessment and members of the CMU Assessment Council, and a review of assessment policies and procedures, it was determined that appropriate policies and procedures are in place to facilitate program evaluation and
the assessment of learner outcomes. There is a problem, however, with the lack of consistency in the collection of outcomes data in academic departments. It was reported in the change request document that a software product known as WEAVE Online, is being piloted to determine its effectiveness in the achievement of consistent data collection. A review of early results of the application of this system should be completed so that a decision can be made regarding institutionalization, or the adoption of another system. Additionally, the rate of return of instructor/course evaluations by online students is very low (33%). Student input is an important part of the course/program review process. The institution must find a way to significantly increase the percentage of students who complete instructor/course evaluations.

c. Off-Campus Faculty. With courses offered at 68 learning centers, the institution has historically employed a large number of adjunct instructors who live in those locations. The offering of courses with an online format should enable the institution to overcome its heavy reliance on off-campus instructors. It appears, however, that this problem persists. In Fall, 2006, for example, only 32% of the student credit hours generated in online courses were taught by members of the on-campus faculty. As stated by several administrators and faculty interviewed, more on-campus faculty members should be teaching these courses. The institution is working through several issues to achieve this aim, and should accelerate efforts to reduce reliance on off-campus faculty, as well as to provide more opportunities for off-campus faculty to participate with their on-campus counterparts in course/program review and planning. These measures will be important to the achievement of identical student outcomes in traditional and off-campus courses, and in the institution’s efforts to enhance student success and retention.

d. Intellectual Property Rights. The institution is seeking ways to improve the policies for protection of intellectual property. The existing policy is not current, and some members of the faculty do not sign the contract for course development because of this policy. As reported in interviews with technology staff, the lack of a clear-cut policy poses special problems relative to security issues and in decision-making about the storage of course content. Members of the faculty interviewed also reported uncertainty about whether current policies are appropriate and functional. Policies are being revised and new ones developed with leadership from the Provost and others within the academic division. Early adoption of appropriate policies will be important to the effective expansion of online programs.

3. Evidence that demonstrates that further organizational attention and Commission follow-up are required

   None noted

B. Other Accreditation Issues

   None noted

C. Recommendation of the Team
1. Evidence sufficiently demonstrated to recommend approval of change request

Evidence is sufficient to recommend approval of the change request.

2. Evidence demonstrated to recommend approval of change request. Commission follow-up recommended

None noted

3. Evidence demonstrated to recommend approval of change request with team recommended modifications (Commission follow-up may be recommended)

None noted

4. Evidence insufficient. Approval of change request is not recommended

None noted

D. Rationale for the Team's Recommendation

Careful planning and analysis of the strengths and challenges related to the expanded delivery of online programs was evident. The institution has been offering programs in distant locations for more than three decades, and has a well-established infrastructure that provides a comprehensive range of services for students. Administrators and faculty have demonstrated a strong commitment to the offering of rigorous, high quality programs and courses that will meet the needs of distance learners.

III. AFFILIATION STATUS

A. Summary of Commission Review

Year for next comprehensive evaluation 2015-2016

B. Nature of Organization

1. Legal status

   No change

2. Degrees awarded

   No change
C. Conditions of Affiliation

1. Stipulation on affiliation status
   
   No change

2. Approval of degree sites

   No change

3. Approval of distance education degree

   Prior Commission approval required for distance education doctoral programs other than the Doctor of Audiology and the Doctor of Health Administration. No prior approval is required for master’s and undergraduate distance education programs that have been authorized through the on-campus approval process.

4. Reports required

   None

5. Other visits scheduled

   None

D. Commission Sanction or Adverse Action

   None noted