A great deal has occurred in the last year—changes in circumstances, changes in leadership—but the reaccreditation visit is looming upon us, so I wanted to update everybody and indicate how to be part of this process as we go forward. This is our ten-year reaccreditation by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), one of the six federally-recognized regional accrediting bodies that allows us to receive federal funding. It is important that we maintain our accreditation. Our last visit was in the fall 1998. We were originally scheduled for a visit in November of 2008, but there were a few things going on so we received a postponement until this coming November.

In order to complete this process, the institution prepares a self-study that responds to 172 topics and 11 standards that are applicable to any institution that is allowed to do business in the New England region. It is organized around description, appraisal and projection. The institution is supposed to describe where it is and appraise its situation. Importantly, the institution should project its plan for the future. If we look at our academic program, for example, the idea is to appraise where we are and then have some forward looking statement about what we intend to do so that we can be poised for our next ten years.

The second portion is a campus visit by an external team of experts. They will come to campus, spend several days here, and talk to many people. Having read the self-study, the team will then give its report which will include recommendations for continued accreditation. I do not think there is any chance that we will not be reaccredited, but it is highly likely that team will suggest topics or issues about which they would like to receive interim reports. This happened on our last visit in 1998. We gave a five-year interim report, which is very common these days.

The team will certainly look at previous findings. They will look at the last few ten-year and five-year reports. Throughout the country, the accrediting bodies’ standards have changed. The environment has also changed. Attitudes toward accountability and higher education have been shifting. There are also institutional issues, which will be mentioned in this report.

In 1998-99, the four big issues that we were required to follow up on were: campus system governance relationships, assessment of student learning outcomes, library collections, staffing and facilities, and deferred maintenance and infrastructure needs. You can see that our issues stay with us.

The NEASC standards were revised in 2006 to try to reflect some of the issues that they have been encountering in reaccrediting processes. They wanted to have a little more clarity regarding the mission and governance. With the growth of online, off-site and international education, there is concern that institutions need to maintain clear control over their programs in order to carry them out with integrity.

The team will be interested in direct outcomes evidence. They want to see that the information we collect is being used for program improvement. There are also a lot of items about accountability to
stakeholders. If you recall, the debates with the Federal Government a year or two ago died down a bit. The basic issues of external expectations regarding accountability and cost have not gone away, and the regional accrediting bodies are really sharply focused on this.

We have also been trying to keep up with the Framework for Excellence, the Chancellor’s draft of the strategic planning process. That becomes a kind of umbrella or framework for the entire self-study. Certainly rebuilding and rebalancing the faculty is prominent. Reaffirming the goals of the Amherst 250 and the RFP process for new faculty hiring is also a big issue. Facilities improvement, mentioned in several contexts, both to support the current levels of research and teaching activity, also create greater capacity. We want to be able to take advantage of the current state investment opportunities, and very importantly we want to develop a comprehensive long-term facilities plan. There also many items related to student experiences—advising and early success, general education and the impact of the student experience on admission competitiveness. Our ability to maintain student revenues is an important part of that framework. These are the kinds of issues that we have seen in the past and that the self-study is going to try to explore. We are also attempting to outline our short-term financial strategy. We want to explore how the campus hopes to meet today’s challenges.

The team is coming on November 1-4. The team chair will be Dr. Mark Fogel who is the President of the University of Vermont. He has the distinction of having just gone through this himself. The visiting team left UVM on April 22, so, for better or for worse, he is fresh off the job. Dr. Fogel is also the incoming President of NEASC, so he is highly interested and deeply steeped in this process. The self-study has been under development for some time. There is a Steering Committee that has been trying to put this together. The Committee includes Marilyn Blaustein, Director of Institutional Research; Ernie May, who has been providing spiritual guidance but should not be blamed for the content of any document; Martha Stassen, Director of Assessment; and Jim Leheny from the Chancellor’s Office who has been in charge of this process in the past. We have also received tremendous help from Cady Kashner, our graduate intern, and Cornelius Coleman, who has been helping us with editing and writing.

We are about to launch our web site, which has links to the NEASC standards. We will also post earlier accreditation documents and contact information. We will include preliminary drafts of the self-study standards. There will be other opportunities to comment on these documents, but this is the launch of the peak-behind-the-curtain and the see-what-is-going-on stage. Various chapters are in different stages of development, and there is a lot to be added, edited and developed. This web site will go live either tomorrow or on Monday. We are very interested in having people look at the eleven standards and give us feedback. You will find feedback links throughout these documents. There will eventually be a link on the campus web site as well, and there will be an email broadcast telling everyone how to get onto it as well.

We will continue to work on this and produce the first real draft of the self-study. By early July, we hope to post that first draft on the web site. We will use email and other means to notify the campus community when it is up. By late August, we hope to post the final draft of the self-study. There will be couple of weeks at the beginning of the semester when we can hear from people and have one last look at it. By mid-September, it needs to be distributed to the visiting team.