September 17, 2007

Ms. Jean Avnet Morse  
President  
The Commission of Higher Education  
3624 Market Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19104-2680

Dear Ms. Morse:

I am writing in response to the Middle States reviewers’ report of Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT)’s June 2007 Periodic Review Report (PRR). We are pleased that the College meets the Middle States standards and that we have responded to the issues raised by the review team in 2002. FIT acknowledges the serious work of the members of the team and thanks them for their time and commitment to this review. Our response below addresses the report’s recommendations and suggestions and includes clarifications of a few points in the review.

1. Planning and Assessment

Middle States Recommendation. We applaud FIT for engaging wholeheartedly in institution-wide planning efforts. **2020: FIT at 75 is a strong plan resulting from a strong planning process...**It is important to keep in mind, however, that other planning processes are still needed. The PRR identifies as least 3 other planning processes that either were initiated recently (i.e. institutional assessment) or will be initiated in the near future (i.e. strategic recruitment). These areas were noted as needing special attention and we encourage FIT to continue with these planning processes. Recruitment and enrollment is projected to remain at current levels but operating deficiencies are projected for the next three years. Finally, FIT should pay close attention to assessment planning. FIT’s academic assessment planning tool is good but its administrative assessment planning is still in its infancy.

We strongly recommend that an institution-wide assessment protocol be developed, one that is linked to the institution’s planning and budgeting process and highlights key indicators of success. The lack of progress to ensure high-quality administrative services in student affairs, business processes, and the like is inconsistent with the progress this institution has made since the decennial visit and should be rectified immediately.

FIT Comment. FIT agrees with this recommendation to continue with our work on institution-wide assessment. We want to note that since the submission of the PRR in June, the following steps have been taken:
- The President has scheduled a strategic planning retreat for her Cabinet in November. One of the objectives of this retreat is to establish clear metrics for the goals and initiatives in the strategic plan, an activity that is intended to further FIT’s institution-wide assessment efforts. When such metrics are incorporated into the Strategic Operational Plan, it will serve as FIT’s institutional assessment protocol.

- The five-year review process to ensure high quality administrative services will begin in AY ’07-’08, focusing on the Bursar operation as our pilot. We will then develop a schedule of reviews for each of the other administrative areas.

On a related point, we find the report’s reference to a lack of progress to ensure high quality administrative services in the area of student affairs somewhat perplexing—given the extensive improvements made in this particular area over the last five years and which were documented in the PRR on pages 9, 10, and 47.

- The performance appraisal process for administrators continues to be improved as a tool for measuring performance as it relates to achieving strategic planning goals as well as completing other initiative/tasks that support the FIT mission. A significant change to be made this year will be simultaneously developing performance goals and the budget in conjunction with the semi-annual review of the strategic plan. This should further enforce the linking of budget to planning.

- Strategic Recruitment. The development of the comprehensive recruitment marketing plan by Stamats described in the PRR was completed in June, 2007, with specific initiatives identified. FIT is now beginning to implement this plan. Ongoing discussions with Stamats and key stakeholders on campus are determining which aspects of the plan will begin immediately and those that will require a longer timeframe or new resources.

In the assessment area, the report refers to the length of time between academic program reviews (5-7 years) as being of some concern and suggests that checkpoints be set up along the way. This timeframe is consistent with the guidelines provided by SUNY for the Implementation of Campus-based Assessment of the Major. In addition, after a program review has been completed and the department’s follow-up action plan prepared, this plan is reviewed after a year and a ½ to determine the status of the recommendations. Further, feedback from the programs’ Industry Advisory Boards is provided on a continual basis, and programs typically update their curriculum—both their content and technology—quite frequently.

**Middle States Suggestion.** *FIT should consider establishing a planning, budgeting and assessment committee made up of a cross section of the campus community to review annual assessment updates, push various planning initiatives and incorporate necessary activities into the annual budget cycle paying particular attention to critical institutional initiatives.*
FIT Comment. FIT will consider this suggestion. We will review successful models of committees at other colleges and universities to identify a structure that may be effective at FIT.

The evaluators also mention that FIT should be more “nimble” and develop a protocol to incorporate changing needs into the strategic plan and the budget process. We believe that we are achieving this by 1) reviewing and updating initiatives/tasks that support the 5 strategic planning goals at least twice a year and 2) ensuring that the budget process includes a mechanism for funding strategic planning initiatives as well as other activities that support the College’s mission.

Middle States Suggestion. We suggest that FIT continue to work to incorporate the mission throughout its academic programming, in particular, paying close attention to assure wide adoption of all of the mission’s essential elements.

FIT Comment. We will continue to highlight FIT’s mission in our five-year program reviews and in our proposals for new programs, focusing in particular on the adoption of the specific objectives of our mission statement.

Clarifications on Enrollment and Finance. We would like to clarify a few points that were made in the enrollment and finance section of the report on page 5.

1. We do not believe it is entirely accurate to connect our enrollment decrease to the collective bargaining agreement limiting our class size of 25. The major impediment to admitting additional students is a limitation of space and facilities. Maximum class section size has remained constant over the years, and space utilization has improved, but the major need that remains is the acquisition of additional facilities, which is being addressed through our Master Plan.

2. In addition, the enrollment decrease at the associate level is part of a consistent strategy on the part of the College. FIT’s programs are 2+2 programs (AAS and BFA/BS), with a growing number of students moving from the associate to the bachelor’s level. Because of our space limitations, as we respond to student aspirations for bachelor-level work and add new bachelor’s majors, we have systematically reduced the number of students admitted to the associate level and increased those at the bachelor’s level.

3. The report refers to operating deficits at the College (on pages 2 and 5), and we would like to clarify this. Over the next three years, FIT will draw on the College’s fund balance in unrestricted net assets in order to invest in programs and operations that are priorities of the Strategic Plan. This is not because of projected operating deficits, but is a planned drawdown on reserves. These modest expenditures beyond the projected annual operating revenues of the college are possible because of a healthy fund balance of unrestricted net assets which has accrued over several years of disciplined financial management. It is important to note that after these expenditures over the next three years, the College’s fund balances will remain very strong.
2. Advisement/Office Consolidation

Middle States Recommendation. We recommend that FIT develop a plan including a time frame for the adoption of academic advising changes for each of the remaining schools. Regarding the consolidation of offices responsible for enrollment activities, we do understand that the physical relocation of spaces is tied to the implementation of the campus master plan, and would encourage FIT to vigorously pursue the timetable for the campus plan implementation.

FIT Comment. In our PRR, we indicated that we would assign faculty advisors from the major departments to entering freshmen beginning in Fall 2007 in the Baker School of Business and Technology. This plan has been implemented. Each academic advisor also worked with a liaison from the Registrar and another from one of the liberal arts departments. Early reports are quite favorable, although it is too early to tell how effective this new academic advisement system is, as students have not yet been asked to register for their second semester classes. We have every reason to believe that with the total implementation of DARS (Degree Audit Reporting System), the on-line degree audit covering the major and liberal arts requirements for satisfactory academic progress, coupled with the availability of faculty academic advisors, our students will be well served as they select courses leading to a degree.

In the School of Art and Design, students are block programmed by major, which provides a measure of coherence to academic programming. In Fall 2007, the School of Art and Design implemented a modified advisement process whereby full-time faculty were available to assist students during convocation week and the first week of classes. This was supplemented by comprehensive curriculum sheets in conjunction with the DARS audit. In addition, the Communication Design Department—the second largest in the school—implemented a pilot program of faculty advisement similar to that of the School of Business and Technology.

The School of Art and Design will explore implementing an advisement process similar to that of the Baker School of Business and Technology, beginning in Spring 2008 with two of its departments--Fashion Design (the largest department in the school), and Interior Design. Training is an essential element in this process, and it is important that faculty members provide accurate information and be knowledgeable about the process.

Both the Baker School of Business and Technology and the School of Art and Design plan to repeat the advisement process for the Fall 2008 incoming freshmen. It should be noted that all FIT freshmen—with the exception of the Visual Art Management (VAM) program, belong to one of these two schools. Each VAM student is assigned an academic advisor from the History of Art faculty.

There is currently no plan to create a similar comprehensive academic advisement system for the School of Graduate Studies. This cohort is in regular, close contact with the faculty, and their academic experience renders them far more capable of independently negotiating the campus and monitoring their academic progress.
Regarding the consolidation of offices for enrollment activities, FIT is vigorously pursuing the timetable for the campus master plan implementation, as this affects the plan to more closely monitor enrollment activities. In the interim, the enrollment services offices have executed plans to link themselves electronically, thus providing swifter service to students, with fewer transactions and less traveling required from office to office. Documents and data now flow from office to office electronically, significantly reducing the need for students to visit more than one office to get the services they need.

3. The Library

Middle States Recommendation. We recommend that FIT complete the new library planning process as expeditiously as possible and that the plan ensure the commitment of sufficient financial resources to provide students and faculty with the information resources needed to support FIT's programs, including the strengthening of FITDIL.

FIT Comment. The Task Force on the Library Strategic Plan, composed of faculty from the various schools and the library, library directors, and an administrator, has now submitted its plan, 2020 The Library at FIT: Realizing Our Information Potential, to the President. The document identifies challenges, goals, initiatives, and strategies, in keeping with the major goals of FIT’s Strategic Plan (see Attachment A: Executive Summary of the Plan); it also assigns responsibilities and projects start dates. Among the plan’s recommendations are the expansion of collections and the strengthening of FIT’s visual resources project, FITDIL. After the plan is approved by the President, the library directors will discuss it with the library faculty and staff, with their Faculty Senate advisory committee, and with other constituencies on campus. It will also be integrated into the overall strategic plan for the college and into the budget planning process.

In closing, I hope our response and comments are helpful. I want to thank the Commission and the reviewers again for their insights and for their work on behalf of FIT. As we go forward, we expect that their recommendations will help FIT to become an even more effective institution of higher education.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Dr. Joyce F. Brown
President

Attachment
Attachment A: Executive Summary

2020 The Library at FIT: Realizing Our Information Potential

Under **Strategic Challenge One**, the report addresses the library’s role in strengthening the academic core.

**Goal #1** is to fully integrate the library into the teaching mission of the college. The activities to implement the goal will be carried out largely by existing college personnel.

**Goal #2** is to expand the library’s collection for the needs of the FIT community. Bringing the collection levels comparable with the SUNY colleges will require a substantial increase in funding that could be undertaken gradually, as the college’s resources permit.

**Goal #3** is to evaluate, protect, preserve and expand access to library collections. Special emphasis is placed on Special Collections which, like The Museum at FIT, is a treasure useful to students, faculty, and researchers from outside the college.

Under **Strategic Challenge Two**, the report addresses the library’s role in enhancing FIT as a creative hub.

**Goal #1** is to evaluate, protect, preserve and expand access to library collections. The initiatives call for investment in security to protect the Special Collections holdings and a new reading room in which their use can be properly monitored. Providing better housing for the collections, and indexing and preserving them, is a large investment that warrants consideration.

**Goal #2** is to build primary research collections for the future. While some primary research materials may be acquired for Special Collections through gifts, the plan calls for new funding to purchase collections for which there is a competitive market.

**Goal #3** is to continue the development of the digital library. Investments such as FITDIL are important for keeping FIT in a strong position for teaching and research, and as a creative hub. We can expect the cost to be significant.

**Goal #4** is to create a program of internal and external public relations. The cost should be small, relative to the major initiatives of this report.

Under **Strategic Challenge Three**, the report addresses the role of the library in a culture of student-centeredness.

**Goal #1** is to improve services and procedures to make the library more student-centered. The plan anticipates increasing hours of service and expanded imaging and printing services, for which the base budget would have to be increased. It also calls for
replacement of furniture, fixtures and equipment, for which one-time capital funds would be required.

Goal #2 is to define, redesign and expand the library as a virtual place. The intent is to push further into the availability of information through the web, anywhere, anytime, anyplace. These costs have more to do with allocation of existing time than with an increase to the budget.

Under Strategic Challenge Four, the report addresses processes for self-assessment and realization of the plan.

A number of the initiatives described in the report are already underway in varying degrees. The extent of those activities is described in a separate four-page document prepared in July.