



Office of the President

February 12, 2014

Dr. Barbara Brittingham
President/Director, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
New England Association of Schools and Colleges
3 Burlington Woods Drive, Suite 100
Burlington, MA 01803-4531

Dear Dr. Brittingham:

On behalf of the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) community, thank you for the opportunity to provide this response to the report prepared by the NEASC visiting team following their evaluation of MCLA from November 3-6, 2013. I also would like to thank President Theo Kalikow and the members of the MCLA visiting team for the insight, experience, and professionalism they brought to their NEASC service. Thank you also to the staff at NEASC for selecting a team of colleagues who recognize the unique and important nature of MCLA's mission, our vital role in the community, our place in the Commonwealth's system of public higher education, and our contributions to the national conversation about the importance of public liberal arts institutions through our membership in the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC).

As we reported in our self-study, our NEASC planning process was one of deep engagement across the campus. It provided the opportunity for students, faculty, staff, Trustees, alumni, and community members to reflect on, understand, and gain inspiration from the achievements and progress MCLA has realized since our 2003 accreditation visit. In the last decade, the College community launched two successful phases of strategic planning; added several new academic programs and majors; grew enrollment; undertook and sustained an intentional focus on increasing student, faculty, and staff diversity; engaged students and alumni in new and deeper ways; launched our first comprehensive capital campaign; redrafted the College mission statement; and opened our first new academic building in 40 years – The Feigenbaum Center for Science and Innovation – among many other notable, transformative achievements.

We were gratified that the visiting team recognized this record of achievement, affirmed our commitment to build on this progress, and challenged us to continue to find ways to record and disseminate the evidence and stories of our accomplishments, in particular the accomplishments of students, alumni and faculty. We appreciate the affirmation, endorsement, and perspective of our peers. We are encouraged that the challenges identified in the visiting team report do not suggest a need to change course, but rather to dig deeper, go farther, and build on the engagement, leadership, and processes that have guided our progress to date.

As the visiting team noted, our strong governance systems have been central to this progress. Our active and engaged Board of Trustees have been, and will continue to be, essential stewards and partners in the progress we have made. We will continue to build and promote strong connections between the Board and the campus community, engage in ongoing board development, and ensure that the culture of Board engagement continues to flourish.

At the same time, it is important to note that MCLA is subject to the same external conditions as colleges and universities across the Commonwealth, New England, and the United States. State funding, changing demographics, increased competition, and new mandates influence both our operations and our planning process. We will respond to these challenges in an appropriate and thoughtful manner, consistent with our mission, and recognizing that our ability to make progress is influenced by these conditions.

The vehicle for navigating these challenges and opportunities is our institutionally effective and participatory strategic planning process. We know that the results of this process, and the alignment of resources with our planning goals, are institutional strengths. We appreciate that the team saw how pervasive and thorough our process has become. Going forward, we will build on this progress by developing and disseminating metrics to showcase our achievements and to increase campus and community understanding of the connections between planning and outcomes.

In conjunction with our planning process, we will continue to build on the foundation we have laid in the area of learning outcomes assessment. The College's Assessment Advisory Group will lead efforts to formalize our Institutional Effectiveness Plan and ensure its alignment with MCLA's strategic planning goals. As we build the plan, we also will continue to engage faculty in this work through initiatives such as the annual data retreat launched in 2013. We recognize that participation by a wide range of faculty and staff is critical to sustaining and expanding progress on planning and assessment activities.

Assessment and evaluation are areas where our campus level efforts intersect with state and national initiatives, and where we have opportunities to demonstrate our effectiveness by highlighting the achievements of our faculty. Through our role as the Commonwealth's public liberal arts college we bring a unique perspective to state assessment efforts and align with initiatives such as the Board of Higher Education's Vision Project. Similarly, our participation in COPLAC, the Council on Undergraduate Research, and the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) provide opportunities for professional development for faculty and to contribute to the national conversation about applied learning, high impact practices, and the connections between higher education, workforce preparation, and engaged citizenship.

In addition to these institutional comments, I also would like to address specific concerns addressed in the visiting team report. As with the overall report, I believe these areas reflect opportunities to build on our progress:

Regular multi-year financial planning is needed, including a more comprehensive enrollment management plan.

- We will continue to enhance our financial planning models. We will build on our existing two year planning budgets to support long term planning. We recognize that these models will be aspirational, and will be subject to variation in the state appropriation, enrollment, and other factors, but will continue to refine our processes in this area.
- Prior to the team visit, we identified the need to create a multi-year enrollment plan and to further formalize enrollment management processes, guided by the College strategic plan. To ensure the Board of Trustees remains fully engaged and informed in this area, we re-established a Trustee committee on enrollment management during the summer of 2013. We also brought in a consultant to review financial aid awarding and advise us on strategies to maximize the effective disbursement of institutional aid. Going forward, academic affairs, administration & finance, and student affairs will develop appropriate enrollment targets that are built on projections in academic programs, considering potential for both new programs and student life programming. This information will inform the recruitment and enrollment management plan.

Access to the college's IT network and wireless service is inadequate.

- Network and wireless access represent both communication and public safety issues. As part of the Feigenbaum Center for Science and Innovation construction, the College installed a new network infrastructure in the building. A campus-wide rollout of this infrastructure is necessary in order to provide the students, faculty, and staff with a stable, reliable network with the capacity to support both enterprise data needs and the bandwidth demands generated by the proliferation of personal devices on campus (laptops, tablets, smart phones, etc.). Expanding this access will be part of the College's interrelated strategic and budget planning processes. We are also working with our state legislative delegation to advocate for improved wireless access for the entire city of North Adams as well as for the campus, to ensure all residents and College community members have consistent wireless access.

Resources need to be made available to carry out the library strategic plan.

- Our well-developed and comprehensive library strategic plan, which the visiting team noted as a strength, provides the platform for making progress in library services and holdings over time. We recognize the importance of resources to support student learning and the use of the library for individual and group study, student research, and information literacy efforts. We have made consistent progress over the last several years in this area, including the creation of a new full-time faculty library position; pursuit of resources to support acquisition of the JSTOR database; and improvements to physical space within the library. We have an endowed fund that allows for specific projects such as the JSTOR acquisition; access to this endowment will continue to assist us in making

progress on the library strategic plan. With regard to the library physical plant, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has a significant backlog of deferred maintenance projects on public college and university campuses across the state. Addressing these projects is a priority of the state Division of Capital Management and Maintenance (DCAMM), and we anticipate that a future state bond issue will provide resources for public higher education deferred maintenance. MCLA's updated campus master plan, currently under development, will include evaluation of the library building and will identify the priority of library deferred maintenance within the overall campus facility portfolio. Furnishings and technology will continue to be supported from campus funds.

A program of information literacy is yet to be infused into the Core and across the curriculum.

- Prior to the team visit we had identified the need to examine the breadth and depth of information literacy and its demonstration in the curriculum. At the request of the vice president of academic affairs, the standing Academic Technology Advisory Group (ATAG) considered this matter and recommended a college-wide group examine next steps and make recommendations regarding strengthening information literacy in the curriculum. The vice president will convene this working group during spring 2014 and expects a report with action steps by the end of the coming summer.

These efforts, and additional priorities identified through our strategic planning process, will provide a foundation for progress as the MCLA community looks forward to the next ten years.

Finally, I would like once again offer my thanks on behalf of the College community to each member of the visiting team for the commitment and dedication that produced a thoughtful report that affirmed our mission and core values as the Commonwealth's public liberal arts college, and that will help guide our future efforts. I look forward to meeting with the Commission next month to discuss this progress, the team visit, and the recommendations that will frame our continued accreditation.

Sincerely,



Mary K. Grant, Ph.D.
President