



May 15, 2024

Dr. James F. Birge
President
Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts
375 Church Street
North Adams, MA 01247-4100

Dear President Birge:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on April 18, 2024, the New England Commission of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts:

that Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts be continued in accreditation;

that the institution be asked to submit a report by January 15, 2026 for consideration in Spring 2026 that gives emphasis to the institution's success in:

- 1) implementing its strategic plan with particular attention to linking enrollment, retention, and graduation goals with multi-year financial plans;

that the institution submit an interim (fifth-year) report by August 15, 2028 for consideration in Fall 2028;

that, in addition to the information included in all interim reports, the institution give emphasis, in the Fall 2028 report, to its success in:

- 1) continuing to implement its strategic plan and linking enrollment, retention, and graduation goals with multi-year financial plans;
- 2) achieving its goals for enrollment and retention;
- 3) achieving its goals for diversity, equity, and belonging with particular
- 4) attention to faculty and staff recruitment and retention and improving campus climate;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Fall 2033.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its actions.

Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*.

The Commission commends Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) for its thorough and well-written self-study. We note with favor that the College has

successfully implemented its new core curriculum through a “faculty-driven, collaborative, and highly successful” process resulting in a core which emphasizes “integrative learning and diversity and inclusion across the curriculum.” Additionally, a new, comprehensive, cross-divisional First Year Experience was launched in Fall 2023 that includes a ten-day, on-campus orientation in which every student belongs to a Success Team comprising peer and staff mentors and “faculty success coaches.” The Commission is pleased to learn from the visiting team report that “[r]obust processes are in place for the assessment of student learning outcomes and external program review” that incorporate both qualitative and quantitative information. We also appreciate that the Board is currently engaged in a self-appraisal process and that it embraces MCLA’s unique mission to serve as an engine for regional workforce development while remaining firmly grounded as a public liberal arts institution. The Commission is gratified to learn that the projected FY2024 budget deficit of \$2.5 million has already been reduced by over \$1 million, with the expectation that it will end the fiscal year with a deficit of approximately \$500,000, and that the College projects the FY2025 budget will be balanced. The Commission notes positively that MCLA has reached approximately two-thirds of its goal towards its \$25 million comprehensive Pathways Campaign designed to support two priority areas: Student Access & Support, and Global Curriculum & Workforce Partnerships. Finally, we acknowledge that MCLA has recently launched new programs in Radio Technology and Nursing, both with strong initial enrollments, and added men’s and women’s ice hockey teams. With an experienced and visionary senior leadership team, an engaged and supportive board, and passionate and talented faculty, staff, and students, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts is well positioned to continue to prepare its graduates to be “practical problem solvers and engaged, resilient global citizens” well into the future.

The item the institution is asked to report on in Spring 2026 is related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation, Students, and Institutional Resources*.

The Commission appreciates learning that, although MCLA’s current strategic plan was designed to run through 2023, the institution delayed developing its next strategic plan in order to fully use the self-study process by incorporating aspects from the visiting team report and the NECHE response, in conjunction with guidance from the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education. The Commission, however, shares the concern raised by the visiting team that “there appears to be no connection between enrollment and fiscal planning,” and we are therefore gratified to note that the strategic planning process is now underway. We understand the College has formed a Steering Committee and selected a consultant “to craft a three-to-five-year strategic plan, including a multi-year financial and enrollment plan.” We ask that the Spring 2026 report give evidence of the College’s success in developing and implementing its strategic plan with particular attention to linking enrollment, retention, and graduation goals with multi-year financial plans. This section of the report should be informed by our standards on *Planning and Evaluation, Students, and Institutional Resources*:

Planning and evaluation are systematic, comprehensive, broad-based, integrated, and appropriate to the institution. They involve the participation of individuals and groups responsible for the achievement of institutional purposes and include external perspectives. Results of planning and evaluation are regularly communicated to appropriate institutional constituencies. The institution allocates sufficient resources for its planning and evaluation efforts (2.1).

The institution plans beyond a short-term horizon, including strategic planning that involves realistic analyses of internal and external opportunities and constraints. The

results of strategic planning are implemented in all units of the institution through financial, academic, enrollment, and other supporting plans (2.3).

Consistent with its mission, the institution sets and achieves realistic goals to enroll students who are broadly representative of the population the institution wishes to serve (*Students, Statement of the Standard*).

The institution's multi-year financial planning is realistic and reflects the capacity of the institution to depend on identified sources of revenue and ensure the advancement of educational quality and services for students (7.6).

Please upload the requested report to the NECHE Institution Portal by January 15, 2026 using the S2026 Progress Report review.

Commission policy requires an interim (fifth-year) report of all institutions on a decennial evaluation cycle. Its purpose is to provide the Commission an opportunity to appraise the institution's current status in keeping with the Policy on Periodic Review. The College is asked, in the Fall 2028 interim (fifth-year) report, to give emphasis to its continued success in addressing the area specified above for attention in the Spring 2026 report. The Commission recognizes that this matter does not lend itself to rapid resolution and will require the College's sustained attention over time; hence, we ask that further information be provided in the report. In addition, we ask that the Fall 2028 report also address two matters related to our standards on *Students; Teaching, Learning and Scholarship; and Institutional Resources*.

The Commission understands that total enrollment at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts declined by almost 36% between 2018 and 2023, a trend that pre-dated and was exacerbated by COVID. We take favorable note, therefore, that total enrollment from 2022 to 2023 remained "fairly stable" with new student enrollment increasing by 12% between Fall 2022 and Fall 2023. The Commission also acknowledges that first-to-second-year retention has improved from 64% for the 2021 cohort to 68.9% for the 2022 cohort. We are further pleased to learn that first-to-second-semester retention for Fall 2023 first-time full-time students was 93%, up from 85% for the previous year. The Fall 2028 interim report will afford the institution an opportunity to update the Commission on its success in achieving its goals for enrollment and retention. Relevant here is our standard on *Students* (cited above and below):

The institution demonstrates its ability to admit students who can be successful in the institution's academic program, including specifically recruited populations. The institution's goals for retention and graduation reflect institutional purposes, and the results are used to inform recruitment and the review of programs and services (5.6).

We acknowledge that MCLA has "great pride and great frustration in its efforts to promote equity and inclusion on campus." The Commission understands that although the current percentage of full-time faculty of color (14.8% / 12 out of 81) is "roughly commensurate" with the demographics of the College's surrounding community, it is "dramatically lower" than the ~25% representation of students of color among the student body. The College also "struggle[s]," according to its recent Climate Survey, to foster a sense of cultural familiarity and a sense of belonging among faculty and staff of color who have been "overrepresented among those voluntarily separating from the College over the past several years." The Commission therefore appreciates learning that, in 2021, MCLA endeavored to "lay the groundwork for a more inclusive campus" through "Setting the Course for a More Equitable, Just, and Inclusive MCLA" workshops in which 82% of faculty participated. We understand that the institution revised its Academic Standing Policy in response to a determination that "academic suspensions were disproportionately affecting ALANA students." We also take favorable note that a Vice Provost for Institutional Equity and Belonging took office this spring and will be a "thought leader" in recruitment and retention efforts for faculty, staff, and students of color. The Commission anticipates being apprised, in the Fall 2028 interim report, of Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts' success in achieving its goals for diversity, equity, and belonging with particular attention to faculty and staff recruitment and retention and improving campus climate. We remind you here of our standards on *Students; Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship; and Institutional Resources*:

The institution addresses its own goals for the achievement of diversity, equity, and inclusion among its students and provides a safe environment that fosters the intellectual and personal development of its students (*Students*, Statement of the Standard).

In providing services, in accordance with its mission and purposes, the institution adheres to both the spirit and intent of equal opportunity and its own goals for diversity, equity, and inclusion (5.12).

Compatible with its mission and purposes, it addresses its own goals for the achievement of diversity, equity, and inclusion among its faculty and academic staff and assesses the effectiveness of its efforts to achieve those goals (6.5).

The institution employs sufficient and qualified personnel to fulfill its mission. It addresses its own goals for the achievement of diversity, equity, and inclusion among its personnel and assesses the effectiveness of its efforts to achieve those goals (7.1).

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2033 is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years.

You will note that the Commission has specified no length or term of accreditation. Accreditation is a continuing relationship that is reconsidered when necessary. Thus, while the Commission has indicated the timing of the next comprehensive evaluation, the schedule should not be unduly emphasized because it is subject to change.

The Commission expressed appreciation for the self-study prepared by Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you, Gina Puc, Chief of Staff to the President, and Richard Glejzer, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, during its deliberations.

You are encouraged to share this letter with all of the institution's constituencies. It is Commission policy to inform the chairperson of the institution's governing board of action on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Brenda Burdick and Noe Ortega. The institution is free to release information about the evaluation and the Commission's action to others, in accordance with the enclosed policy on Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions.

The Commission hopes that the evaluation process has contributed to institutional improvement. It appreciates your cooperation with the effort to provide public assurance of the quality of higher education.

If you have any questions about the Commission's action, please contact Lawrence M. Schall, President of the Commission.

Sincerely,



Russell Carey

RC/sjp

cc: Brenda Burdick
Noe Ortega
Visiting team

Enclosure: Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions