



Office of the President

February 2024

New England Commission of Higher Education
301 Edgewater Place, Suite 210
Wakefield, MA 01880

Dear Commissioners:

On behalf of my colleagues and the Trustees of Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA), I wish to offer our gratitude to the Commission, and particularly the Visiting Team, for your thorough review of MCLA's efforts to meet the NECHE accreditation standards. Team Chair Dr. Mel Netzhammer was especially skilled at managing the Team's time and work and helping MCLA prepare for the visit. I think the visit was successful and the Visiting Team's evaluation report accurately portrays our campus strengths and challenges.

Like all higher education institutions today, MCLA is confronting the environmental challenges of changing student demographics, economic pressures, and the evolving labor market. Yet, as a small, public institution in a rural setting, we experience these challenges, perhaps, more acutely than other institutions. I believe the Team's report reflects MCLA's successful efforts to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and the era of these challenges, all the while maintaining our commitment to NECHE's accreditation standards.

The challenges for higher education persist, but the Team's initial public report-out provides MCLA with a launch pad for action. We continue to plan and strategize around their assessment of our strengths and areas of concern, remaining attuned to opportunities on the horizon that will fortify MCLA.

For example, enrollment and revenue gains continue to stabilize and even strengthen heading into the Spring 2024 semester:

- Building on new student enrollment that increased 12% between Fall 2022 and Fall 2023:
 - Forty new undergraduate students enrolled in spring 2024 compared to 19 last year.
 - MCLA's Early College program with Drury High School expanded with 80 students (growing from fall 2023) enrolled in the program with capacity to scale up to 120 by 2025. MCLA was the first higher education institution in the Commonwealth to be designated in a rural community with students selecting course pathways in critical sectors such as healthcare, education, and technology.
- MCLA has seen significant improvement in first-to-second semester retention for first time students over the past three years. The first-to-second semester retention rate for Fall 2023 first-time, full-time students is 93%, compared to 85% for the Fall 2022 cohort.
- The FY24 budget deficit of \$2.5 million has been reduced by over \$1,000,000 with projections for year-end results looking increasingly favorable.
- For the first time in College history MCLA embarked on a plan to diversify investment holdings which is strengthening our financial position and helping to reduce the current budget deficit
- The Pathways Campaign for MCLA continues its progress in its silent phase, reaching 65% of its goal last month. Campaign progress continues and plans call for a launch of the public phase in fall 2024.
- Campaign funds are already at work, primarily in student support providing funds for scholarships, internships, travel courses, and key wrap around services. Moreover, since the Team's visit MCLA

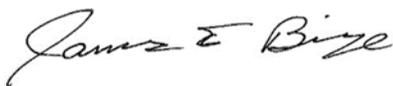
has received funds for faculty development, retention of faculty and staff of color, student recruitment, career services and athletics.

We have been sure to protect the integrity and confidential delivery of the Team report. But we have already taken steps to address the areas of concern identified by the visiting Team, capitalizing on their collective expertise and good counsel:

- MCLA has hired a Director of Conferences and Events to build capacity for a robust rentals and conferences business to continue to grow these external sources of revenue.
- A strategic planning process is underway with the identification of a Steering Committee and the selection of a consultant to craft a three-to-five-year strategic plan, including a multi-year financial and enrollment plan. Our delay in planning until after the Team visit was intentional. We believe that the gains of waiting for the crucial feedback from the Visiting Team outweighed the impacts of a gap between the close of one plan and the start of another.
- Responding to the Visiting Team's call for an integrated approach to planning, we have leveraged a recent assessment vacancy to create a new position, Dean of Assessment Strategy, to bring together key stakeholders in this work and catalogue progress.
- Last month, the Board of Trustees held a day-long retreat, including a lengthy session on self-assessment featuring robust dialogue and enthusiastic participation to move this work forward over the coming year. A Board member will also participate on the Strategic Planning Steering Committee.
- A Vice Provost for Institutional Equity and Belonging, to begin their work this spring, will be a thought leader in the areas of recruitment and retention of diverse faculty and staff, and recruitment and retention of students of color and to work together with all members of the campus community to further these goals.
- A recent retirement of our longtime website director means we were afforded the opportunity to reimagine that position, with a search underway for a web content director, positioned out of the central Marketing and Communications office to allow for necessary website enhancements and proliferation of content development.

The accreditation process has energized the MCLA community and engaged our campus in meaningful and lasting planning work. Thank you to the Commission and Visiting Team for an opportunity for deep reflection. I look forward to our visit with the Commission in April.

Sincerely,



James F. Birge, Ph.D.
President