

Report to the  
Faculty, Administration, Trustees, Students

of

**Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts**  
North Adams, Massachusetts

by

An Evaluation Team representing the  
New England Commission of Higher Education

Prepared after study of the institution's  
self-evaluation report and a site visit  
November 5 – 8, 2023

**The members of the team:**

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This report represents the views of the evaluation committee as interpreted by the chairperson. Its content is based on the committee's evaluation of the institution with respect to the Commission's criteria for accreditation. It is a confidential document in which all comments are made in good faith. The report is prepared both as an educational service to the institution and to assist the Commission in making a decision about the institution's accreditation status.

**NEW ENGLAND COMMISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION**  
**Preface Page to the Team Report**

Please complete **during the team visit** and include with the report prepared by the visiting team

Date form completed: 10/30/2023

Name of Institution Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts

1. **History** Year chartered or authorized 1894 Year first degrees awarded 1899

2. **Type of control:**  State  City  Other; specify: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Private, not-for-profit  Religious Group; specify: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Proprietary  Other; specify: \_\_\_\_\_

3. **Degree level:**  
 Associate  Baccalaureate  Masters  Professional  Doctorate

4. **Enrollment in Degree Programs** (Use figures from fall semester of most recent year):

	Full-time	Part-time	FTE	Retention <sup>a</sup>	Graduation <sup>b</sup>	# Degrees <sup>c</sup>
Associate	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Baccalaureate	675	161	724.9	68.9%	49.1%	217
Graduate	42	55	59.6	46.1%	66.7%	37

(a) full-time 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> year (b) 3 or 6 year graduation rate (c) no. of degrees awarded most recent year

5. **Number of current faculty:** Full time 75 Part-time 55 FTE: 93.2

6. **Current fund data for most recently completed fiscal year:** (Specify year: **2023**)  
(Click in any cell to enter spreadsheet. Enter dollars in millions; e.g., \$1,456,200 = \$1.456)

Tuition	\$5.129	Instruction	\$12.138
Gov't Appropriations	\$28.425	Research	\$0.000
Gifts/Grants/Endowment	\$10.350	General	\$18.304
Auxiliary Enterprises	\$5.507	Auxiliary Enterprises	\$4.067
Other	(\$0.038)	Other	\$12.230
Total	\$49.373	Total	\$46.739

7. **Number of off-campus locations:**  
In-state: 1 Other U.S.: 0 International: 0 Total: 1

8. **Number of degrees and certificates offered electronically:**  
Programs offered entirely on-line: 0 Programs offered 50-99% on-line: 0

9. **Is instruction offered through a contractual relationship?**  
 No  Yes; specify program(s): \_\_\_\_\_

## **Introduction**

This comprehensive evaluation of Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) followed the previous comprehensive visit November 3-6, 2013 and an interim report submitted by the institution in 2018. On March 4, 2022 the Commission approved MCLA's proposal to offer distance education within the scope of its mission.

In accordance with NECHE practice in November 2023, the visiting team conducted the visit in person. All materials were prepared and reviewed in electronic format through the MCLA website, the electronic workroom and the NECHE portal.

The institution provided additional documentation and evidence upon request of team members. Documents reviewed included current and past strategic plans, audited financial statements, enrollment reports, minutes of various committees, assessment and academic program review reports, and other evidence supporting the self-study. Over the course of three days, the team met with faculty, staff, students, executive leadership and trustees. The university community was actively engaged in preparation of the self-study and in the visit, and the team appreciated the openness and forthrightness exhibited during the visit.

The visiting team found the self-study to be a reflective and effective look at MCLA, clearly addressing NECHE's Standards for Accreditation. Our visit confirmed and clarified the themes that emerged in the self-study.

### **Standard 1: Mission and Purpose**

Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts exemplifies its public liberal arts mission through its commitment to a common core curriculum, student success, high impact practices, community engagement and institutional effectiveness, always through the lens of a public liberal arts education.

MCLA last updated its mission statement in 2013, when it was formally adopted by the trustees, and has held true to that mission during the last decade. The college has reaffirmed that mission on occasion and will engage in a formal review as part of its forthcoming strategic planning process. The MCLA Mission and Values Statement is found on the college's website and broadly available. As important, the mission statement informs department and unit mission statements that guide the institution at other levels.

The Board of Trustees has a clear sense of MCLA's mission. The board characterizes MCLA's mission as an engine of regional workforce development combined with a state and national public liberal arts mission. The liberal arts core fundamentally undergirds all MCLA majors, both professional programs and traditional liberal arts programs. This is something the board articulates clearly and supports passionately.

In addition to guiding its approach to student learning, MCLA's mission also guides engagement with its external community. The college's focus on public service and active citizenship are evident in the cultural, business, environmental and service partnerships it has with Berkshire organizations. In valued, reciprocal relationships with surrounding partners, MCLA students, faculty and staff provide hundreds of hours of community service and support the region through a variety of projects. This is all consistent with a public liberal arts mission.

MCLA's leadership understands and is committed to this central mission. Members of the campus community can articulate the value of public liberal arts education to students and the surrounding community but could do so more effectively. In a climate where liberal arts education is under scrutiny nationally, the ability to articulate its mission and values in meaningful ways will be essential.

## **Standard 2: Planning and Evaluation**

Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts has engaged in a variety of planning and evaluation processes to promote a culture of continuous improvement. MCLA completed its most recent strategic plan in 2022. It utilized best practice standards with internal and external stakeholder engagement. Results of the strategic plan were mixed, impacted significantly by the pandemic, like most institutions of higher education. MCLA chose not to initiate its next plan during the pandemic. Campus stakeholders including the trustees felt input from the site review team would provide a foundation for its next strategic plan. The community also felt students' well-being was a more urgent concern rather than initiating the strategic planning process.

MCLA initiated a focused campus wide set of projects that extended some of the work from the recent strategic plan specific to diversity, equity and inclusion. This focus aligns with the required work from the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education's Strategic Plan for Racial Equity. The emphasis of this plan includes concentrated work on closing the equity gaps in retention and completion associated with race/identity. Department chairs are also engaged in detailed work to identify program level areas of inequity. Additional campus wide planning has included an assessment and realignment of the executive team, review and revision of the core curriculum.

**Planning:** In lieu of a new plan, MCLA moved to a continuous planning process that uses short-term goals aligning to long-term success of the college. This does place the institution out of compliance with the state mandate of an active strategic plan. MCLA intends to initiate strategic planning in the 24-25 academic year. This will be critical.

The lack of a strategic plan has had an impact on MCLA. Multiple constituents expressed concern as to a lack of clear purpose to their work. One person overtly expressed, "What are we working toward?" All constituent groups acknowledged that enrollment is the priority yet did not feel there is a unified plan for the campus community to support this goal.

MCLA does have adequate resources for planning in institutional effectiveness. Faculty and staff confirmed they get data as needed/requested for program reports to facilitate program review. The review team believes it may be helpful for the office to develop internal dashboards to make data more accessible to the campus community. This may enhance the transparency concerns expressed during stakeholder sessions.

Fiscal planning has occurred on an annual budget model. Annual budget requests include a request process with data from previous year expenditures used to guide allocation requests for the next fiscal year. Tools for budget reallocations were not apparent to the review team, nor could we determine a clear link between requests and institutional priorities. Clarity is also needed for aligning long-term budget needs to enrollment trends.

The MCLA foundation has engaged in a thorough process for the launch of a comprehensive campaign. An external consultant was hired to support the case development model. Four primary support areas were identified: student support, program support emphasizing the new nursing program, athletics, and faculty development. The silent phase of the campaign has been successful, and the campaign may be able to enter the public phase earlier than projected. There are some concerns noted that contributions may meet the campaign goal but not align to the needs in each priority area.

**Assessment:** MCLA has a strong program review process. The program self-study is a rigorous and comprehensive system for assessment of academic programs. It includes external input from two external reviewers. Overall, the program review process is well done and leads to continuous improvement for the departments. Other areas of planning specific to long term goals of the institution should be strengthened.

### **Standard 3: Organization and Governance**

**External Governance:** MCLA is a member of the Massachusetts Higher Education system. Oversight is provided by the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education and the Board of Trustees for MCLA. Board members are appointed by the Governor. Terms are 5 years. Currently there are multiple members of the board with expired terms awaiting replacement.

The Board of Trustees is an 11-member, diverse group. New board members receive an initial orientation by the president and board chair. In addition, a mentor is assigned to assist new appointees with the governance process. The board engages in its own professional development. The current board expresses that trainings and roundtable discussion are positive and effective for ensuring the board can fulfill its duties. The board also convenes seven committees to provide oversight to the college and for presidential review. The chair of the board and the president meet weekly for consistent communication and oversight of MCLA.

The Board of Trustees posts all agendas and minutes on a public facing website for transparency in their work. However, the last posted minutes were from March 2023.

Maintenance of the minutes would assist the campus community in a sense of transparency by the board.

The board members expressed a strong belief that they serve effectively in oversight of MCLA. They also feel they act strategically on behalf of the college rather than at the tactical level. One member expressed that in the past the board was tightly controlled by administration and that they now have the right balance between oversight and directing the work of the college. Conversely, some members of the campus community have suggested the board can be somewhat intrusive. The site team saw that negative perceptions can arise when stakeholders see a lack of alignment of the board with MCLA administration.

The board is currently engaging in an internal process for self-appraisal. The board chair is assessing practices of other boards as a method for creating this process and may find engagement with consultative organizations helpful. The board operates with an understanding of the significant weight they have on behalf of the college. The members take this role seriously and are invested in the long-term success of MCLA.

**Internal Governance:** MCLA has a traditional shared governance model. Authority is delegated to the president via appointment by the Board of Trustees and the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education. All other shared governance bodies are recommending bodies to the president. The cabinet participates in shared decision making with input from stakeholders. An All College Committee recommends approval of policy and curriculum. Subcommittees provide due diligence specific to curriculum, academic, and student affairs policies. Inclusion of shared governance in the faculty collective bargaining agreement creates some limitations. Due to the tenets of the statewide CBA faculty dominate these committees. The curricular process is governed by the faculty. In addition, an ad hoc committee was created to review and provide oversight of the core curriculum. There is also a strong assessment process for the oversight of programs. A rigorous program level review occurs on a regularly scheduled basis.

MCLA notes in its self-study a need for more transparency of the actions and work of shared governance committees, which an easily accessible repository for shared governance work, CourseLeaf, addresses. MCLA also notes that the Student Government Association has had difficulty rebounding from the pandemic, resulting in limited engagement by students in shared governance. MCLA acknowledges that increased engagement is needed with the SGA to provide students with a greater understanding of the university governance process as well as their role within shared governance, something students desire.

Throughout all stakeholder meetings with the site team, communication emerged as a theme. Although the shared governance process is implemented, multiple constituency groups expressed concerns regarding transparency in decision making. Collectively, staff, faculty, and department chairs desire to provide more input into the decision making of the college. The staff recognize that the governance structure is a result of bargaining but believe other tools could be employed to allow greater campus input.

Another area of frequent discussion by members of the MCLA community was the need for campus wide notice of meetings and agendas. It was also noted that most of the campus still has difficulty knowing how to use CourseLeaf and there are no notification processes to the campus community when new agendas or minutes are posted into the system.

Department chairs also indicated a desire for an increased voice with administration. Participants in the chair meeting indicated they meet twice per month with administration but indicate these are typically information giving sessions with little time for discussion or feedback. They suggested that documents be provided in advance to allow time for input and discussion during the meeting. Chairs said they are not provided with formal training. A handbook is provided but chairs rely heavily on more seasoned chairs for advice. Additional areas of frustration for chairs are lack of clear guidance on resource management, transparency on the budget process, and seemingly inconsistent allocation of resources based more on “the loudest voice” rather than a clear procedural process with timelines for decision making.

#### **Standard 4: The Academic Program**

As a member of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges and one of the nine state universities, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts offers academic programs shaped both by its public liberal arts identity and by its mission as a regional institution responsive to area workforce needs. Among the 60 academic programs (including concentrations), there are several arts and sciences majors but also professional degree programs. The largest number of majors are in Business (111 students in Fall 2022), followed by Psychology (96) and Health Sciences (75). As the institution has responded to workforce needs in the region, dramatic enrollment declines, and changing student interests, MCLA has added multiple programs in healthcare, introducing Health Sciences in 2017, Radiologic Technology in 2020, and a BSN in Nursing in 2023, which has its first class of 21 students this fall. The longstanding Arts Management program and Music, Industry, and Production, introduced in 2023, also address area workforce needs and take advantage of the institution’s location in the Berkshires, close to nationally-recognized arts institutions. During the visit, team members heard faculty, administrators, and staff reflect thoughtfully on the institution’s mission to provide access to transformative liberal arts education and to provide academic programs aligned to workforce needs, noting productive tensions that arise as the institution tries to fulfill both aims.

MCLA is primarily an undergraduate institution, with academic programs that lead to a BA, BS, or, newly, BSN. Through the Division of Graduate and Continuing Education, MCLA offers two master’s degrees: one in Business (MBA) and one in Education (M.Ed.). In addition, DGCE enrolls students in certificate of advanced graduate study (CAGS) and other continuing education programs; DGCE also runs courses for non-matriculated students. There are no online undergraduate degrees. The institution has accelerated joint degree programs through articulations with other institutions. Information about these programs is included on the website.

Based on a review of the undergraduate catalog and the website, the team found that the programs are clearly scaffolded and coherently designed. Each program publishes its learning goals in the undergraduate catalog, and these goals include knowledge, skills, and competencies. Career-specific goals are highlighted in descriptions of programs on the public-facing website but for the most part not included in the student learning goals listed in the undergraduate catalog. DGCE does not have a catalog and therefore the learning goals for those programs are harder to locate. All programs go through a regular review process to ensure quality and provide opportunities for continuous improvement, discussed in more detail below.

An area of emphasis in the 2018 interim report was the “completion of a revised core,” and the self-study and supporting materials document that the revised core was fully implemented in 2021. The team learned that the campus is enthusiastic about the new core, which is closely tied to the public liberal arts mission.

**Assuring Academic Quality:** Conversations with governance committee chairs confirmed that the shared governance system outlined in the of the Massachusetts State College Association collective bargaining agreement provides an effective mechanism for curricular approval and oversight. The self-study highlights that department-level curriculum committees are formed according to the MSCA contract, with two students on each departmental committee. Curriculum proposals then go forward first to the All College Committee and next to the college Curriculum Committee for consideration before final approval by the President. New degrees need to be approved by both the Board of Trustees and the Board of Higher Education. Graduate curriculum proposals are considered by the Graduate Education Council before approval by the President. During the site visit, the team learned that faculty regard the shared governance process as straightforward and easy to navigate when proposing programmatic changes, resulting in stronger curriculum proposals.

The team members’ conversations with academic administration and faculty revealed that the program review process also helps departments improve and plan. Programs are reviewed every seven years according to a process that is spelled out in a current 20-page handbook. MCLA retains a program review schedule, documenting that the institution sticks to this seven-year schedule, including extensions or delays because of sabbatical leave or COVID disruptions. The 15 sample self-study reports included in the workroom demonstrate that departments present detailed data, including information about program design, needed resources, departmental goals, student learning goals, and assessment of student learning. Two external reviewers assess the program based on their visit to campus and review of the self-study, responding to material in the self-study and making recommendations to the department and the college. The process is robust, and the institution provides opportunities for programs to use the external review process as the basis for developing an action plan to address future needs. In a meeting with faculty, the team learned that departments view the administration as responsive to the requests for resources, supported by data, that have been put forward through this process. The team notes, with favor, the successful program review process the institution maintains.



MCLA also assures academic quality through engaging outside accrediting bodies to review programs. Accredited programs include Business Administration (ACBSP) and Education (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [DESE]); the new Nursing program will be accredited by the Board of Registration of Nursing. The ACBSP report concluded that the MBA is “fully accredited with no notes or conditions.” However, in 2018, DESE issued accreditation with a “Probationary Approval,” citing concerns about the quality among instructors, unevenness in candidate preparation, insufficient training of supervising practitioners, among others. A subsequent review in 2022 resulted in “Approved with Conditions,” and the most recent September 2023 report listed only one condition. The visiting team learned that DGCE was pleased with DESE’s most recent review of the M.Ed. and that the Education program and DGCE are working productively to continue to improve the M.Ed. program.

While the program review process and accreditation process appear to work well, the team did hear comments about inadequate resources for different academic programs to ensure the quality of the program. Some departments consider themselves to be at a crossroads with resources, needing to upgrade equipment to ensure the programs can continue. This was not a universal concern but one voiced by faculty from a few different departments; a few departmental self-study reports also document pressing equipment needs. Faculty from some departments expressed satisfaction with their equipment and physical space, as well. Of greater concern was that faculty did not have a clear sense of the proper process to use to document needs and to request resources, outside the program review process. “Whoever complains the loudest and longest” gets resources, faculty observed.

As part of its review of programs and changing demand, MCLA has deleted a few programs, as well as added some, since the last comprehensive accreditation visit. During the site visit, the team learned that this process happens organically, growing out of the program review process and often initiated by faculty. The self-study indicated that the bachelor’s degree in Athletic Training, for example, was deleted because an accreditation change required a master’s degree for a job in Athletic Training, making the current bachelor’s degree insufficient. Other program deletions have been at the level of a minor or concentration. For example, Bioinformatics in Biology was deleted but students were able to pursue a Data Science minor instead. Programs have also been added. According to the self-study, recent new majors include Early Childhood Education and Elementary Education; Music, Industry, and Production; BSN in Nursing; a new Film and Visual culture concentration; and a new concentration in Finance.

A substantive change was approved in 2021 to allow the Division of Graduate and Continuing Education to offer already-developed programs fully online.

**Undergraduate Degree Programs/The Major or Concentration:** To graduate from MCLA, students must earn a minimum of 120 credits, with at least a third at the 300- or 400-level. Based on a review of the curriculum published in the undergraduate catalog and the syllabi included in the workroom, programs are adequately scaffolded with 100- and 200-level courses required before upper-level courses that allow for greater specialization in the major and more

in-depth study. Students and their faculty advisors can track students' progress toward their degree on DegreeWorks.

As a public liberal arts institution, MCLA aims to give students an education with breadth across liberal arts disciplines and the opportunity to do a "deep dive" in their discipline. As is evident in the course catalog, each major has a clearly articulated set of learning objectives. Students' exploration of the curriculum beyond their majors is evidenced by the 39.8% of graduates from the class of 2023 who had one minor; the 11.4% of students with two minors; and the 11.6% of students with more than one major.

Faculty conduct regular assessment, as outlined in "E-Series Forms" to ensure that students are meeting learning outcomes. The Director of Assessment and Director of Institutional Effectiveness support departments in this assessment process. Assessment looks different across the various disciplines, but every department completes assessment of learning outcomes every year. During the site visit, administrative staff observed that this work is not consistently documented.

The self-study reports and the site visit confirmed that high-impact practices such as internships, independent studies, student research are integrated into the major, as well as general education. Information literacy is also part of the core and the major. The most recent year has seen an increase in student internships to 17% in 2022 from 9.5% in 2021 (or 10.18% in 2018); 17.9% of undergraduates presented at the most recent undergraduate research conference. These high-impact practices are supported by the Career Office and Undergraduate Research Coordinator. MCLA offers multiple travel courses, some of which are fully funded by donors to create greater equity. Students paid nothing for the US Civil Rights Travel course and the course to South Africa. Team members learned that the institution is committed to creating greater access to high-impact practices, such as study abroad. Further evidence of MCLA's commitment to access is the Honors Program, which admits students, no matter their high school GPA, as part of a "Fresh Start" program. A high proportion of students are in Honors: 154 in Fall 2021. Increased student success is indicated by improvements in the graduation rate, including the four-year rates, since the last review, going from 33.5% in 2012 to 48.9% in 2020.

MCLA offers courses in several off-campus locations. For many years, students at Drury High School in North Adams have taken dual enrollment courses. A new Early College program, supported by grant funding from the state, has a goal of full participation from all Drury students. During the site visit, the team learned that faculty teaching these courses use MCLA syllabi and course materials, and MCLA faculty observe and consult with teachers to ensure the integrity of the college-level credit awarded. MBA students take courses at the Berkshire Innovation Center five Saturdays each semester. Other off-campus locations include Berkshire Medical Center for Nursing and Radiological Technology and Berkshire Community College, where a degree completion program is currently being phased out, but other partnerships continue.

**General Education:** A revised core curriculum was implemented in Fall 2021, thus fully addressing one of the three areas of emphasis in the 2018 interim report. The visiting team learned that the process for developing the new core was faculty-driven, collaborative, and highly successful. Small groups of faculty members attended AAC&U summer conferences and received key guidance that helped to shape the process. Faculty reported that, despite interference from previous academic leaders early in the process, new academic affairs leadership fully supported the core revision process. Faculty felt that their work was valued. The team noted significant pride among the campus community in the new core curriculum.

The new core requires 40-41 credits with a foundational Tier I including a Critical Reading, Thinking, and Writing course; a Quantitative Reasoning course; and a Health & Wellness course. At the “integrative content” Tier II level, students are required to take courses across the arts and humanities, sciences, and social sciences in five domains labeled as follows: “Creative Arts, Self & Society, Human Heritage, Science & Technology, and Language, Culture & Communication.” Finally, Tier III includes an upper-level capstone that invites students to make connections across disciplines. This new curriculum has a clearly defined mission that is linked to the college’s mission as a public liberal arts institution. Other new features of this revised core include a focus on integrative and experiential learning, as well as diversity and inclusion across the curriculum, not as a separate standalone requirement. The revised core also includes newly defined student learning outcomes.

The new oversight structure for the revised core is effective. A Core Steering Committee, which was established through the MSCA contract as a special committee, approves courses before they go through the shared governance review process and ensures a balance among the different domains. The Core Steering Committee oversees the new assessment process, and the presence of the Chief Diversity Officer on the committee is intended to help maintain the focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion learning outcomes across the domains. The visiting team is pleased with MCLA’s revised core and heartened by the faculty members’ enthusiasm for it.

**Graduate Degree Programs:** As noted, MCLA offers two graduate degrees: an MBA in Business Administration and an M.Ed. with 15 tracks for licensure. There is also a non-licensure M.Ed. The Division of Graduate and Continuing Education also offers a Certificate for Advanced Graduate Students designed for students seeking a superintendent licensure. In Fall 2022, there were 9 MBA students and 45 M.Ed. students. Another 43 students participated in the Leadership Program, geared for superintendents and principals.

Department chairs in Business and Education administer the programs with support from DGCE, which has its own dean and associate dean, both new in their roles. Both graduate degrees are accredited by outside agencies. The Graduate Education Council, outlined in the contract for DGCE, makes recommendations for new programs and curricular revisions directly to the college president. The dean and associate dean discussed improvements in the existing programs and two possible new programs that would address pressing workforce needs: a Master of Social Work and a Master of Nursing.

DGCE does not have its own catalog, which makes clarity about the programs—including objectives, rationale, and requirements—harder to access. During the visit, the team learned the DGCE deans are making progress on a catalog, with a goal to complete by December 1, 2023. Learning outcomes for the MBA juxtaposed in the self-study with learning outcomes for the undergraduate degree in business indicate a higher level of expectation for graduate level work. The team could not easily determine evidence of higher expectations for the M.Ed. in Education, given the current absence of a catalog and of stated learning outcomes.

Graduate faculty can be either full-time “day” faculty or part-time faculty, who are paid per-credit; the DGCE dean approves their appointment as graduate faculty. The visiting team confirmed that the dean evaluates graduate faculty appointments appropriately. MBA faculty must possess relevant professional experience that serves the MBA’s focus on business in Berkshire County, and Education faculty must have a research record and experience in the field.

**Transfer Credit:** As a public higher education institution in Massachusetts, MCLA follows the guidelines outlined in the MassTransfer agreement. MCLA has participated in the development of “A2B” maps to create clear transfer pathways for students enrolled at community colleges in the Commonwealth. Given its location, MCLA also has articulated transfer pathways with New York community colleges through the New York Transfer Program. Both programs are clearly linked on the website under Transfer Admissions and provide detailed information about transfer policies and course equivalencies. The team commends faculty involvement in reviewing transfer students’ transcripts early in the process to ease the transition to MCLA. The self-study notes that transfer policies are not clearly included in public-facing admissions materials. The team learned that the institution is actively working on making transfer practices more accessible and transparent. Even though communication about transfer policies could be improved, the visiting team commends the institution on maintaining transfer articulation agreements that support pathways for students from community colleges in Massachusetts and New York.

**Integrity in the Award of Academic Credit:** The credit hour is defined on the website in the list of academic policies under “Definition of Credit Hour.” Through its governance, program review, assessment, the institution provides clear and ongoing oversight of the credits awarded. Based on the team’s review of syllabi and the course catalog, it is clear that no remedial courses are given academic credit, and the required coursework includes “demonstrable academic content.” According to the Prior Learning Policy and Alternative Learning Policy, students can earn 15 credits each through each program and no more than 30 credits overall. These policies are available on the website. All programs require a minimum of 120 credits for graduation. Credits earned off campus are still managed by the MCLA governance process. MCLA also has an Early College partnership with Drury High School, with courses following MCLA syllabi and evaluated by MCLA faculty.

Finally, the catalog includes academic honesty and academic appeals policies, as well as clear graduation requirements. The team did not hear concern from students about course

availability challenges that created obstacles in graduating within four years. In fact, during the site visit, academic affairs leadership spoke to their commitment to working with seniors to ensure course availability and timely graduation. The undergraduate catalog is kept up to date.

### **Standard 5: Students**

Following the 2018 interim report, MCLA was asked to give special emphasis to “achieving its goals to increase student enrollment, retention and graduation” and “developing a multi-year financial plan that is aligned with its recruitment, enrollment and retention plans.” With the advent of COVID and the enrollment cliff in New England and elsewhere, neither goal was met although work is now addressing both.

According to the 2023 Fall Freeze Enrollment Report, overall headcount enrollment is currently at 933, having fallen close to 36% since 2018 but remaining stable compared to last year (938); the goal was 948. Enrollment was declining prior to COVID; COVID accelerated the decline. Of this, 836 students (90%) are undergraduates; 675 of these are full-time undergraduates (a 1% decline). However, first-time, first-year enrollment showed a rebound, up 8% (14 students for a total of 191) but is down 33% since 2019. Transfer enrollment increased 20% (15 students to a total of 90) but has declined 43% since 2019. Transfer enrollment represents approximately 11% of the total undergraduate enrollment. The declines since 2019 are, in part, explained by the decline in the traditional age demographics and by the impact of COVID on enrollment overall. Graduate enrollment also declined (3% to 97 students). 81% of undergraduates are full time (43% for graduate – a 21% decline but a 17% increase in part time) and 54% are female (65% for graduate). 65% of the students are in-state. Out of state students increased slightly and represent 32% of the undergraduate student body and approximately 53% of the graduate. Students of color represent 23% (212) of the total enrollment – this is a 14% decrease as compared to last year. 55% of undergraduate students live on campus (81% of first-time, full-time). 41% of MCLA students are Pell eligible.

The freshman first to second year retention was 68.9% (compared to 64% for the '21 cohort; the goal was 71%) and the second to third year retention was 57% for the '21 cohort (compared to 49% for the prior year). Disaggregated data was not yet available for the '22 cohort. One year does not a trend make, but this is a positive indicator, and combined with the slight increase in new students, contributed to overall enrollment being fairly stable.

Of special concern, returning undergraduate enrollment is down 6% (28 students to a total of 456) and enrollment of students of color is declining as well: first-time, first-year enrollment is down 22% (to 45) and overall undergraduate enrollment shows a decline of 15% (to a total of 196). Further, disaggregated retention data over the last three years shows that students of color (in particular African American male students) have retained at lower rates than white students (55% vs. 68%), and other at-risk populations such as Pell recipients (53% vs. 74%) persist at lower rates than their counterparts. Similar trends appear within the graduation data although not as extreme. Disproportionate numbers of students of color are suspended, many times after one semester; the policies surrounding suspension are being revised and more

supports are being put in place. Strategies to begin addressing enrollment are underway and included below; there is currently no single enrollment plan that details these strategies although the new Executive Director of Enrollment Management has prepared a draft plan.

**Undergraduate Admissions:** The MCLA Admissions website states, “As Massachusetts’ public liberal arts college, we welcome applications for admission from motivated students, no matter who they are or where they come from.” This is reflected in admissions processes and subsequent service and support of students. Students can apply by using the Common Application. The Massachusetts Department of Higher Education sets the minimum standards for all incoming first year and transfer students. Applicants are required to complete the standard college preparatory program for Massachusetts and have earned a minimum GPA of 3.0, although a “special admit” category exists (up to 10% of the entering class) for those applicants who may not meet the standards but show academic promise. Students are evaluated by a combination of their high school academic program, a recalculated GPA (utilizing Massachusetts standard units), essay and associated writing skills, honors and activities including other personal characteristics and fit with the institution, and the availability of supports to help the student be successful. No student may be admitted whose overall grade point average falls below 2.0. During 2020, MCLA moved to a “test-blind” pilot program for SAT/ACT scores in part to respond to the barriers faced by students during the pandemic; this policy has now been made permanent and SAT/ACT scores are not a factor in admissions decisions. All students can apply for the Honors Program; more than 150 students participate.

The Admissions Office evaluates and reviews both the DHE standards and its own procedures regularly, performing annual equity reviews, bias and file review training. Staff participate in Safe Zone workshops and review applications with more attention to student’s backgrounds, including through the lens of the LGBTQ+ community. Specific programming for students of color has been developed to include overnight visitation experiences and Accepted Student Day visits. The office has hosted bus trips and overnight experiences for prospective students from the Boston and Worcester/Springfield areas and will be reinstating these trips for the next admissions cycle. MCLA performs the usual admissions activities one would expect (fall travel, college fairs, transfer fairs, accepted student days, summer guidance events, etc.).

MCLA has been actively engaged with the DHE to adopt MassTransfer. The program allows for easier transfer opportunities for Massachusetts students; MCLA is continuing to update course equivalencies and articulation agreements as a part of this program. MCLA is anticipating that students participating in the MassReconnect program (“free” community college for students 25+) will ultimately transfer to MCLA. Given the importance of transfer admissions in overall enrollment priorities, staff responsible for transfer evaluation report that work is being done to streamline and simplify transfer and that transfer is not as “friendly” as it should be.

A chatbot is utilized at MCLA and performs a variety of tasks – from answering basic questions from prospective students to sending helping “nudges” and reminders about things like FAFSA completion, bill payment and registration tasks.

**Financial Aid:** Student Financial Services relies on the FAFSA to determine need-based funding options for students. Complete information is provided specific to the cost of education, applying for aid, and the availability of scholarships, grants and loans. Students can review the status of their award on their self-service Banner accounts. Returning students are notified of awards via email; all new students receive their awards in a timely fashion so they can make informed decisions, and awards can be accessed through the Admissions portal. All first-year students receive some scholarship aid, either in the form of a merit scholarship (\$2000-\$4000) or a Commitment Scholarship (\$1000). These scholarships are being reevaluated for the 2024-2025 cycle. Massachusetts residents qualify for the Mass Grant Plus program which covers all tuition, fees and books, and a variety of other scholarship programs are available as well; all undergraduate applicants are automatically considered for MCLA Foundation Scholarships as well as other scholarships. This may in part explain their relatively low discount rate of 26-28%. Average loan debt for students who receive degrees is \$26,500 for undergraduates (76% of the students), \$35,000 for graduates (55%). Students are informed about the importance of managing debt and are provided with complete information about repayment, deferment, consolidation and delinquency/default. While enrolled, students receive a “debt letter” each year to notify them of cumulative balances and is a part of general financial literacy support for students. While graduate students in credit-based programs can qualify for loans, they cannot obtain any additional aid. The information on the MCLA website specific to graduate financial aid and costs while accurate could use some revision when DGCE updates its various webpages.

**Graduate Students and Degree Completion:** DGCE admits graduate, certificate and degree completion students. Applicants for admission to graduate programs must possess a bachelor’s degree from a regionally accredited institution. Teacher licensure candidates may request a preliminary transcript review by the Coordinator of Educator Licensure and Placement to determine whether content area requirements have been met by previous coursework. A minimum undergraduate GPA of 3.0 is required for immediate matriculation, with a provisional option for those who successfully complete two core courses with grades of B or better before enrolling in other courses. A 3.0 GPA is preferred for MBA applicants but not required. All applicants include a personal statement and three professional letters of recommendation.

Enrollment in graduate programs has declined since 2019 and is at 97 in Fall 2023. The MBA program has seen a significant decrease from a high of 33 but saw a slight increase from 9 to 13 this year. Enrollment in the M.Ed. program decreased as well but has been stable for the last two years (at 45 students). The Leadership program, intended for teachers aspiring to higher positions (principals, superintendents), shows declines as well but is anticipated to grow as more teachers commit to leadership positions.

Admission in degree completion programs showed similar declines (29 in 2019 to 16 in 2022). Increased demand and higher wages within the local job market may be influencing this enrollment. According to DGCE leadership, the degree completion programs are going to be phased out and be handled like a transfer program as opposed to a stand-alone academic program.

DGCE has experienced significant leadership changes over the past six months and is making significant enhancements to the overall program. Current recruitment strategies of DGCE include a revamped MBA structure for fall 2023 to include the development of concentrations within areas such as project management, health care management and data science, the creation of an online pathway to teaching for those with emergency licenses and expanded marketing for its Leadership Academy. In addition, DGCE is developing a feasibility and financial study related to adding an MSW, is looking to enhance communications through improvements to their website, implementing a graduate catalog, implementation of Slate as their CRM, more engagement with corporate partners and expanding digital marketing. Because DGCE works with non-matriculated students including Early College, they will offer expanded advising to these students and promote a “take a class” concept to encourage more students to experience MCLA. DGCE is a member of the newly formed Strategic Enrollment Management Council. There seems to be a growing recognition of the importance of DGCE programming and enrollment in the overall enrollment mix, and more inclusion of DGCE in enrollment planning.

**Overall Enrollment Strategies and Planning:** A Strategic Enrollment Management Council, co-chaired by enrollment management and student success leaders, meets weekly. It includes representatives from throughout MCLA: administration, student life, DGCE, and faculty. Initial priorities include recruitment and onboarding (including summer melt), student persistence, year-to-year retention and the development of multi-year enrollment and fiscal planning. Currently there appears to be no connection between enrollment and fiscal planning. While staffing has been a challenge, the Executive Director of Enrollment Management has been hired and provides leadership for that division, and the interim Director of Admissions is now the Director. Ongoing challenges exist in hiring admissions counselors but salaries for these entry level position have been increased in hope of expanding the applicant pool and reorganization has occurred in the office to better meet the needs of Admissions.

Undergraduate recruitment priorities include increasing the enrollment of out of state students using a third-party vendor (RFP process for this is underway), increasing the enrollment of transfer students, expanding outreach and possibly reinstating a summer bridge program, which could “shore up” recruitment for students from underserved populations. The new program in Nursing and addition of Men’s and Women’s hockey are anticipated to further grow enrollment, and MCLA’s participation in Early College should increase over the next few years as evidenced by enrollment during the Fall 2023 semester (these students would have a direct pathway to MCLA should they choose it). The Nursing program will be capped at 25 students a year until the first class graduates and MCLA can evaluate success via measurements such as the NCLEX; if successful, enrollment will likely be capped at 30-35 students per year.

**Onboarding and Summer Melt:** Admission, Academic Advising and Support and Student Affairs are collaborating to ensure consistent and ongoing messaging and engagement with incoming students during the time between admission and matriculation. Virtual and on campus engagement days, guidance in activating accounts and becoming familiar with key online tools and platforms and an online orientation are strategies. Another key change in the registration



process has a small team meeting individually with all entering students to build schedules, explain important aspects of the academic program and answer questions.

**Working toward Multi-Year Enrollment Projections:** MCLA has developed a three-year enrollment projection extending to Fall 2026 which considers internal and external factors impacting enrollment. The institution anticipates that degree-seeking enrollment will increase by 9.1% (76 students) in that time period through increasing the retention rate and the admission of new students.

**Student Services and Co-Curricular Experiences:** Significant staffing changes within leadership connected to student recruitment and support and staff reorganizations have been common. Staff are well qualified, and positions are being rethought to include current priorities, including DEI. These seem to all lend themselves to a more logical and coherent organization of responsibilities within student affairs and enrollment management. With the collaboration that seems to be a hallmark of how work is accomplished at MCLA, these changes seem to be positive indicators of the potential for MCLA moving forward.

**Onboarding and First Year Experience:** In 2023, MCLA launched a new, comprehensive and cross-divisional First Year Experience (FYE). Designed to improve the quality of the student experience in the first year, increase retention, and improve student success for all students but most specifically those at highest risk (low income, first generation, students of color), the FYE is one part of a larger 18 month-long onboarding cycle from the moment a student first enrolls through the completion of their first full academic year. All incoming students attend an on-campus orientation program during the ten days prior to the start of classes. During the first five days, students participate in the Greylock Federal LEAD Academy which is a student-driven pre-orientation program focused on leadership development. The second half of orientation covers more traditional orientation topics. Success teams of staff mentors, peer mentors and faculty success coaches follow students through their first year, providing consistent point of contact. The First Year Seminar includes strategies and skills needed for student success, and a First Six Weeks program series provides additional opportunities for skill and community building. This creative new series of programs will be assessed in part using metrics provided through DHE's "Strategic Plan for Racial Equity."

Students within graduate and degree completion programs tend to be non-traditional and enroll predominantly online. An onboarding course provides engagement, and structured guidance to connect them to the resources and support they will need.

**Advising and Academic Support:** A Title III grant (2016) laid the foundation for many of the components within this area. A newly created Academic Advising and Academic Support Office has launched a student success management program (EAB Navigate), added Faculty Advising Fellow/Success Coaches who work with all incoming students, and broadens the components of student success and support to include tutoring (Trailblazer Tutor Program). New in Fall 2023 is a promising dual support model where students have an advisor within the Advising and Academic Support Office and also a faculty success coach. The Academic Advising and Support

Office, Disability Resources Office and the TRIO Student Success Services program all report to the Executive Director of Student Persistence. Disability Services is serving close to 300 students annually (including temporary disabilities) and one-third of the entering class needs some kind of service. The Office will be working more closely with Admissions to better identify student needs in advance of attendance. The TRIO SSS grant received in 2020 is designed to enhance support for low-income, first-generation students and students with disabilities. These offices are co-located. Other academic supports include the Math Drop-In Center (peer tutors), the Writing Studio (peer tutors) and the Freel Library (information literacy, etc.). A “Success Zone” exists online that contains free study skill resources.

**CARE Team:** Coming out of the pandemic, MCLA reorganized its approach to providing support for students facing either academic or social difficulties, including disengagement, mental or behavioral health concerns, or assistance with basic needs. The CARE (Concern, Assessment, Response, Evaluation) team became a cross-functional team co-chaired by the Executive Director of Student Persistence and the Dean for Student Success and Community Wellbeing. The goal is to intervene as early as possible to support each student by developing and implementing an appropriate action plan for the student.

**Student Life and Co-Curricular Experiences:** MCLA’s Student Affairs division provides opportunities for students to engage in over 50 clubs and organizations, participate in student government and leadership, explore identities and cultures, volunteer within the community, and develop leadership skills. A weekly newspaper, *The Beacon*, and a student-run radio station, WJJW, both offer opportunities for further student engagement. Students enrolled in DGCE have full access to the services and supports available to undergraduate students.

The Student Affairs division completed a planning process that focused on five divisional goals that will form the basis for work to come. These include student leadership and development (the development of a sustainable student governance model), a “re-commitment to MCLA’s identity as a residential college”, creation of a culture of wellness and increasing assessment through an equity lens. The Division is “modeling for others’ in its approach to developing specific actions designed to enhance student (and staff) inclusion and belonging in alignment with MCLA’s racial equity work. The division is also committed to providing more open and transparent communication among staff, faculty and students via newsletters and updates for departments.

**Student Government and Leadership:** While a Student Government Association does exist and plays a role in the governance process at MCLA, student engagement has been small. As of this writing, there are only two active SGA members out of 27 (the President and the Student Trustee). Work is underway to revitalize the SGA including sending members to the national SGA conference, holding a retreat to discuss the role of SGA and rewriting the constitution. A forthcoming report will present a new structure (seemingly by administration, students we spoke with seemed unaware of this). A combination of COVID and upper-class students graduating/leaving likely contributed to the current situation; as a result, more specific training around leadership development is being planned. With such small numbers, staff now work

with the Student Activities Board, monitoring budgets, ensuring funding, etc. Students have many opportunities to participate in clubs, activities and athletics/recreation and there are also several high impact opportunities for students. The challenge in these years post-COVID is to get more students excited and engaged.

The **Office of Institutional Equity and Belonging** works closely with Centers and student organizations to ensure students can connect and develop a sense of belonging. Through the Gender and Sexuality Center, the Multicultural Education Resource Center or the Veterans Resource Center, students can find space and resources to build communities with student with shared experiences. Several groups and clubs, such as the Asian Student Association, the Black Student Union, Out@MCLA, and the Latin American Society, provide additional connections. A department newsletter (the *Institutional Equity Digest*) provides the MCLA community with information on programs, events, workshops and training opportunities. Several workshops and trainings, including Safe Zone trainings, are scheduled for the 2023-24 academic year and are available on the MCLA website.

In 2022, the campus conducted a climate survey based on the Culturally Engaging Campus Environment model to measure perceptions and experiences with respect to several indicators within cultural responsiveness, cultural relevance and sense of belonging. Across the board, students reported feeling minimal/uncertain experiences of all indicators, with students of color responding at a level significantly lower than white students to four of six indicators. As the self-study states, the results reinforce consistent feedback from students, both anecdotally and via other surveys, regarding their lived experiences on campus, and further reinforced their experiences on a predominantly white campus. The survey results have informed a Racial Equity Summit out of which emerged the theme for MCLA's 2023 Day of Dialogue (creating a stronger sense of belonging among all campus constituencies) and are contributing to work occurring at the program level. Work is occurring at the broader state level connected to the strategic plan for racial equity as part of the REJI work. Given the decline in students of color at MCLA, focusing more intentionally on that population and its experiences, academic and social, would be advised.

**Residence and Commuter Life:** MCLA has a three-year on-campus residency requirement. Transfer students are required to live on campus based on the number of credits accepted at admission. Certain classes of students are exempt from the requirement and petitions for individual modifications to residency are considered. There are three residence halls on campus, current occupancy is 59% (only two residence halls are occupied). Living-learning communities and theme housing are in place for interested students. All resident students receive a Resident Student Handbook detailing guidelines for community living, safety and security, general expectations for behavior, and other topics relevant to on-campus living. A review of the residential life program occurred in 2019 and focused on needed improvements in personnel, technology and programming; work has been ongoing to address identified deficiencies. Currently, 40% of MCLA students are commuters. The college has long-term goal to identify suitable, accessible space for a commuter student lounge. Students report staying in their cars in between classes given the absence of on-campus space. Residence Life and

Housing maintains current listings of local off-campus living for students transitioning out of on-campus housing although with the housing shortage in the area, availability of off-campus housing is very limited.

**Health and Wellness:** Headed by a new Dean for Student Success and Community Wellbeing, Counseling and Health Services are now together in one area. A three-year wellness strategic plan is in place to focus wellness efforts and priorities as laid out in the DHE Student Success Framework. An Associate Dean for Counseling and Wellness was hired in spring 2023. This model has been replicated elsewhere in the Massachusetts system and has enabled MCLA to gain access to grants that support mental health and wellness, such as a SAMHSA Suicide Prevention grant to support student wellbeing and suicide prevention among underrepresented populations and to create a Health Promotion Specialist position. Approximately 40% of MCLA students have used counseling services in the past year. Staff for both Health Service and Counseling are comprised of the appropriate positions; the loss of two counselors contributes to a backlog in timely service. A hard waiver student health insurance plan is in place which includes coverage for mental health and substance use addiction counseling.

A *Basic Needs Center* exists to support and assist students with housing, transportation and/or food needs; a food pantry is available on campus, and self-care products are also available through a hygiene closet managed by Health Services. A Student Services Navigator shared by MCLA and Berkshire Community College helps support students experiencing food insecurity.

Also in 2022, MCLA participated in the Healthy Minds Study as part of the commitment to become a JED campus. While the response rate was relatively low (17%), it did provide a basic understanding of several mental wellbeing issues experienced by students including depression, anxiety, feelings of isolation and the impact of mental health issues on their success. Being a JED Campus enables the JED Foundation to partner with an institution to assess the community's needs, develop a customized strategic plan to build on existing strengths, and implement tools, strategies, and techniques that lead to measurable improvements in student mental health and a more connected community. Feedback from JED (received in February 2023) seems to have reinforced much of the work on racial equity and the need for cross-divisional support for the wellbeing of the community and validated the alignment of Health Services and Counseling.

**Career Services** provide the standard range of services to undergraduate and graduate students and extends these services to alumni. They play an integral role in one of MCLA's high impact foci, internships; the office manages the connections to departments related to internships, works with area businesses and provide information and training to ensure that the employer, student and faculty coordinator are clear on the various expectations.

**Athletics and Recreation:** MCLA has a Division III intercollegiate athletics program offering opportunities for student athletes who compete in 14 sports (7 men, 7 women; approximately one-third of the undergraduate student body) not including Esports. Men's and Women's Ice Hockey started in Fall 2023. E-Sports was added to increase the sense of belonging. Student

athletes come from 19 states and two countries. Intramural and outdoor opportunities exist in sports such as ping pong, badminton, indoor soccer and arena football. The Trailblazer Fitness Center is available in the Campus Center and is available to the MCLA community.

**Community Standards:** The Community Standards (Student Handbook) clearly represents student-related policies and procedures and apply to undergraduate and graduate students. The Student Conduct code is available online and within the Community Standards. A Student Affairs Governance Committee has been “revitalized” and is participating in college governance. The policies for student accountability recently went through a new adoption and review process. All policies within the Student Handbook (Community Standards), including conduct and grievance, have been formally adopted and are now current.

All student records are preserved as required in the Massachusetts Statewide Records Retention Schedule and the Massachusetts State Colleges Records Retention Schedule. The release of information is subject to the Massachusetts Public Records Law (also referenced in standard 9).

#### **Standard 6: Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship**

In line with the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts mission statement, “[to promote] excellence in learning and teaching, innovative scholarship, intellectual creativity,” faculty and academic staff are qualified and effective educators who continue to demonstrate their commitment to advancing the institution’s academic purposes and high academic standards through teaching, learning, and scholarship both at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

**Faculty and Academic Staff:** MCLA has a cadre of well-qualified full-time and part-time faculty and academic staff governed by structures and processes in two collective bargaining agreements. The Massachusetts State College Association bargains for the “Day” faculty and for the Division of Graduate & Continuing Education faculty. The MSCA Day and DGCE contracts provide structure to teaching load, service, and scholarship expectations and professional opportunities for faculty to ensure that they are demonstrably effective in carrying out their assigned responsibilities. The contracts have clear, enforceable policies and procedures that cover the various aspects of full-time and part-time undergraduate and graduate faculty. The DGCE covers faculty teaching evening online graduate courses. The faculty teaching workload is primarily 12 credits per semester (4/4). Student advising is also part of the faculty’s teaching responsibilities. Faculty categories, salaries, faculty rights and responsibilities, including academic freedom are also outlined in the contracts.

The full-time “Day” faculty curriculum vitae attest to the institution’s commitment to a thorough and rigorous recruitment and appointment process, and the renewal, tenure, and promotion evaluation that are consistent with the standards, policies and procedures as defined in the MSCA contract. Full-time faculty must have a terminal degree or be ABD and complete the degree within two years of hire. A master’s degree is required for part-time faculty; however, professional experience or specialization may replace the master’s degree

requirement. Faculty CVs show that faculty typically hold terminal degree in their discipline from a wide array of institutions. They also provide evidence of adequate to exceptional qualifications (i.e., educational attainment, research, work experience, publications, and presentations) of full-time and part-time faculty that appropriately qualify them to teach the courses in their discipline.

DGCE faculty are vetted following the DGCE contract hiring procedures and qualifications. The dean notes that faculty have command of their disciplines and ability to sustain teaching excellence through onboarding and dedicated professional development. Most of the DGCE faculty come from the “Day” faculty.

The Data First Forms report that as of 2023, 29 professors, 22 associate professors, and 17 assistant professors have doctoral degrees; two professors, two associate professors, and six assistant professors have master’s degrees. Among 34 part-time faculty, nine faculty have doctoral degrees and 18 faculty have master’s degrees. The rest of the faculty have comparable academic qualifications or specializations and professional experiences relevant to their discipline and courses that they teach. The Data First Forms also report the 79 full-time faculty comprise 30 professors, 26 associate professors and 22 assistant professors.

The self-study acknowledges a considerable decline in the number of full-time faculty over the past five years. The decline in the number of full-time faculty resulted from retirements and voluntary separations with those lines remaining unfilled as a cost-saving measure or due to difficulties in recruiting. Part-time faculty dropped from 86 in 2020 to 34 in 2023. MCLA is below the 15% stipulated limit by the bargaining agreement contract for courses taught by part-time faculty. The decrease in the number of full-time and part-time faculty is more prominent in some academic programs than others. Most faculty seem positive that their current number of faculty in programs is adequate to continue advancing their program goals, although a few disagreed.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion goals commit to increasing faculty diversity across campus, aligning with MCLA’s commitment to an inclusive community. However, data show that African American, Hispanic, and Asian faculty are severely underrepresented.

**Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship:** MCLA faculty are unquestionably dedicated to the institution, committed to students and student learning, and are deeply involved in teaching and service across campus, often accountable for multiple responsibilities. At the student forum, undergraduate students expressed appreciation for their instructors’ knowledge of content and teaching pedagogy. One student commented with concern on the DGCE faculty’s preparedness for their online teaching. Another student recommended more rigorous graduate courses. Overall, students and faculty clearly have positive relationships and students find faculty to be caring and attentive to their needs. Faculty and academic staff maintain cohesive, collegial relationships and have deep respect for each other’s contributions.

Courses are taught in-person, hybrid, or online asynchronous. Sample course syllabi illustrate faculty use of a variety of in-class pedagogical practices and assessments, including lecture, discussion, student presentations and PowerPoint presentations. Faculty implement suitable and relevant pedagogy for in-person and online teaching. Almost all undergraduate courses are conducted in person. A few courses are involved in a pilot project to implement online asynchronous courses. The DGCE courses are offered online asynchronous.

Full-time faculty are evaluated for renewal, tenure, or promotion based on the criteria and processes outlined in the contract. While they are evaluated in four categories, emphasis is placed on the fact that MCLA is primarily a teaching institution. Departments evaluate part-time faculty based on criteria and processes outlined in the contract; however there is no evidence that academic departments and the DGCE evaluate their part-time faculty in a detailed, consistent, and thorough process. Students also complete evaluations of each of their courses to provide feedback to instructors and to inform course revision and improvement. The Office of Assessment and Institutional Research and Effectiveness confirmed that student evaluation data are disseminated to course instructors and included in their personnel files for reappointment, tenure, or promotion review.

Faculty have divergent perceptions about the institution's effort to scale up support for their research and professional learning. At a faculty forum, some faculty agreed that institutional and technical support and resources, professional development, and opportunities for faculty collaboration are readily available. MCLA administrators and faculty shared various examples of institutional support and resources to meet campus goals for equity and to advance student success. The Center for Teaching and Learning provides ongoing professional development, workshops, and speakers to the faculty learning community on various topics, such as anti-racist pedagogy, based on faculty's expressed needs or identified institutional priorities. A CTL representative and the Dean for Academic Affairs also described collaboration with Academic Technology, Academic Affairs, and High Impact Practices on programs focusing on reimagining the role of technology in the teaching and learning contexts especially post-COVID, including a pilot project implementing online asynchronous courses to explore further how this learning model and digital learning environment can serve as an effective tool to transform learning.

Faculty recognize that MCLA is a teaching institution, but some faculty raised concerns about a 4/4 teaching load that limits their ability to engage in research and scholarship. One faculty offered a compelling argument for the role of research in the quality of teaching and student learning. In response, another faculty called attention to alternative arrangements to the 4/4 teaching load that are already in place, such as course credit reduction through research release time or other internal or external funding to buy out time for a specific period. The visiting team got the impression that information about faculty opportunities for research and scholarship support and professional development might not be communicated clearly.

The NECHE team acknowledges the quality of engagement among faculty and academic staff. In conversation with the Core Curriculum Committee, the NECHE team was impressed to learn that faculty and academic staff have committed significant investment of their professional

time and energy into the core curriculum revision process that will have a long-term impact on the future of MCLA. This collaborative spirit is an institutional strength and asset as the institution moves forward.

### **Standard 7: Institutional Resources**

**Human Resources:** Led by the Chief Human Resources Officer and staffed by 5 full-time staff members, the Human Resources department supports 279 full-time and 69 part-time employees across campus. HR manages hiring, onboarding, payroll, benefits, and the administration of college, state and collective bargaining policies and guidelines. Senior administrators mentioned there is a strong positive relationship with the unions, as did union leadership. There is significant collaboration between HR and departments throughout campus and considerable support provided to all colleagues.

Key HR policies that govern personnel matters are primarily developed by the state university system. These policies are easily accessible on the campus HR website and route directly to the appropriate source documentation. Approximately 30 employees are classified as Non-Unit Professionals (“NUPs”) and are not covered by a collective bargaining agreement. All other employees are covered by one of three CBA agreements: AFSCME (classified staff), APA (professional staff) and MSCA (faculty/librarians). NUPs adhere to a separate policy handbook developed by the board of Higher Education. HR works with union representatives to ensure consistent application of the policies across campus. HR also consults within the system to discuss best practices. Grievance policies and procedures are clearly outlined in each of the CBAs.

The president and executive team review the organizational structure and staffing annually. Conversations with the executive team indicate that HR and Finance review staffing and open positions bi-weekly. The organization has been clear with employees that furloughs or layoffs will not be used to solve the financial challenges the campus is experiencing. Instead, attrition is used to reduce staffing and compensation expense by not filling vacancies. While this succeeds in reducing the number of employees and related expenses, it is not always strategic and may create an imbalance of resources across departments. HR also reviews job descriptions prior to filling positions and takes the opportunity to determine whether the responsibilities are accurate and necessary to further the mission of the department and institution. Employees noted that HR and campus leaders do not effectively communicate changes in staffing that are occurring at a swift pace, which creates frustration for remaining employees and for students.

During the visit, employees expressed concern about the lack of a strategic plan to set priorities. This impacts the ability for employees to understand whether they are collaborating on the right projects and executing their job responsibilities as expected. Evaluations for employees are governed by requirements in the CBAs and are similar for NUPs. HR said that improvements are needed for consistent application of the evaluation process, although employees that spoke during an open session stated that they had received appropriate



feedback and reviews. On-boarding is another area that HR continues to develop, and employees echoed the need for improvement during an open faculty and staff session.

Compensation is mainly driven by parameters, grade levels and compensation review from the state. Compensation is often lower than levels offered by private institutions and industry, but the college emphasizes the benefits package to potential candidates. The state sometimes adapts the process and accelerates job steps to address challenges the college faces with recruiting employees in certain positions (e.g., electricians; police officers). This is a necessary step that assists in maintaining staffing in critical positions.

Administrators, faculty, and staff access professional development in many ways and on a wide variety of topics. MCLA has sent senior leaders to the Executive Leadership Institute sponsored by the Massachusetts State University Council of Presidents. This opportunity prepares them for executive positions through a year-long transformational leadership program. Faculty receive professional development funding through the CBA and can also apply for a Faculty Incentive Award to fund sabbaticals, research, etc. Faculty have access to a robust menu of training programs via the Center for Teaching and Learning in several modalities, along with specific training for the library staff. The Center for Teaching and Learning sponsors the Faculty Learning Community (a one-year development program with monthly meetings and activities) and a mentor program. The college also provides tuition reimbursement benefits.

The college is currently struggling in its efforts to develop a more diverse workforce. One challenge is the lack of diversity (87% white alone/non-Hispanic or Latino) represented in the local community. During several meetings, employees identified issues with access to buildings and the ability to travel across campus as an equity concern. The inability to access the second floor of the gym once the dining hall is closed was mentioned. Employees also noted that walkways are not always cleared, entrance ramps are not available, and elevators are often under repair or do not exist.

The college is currently in the process of filling the vacant role of Chief Diversity Officer. The position will report to the provost rather than the president. This is a critical role needed by the institution. The Director of DEI has a deep understanding of best practices and a coherent plan to advance DEI across the organization and the college will benefit by continuing to include the Office of DEI in planning and strategy.

**Financial Resources:** MCLA is one of nine institutions of higher education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The college hired a new Vice President for Administration and Finance in July 2021. The VPAF brings 28 years of higher education experience. He brings experience engaging with the state on matters of appropriations and capital and repairs funding. The VPAF leads a division that includes a staff of five in Administration and Finance with tenure at the college ranging from five to over twenty years and with experience and education in Accounting, Finance, Purchasing and other finance functions. The Chief Information Officer and Interim Director of Facilities also report to the VPAF.

The institution is currently financially stable with cash and cash equivalents and short-term investments of \$19.8 million as of June 30, 2023. Finance has transferred cash from accounts earning minimal returns to investment accounts earning rates of 4.5%. All cash is held by financial institutions and is fully insured. MCLA has \$91.5 million in capital assets (net). The college indicates in its self-study that these assets are not available for liquidation, but it is not clear why. MCLA prepares audited financial statements that adhere to the appropriate accounting standards and received an unqualified opinion from its financial auditors for all years presented. These audited financial statements were reviewed and accepted first by the Board Financial Affairs Committee and also by the Board of Trustees. The MCLA Internal Control Guide provides sufficient support for policies and procedures.

By virtue of its position as a state public institution, MCLA's two main revenue sources are the annual state appropriation (\$20.6 million in FY23) and tuition and fees (\$14.0 million in FY23), representing 76% of total revenue. The remaining revenue sources include grants, contracts and other. State appropriations have continued to increase since FY2019, and Tuition and Fees have continued to decline in the same period due to declining student enrollment. State appropriations are finalized each year in April for the following year. Although they are determined on an annual basis, there seems to be a low risk of losing this source of funding.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the institution was able to sustain a positive operating margin by applying one-time federal funding via three rounds of Higher Education Emergency Relief Funds established in the CARES Act, CRRSAA, and ARPA programs. As of June 30, 2023, the college spent all the HEERF funding it was granted. Because these one-time funds were applied against recurring expenses, MCLA was faced with an operating deficit of approximately \$4 million when it began preparations for its FY24 Budget. The college cut \$1.2 million in vacant positions and increased its Campus Support Fee by 3%. In addition, the Board of Trustees allowed the college to operate at a deficit this year and use \$2.6 million of reserve funding. The VPFA stated that the college needs to pursue additional grant funding to continue to close the budget gap in anticipation of higher future enrollment, although grant funding is often short-term and may not address structural deficits.

MCLA does not have a multi-year financial plan required by NECHE, first requested in 2013 and then again in 2018. The college relies only on an annual budget that is reviewed and approved by the Board of Trustees in March prior to the budget year. The college experienced challenges with software purchased for reporting and financial planning. The Finance team currently uses spreadsheets that are uploaded to OneDrive and accessible to all departments for completion and then uploaded to Great Plans accounting system for analysis. The Comptroller also prepares quarterly forecasts (including YTD Actuals) that are provided to the Fiscal Affairs Committee and the Board. The Board and College are not able to effectively plan beyond one year, nor are they able to share financial goals that are needed for enrollment management, financial aid strategies and other revenue and expense drivers used by departments across campus. A lack of a multi-year plan also hinders MCLA from determining future institutional viability. The lack of a multi-year plan doesn't allow management to determine the impact of internal shifts or macro level events, such as free community college, the demographic cliff, and

economic conditions. Other colleges within the state system adhere to this requirement, even with the same timing of information received from the state.

The college was successful in stabilizing enrollment this year with a current matriculated enrollment for Fall 2023 of 933 students. Executive leadership believes that the ideal enrollment for the college is 1,500, with 1,200 needed to break even.

Financial aid is a critical component of attracting the right students for MCLA and achieving enrollment goals. The state provides a significant amount of need-based aid to in-state students. As a result, the financial aid budget reflects institutional need-based aid that is directed primarily to out-of-state students of approximately \$600,000 and the remaining \$1.3 million for merit-based aid. Finance provides the budget for financial aid but is not involved in any financial aid strategy with Student Financial Services and Enrollment Management. Institution Research provides significant additional data and support. There is an opportunity for the departments to work collaboratively to develop the appropriate financial aid strategy.

**Library:** MCLA has just recently invested in renovations to the Freel Library that provided welcoming and inclusive space for all campus constituents. In 2019, the library used Title III funding to reconceive the main floor as a Learning Commons Environment to provide attractive, flexible study space. Students are positive about space, services, and information available. However, library hours have been significantly reduced (evening hours and closure on Saturdays) due to budget constraints, which limits accessibility for all users. The library staff continues to support students in many ways. The library's subscription ebook, journal, and video collections are all available on the library's website. The staff is clearly focused on priorities and future needs that support students, such as diversity within collections, digital resources, and accessible textbook reserves.

**Physical Plant and Facilities:** Other renovations to building space and infrastructure have also been completed. MCLA has a complex facilities structure where most academic buildings are owned by the college, the three residence building are owned by the Massachusetts State College Building Association, some neighboring offices and department buildings are leased from and owned by the MCLA Foundation and additional off-campus properties are leased for labs and classrooms. The state engaged a consultant (Canon FOS) to conduct a facility condition assessment for all state-owned buildings, including those on the MCLA campus. Canon reviewed 12 of the 33 non-residential buildings on campus and identified over \$53 million in priority projects broken into three buckets of prioritization: \$7.1 million that are currently critical, \$15.7 million that are potentially critical and \$30.6 million that are necessary but not yet critical. This will assist the campus in evaluating its facilities in a period of declining enrollment. The authority to engage in renovations and deferred maintenance projects follows the ownership of the building and is currently focused on infrastructure. The Interim Director of Facilities stated that all facilities are constructed and maintained in accordance with legal requirements. There is an energy manager in the facilities department, but there does not appear to be a focus on environmental sustainability across campus.

**Information Technology:** The Chief Information Officer is responsible for ensuring that technology is available to further the strategic goals of MCLA and that the technology and data are secure. The CIO has been at MCLA for many years and understands the needs of staff and faculty. The IT department includes the Computer Help Desk (88 hours per week providing support via various modalities), Media Services (classroom technology and support), Administrative Services and Networks, Telecom, Systems and Web Services. The college is in the process of replacing the current telecom system with Teams technology to provide enhanced and consistent services and financial benefits. In 2018, budgeting for IT became more strategic and less reactive by implementing a 4-year replacement lifecycle on all end-user computer devices. The college implemented multi-factor authentication in addition to existing malware protection. During COVID, the team was able to provide every classroom with equipment and technology to support on-line learning and the classrooms still maintain what is necessary for hybrid learning.

### **Standard 8: Educational Effectiveness**

MCLA places a strong emphasis on fostering student success through mission-aligned learning outcomes. There is a robust culture of assessment of student success at the departmental level led by the Director of Assessment who supports assessment processes and partners with other offices across the university including Institutional Research, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Academic Technology, and Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), to collect and deliver assessment resources. Department chairs or their designees are responsible for ensuring programs follow the seven-year program review cycle that provides departments an opportunity for holistic and periodic review of offerings. Due to the pandemic, some programs were unable to maintain the seven-year review cycle. Recent program review reports indicate departments incorporate recommendations of previous program reviews and develop action plans based on the self-studies.

MCLA ensures that all assessment plans are firmly rooted in its assessment cycle. This cycle encompasses the establishment of outcomes, curriculum mapping, instructional planning, assessment of Student Learning Outcomes, and reflective practice. The university is actively engaged in fostering a more inclusive and just assessment culture through its participation in the Racial Equity and Justice Institute. Typically, the department chair collaborates with the Director of Assessment to craft SLOs, which faculty members are strongly encouraged to integrate into their course-level SLOs. Each program is obligated to submit an assessment report, focusing on one SLO per semester. While MCLA adheres to the Liberal Education and America's Promise essential learning outcomes at the institutional level, there is a growing interest in developing more localized SLOs.

Almost all academic programs have learning outcomes posted on the program website. Learning outcomes and requirements for each undergraduate degree program have been published and are easy to understand. However, learning outcomes for some concentrations and minors are not published on the website. There's a need for additional effort at the

graduate level. For graduate programs, MCLA's website describes the learning goals and requirements for the MBA program, and the MED program is a work in progress.

As evidenced in recent program review reports and highlighted in on-site interviews, adhering to a thorough review process yields valuable information. This process involves incorporating feedback from external reviewers, such as the Mathematics Action Plan, and establishing connections to the budgeting process, as seen in Chemistry's identification of the need for additional tenure track faculty. Not all minors and concentrations undergo assessment. Moreover, there is a challenge in differentiating the mastery of learning outcomes by students within specific programs.

As outlined in the self-study, MCLA diligently collects, analyzes, and publishes an extensive array of institutional student success metrics. These metrics cover progression, retention, transfer, graduation, default, and loan repayment rates, as well as licensure passage rates for professional programs. Default and loan repayment rates are not readily accessible. MCLA goes a step further by collecting data on student retention and graduation rates, breaking down the information by demographic factors. According to the Factbook, first-year retention has shown some variability, ranging from a high of 78.8 percent (Fall 2015 cohort) to a low of 62.9 percent (Fall 2020 cohort). Six-year graduation rates have fluctuated between 51.7 percent and 61.3 percent.

In 2021, a noteworthy 91% of first-time, full-time MCLA students had either graduated within eight years of entry or remained enrolled. This outperformed the 81% reported for students at national peer institutions. Additionally, MCLA has identified a concerning trend of attainment gaps in graduation rates among historically marginalized student groups. To tackle this issue, the institution has initiated various measures discussed in detail earlier.

The five-year average (2016–2021) passage rate of MCLA students on the Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure is 88%, which is close to the state rate (92%). Nearly 300 MCLA graduates have received a teacher's license from 2016 to 2021. MCLA radiologic technology students' passage rate was 100% on the first attempt in 2022 on the AART. MCLA's five-year average passage rate on the first attempt is 90%, significantly higher than the national benchmark of 75%. Over the past five years, all MCLA graduates of the radiologic technology program who actively sought employment were employed.

MCLA tracks NSSE student engagement data annually. Based on the 2022 NSSE snapshot, perceived gains range from 87 % (thinking critically and analytically) to 51 % (being informed and active citizen). Students perceive that they have developed significantly in the areas of communicating (including cross-culturally) and critical thinking, while areas of challenges exist in quantitative and analytical areas. Academic emphasis responses for MCLA students seems to be significantly lower compared to COPLAC institutions. As a response to the question "How much did students say their institution emphasizes spending significant time studying and on academic work?", 56 % of MCLA first-year students responded "Very much" or "Quite a bit" as compared to 78 % from COPLAC students. A few students conveyed to the visiting team a

desire for more robust academic rigor. Similarly, 56 % of MCLA students indicated they would “definitely” or “probably” attend the institution again whereas 80 % of COPLAC students indicated the same in the 2022 NSSE snapshot. MCLA administers other student satisfaction surveys periodically and uses the results for improvements. For example, Ruffalo Noel Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory was administered in spring of 2019 and several steps were taken, including all vice presidents holding regular office hours starting fall of 2019.

The University administered campus climate surveys in 2022. A significant number of students reported a lower level of belonging. This led the university to take several steps including, holding the first Racial Equity Summit, creating Department Chair Faculty Learning Community, and hiring a person to conduct qualitative research to understand differences in “sense of belonging” between the people of color and their white counterparts.

MCLA assesses college writing periodically. In 2018 faculty chose to assess students’ ability to summarize effectively and ethically, paraphrase, quote, and cite published sources. Faculty evaluated a sample of student work and identified 65.5% of students as proficient or very proficient, with 23% performing adequately. In 2019, quantitative literacy outcomes were addressed and then evaluated using a student self-assessment survey created by the Director of Assessment. Most students either agreed or strongly agreed that after the research project unit, they were better able to engage in the research process. In 2021, students’ ability to revise and edit written communication across multiple drafts was assessed. Faculty reported that most of the students they assessed ended the semester with the ability to give and draw from feedback, as well as to revise and edit, at a proficient or advanced level.

Overall, MCLA puts serious emphasis on educational effectiveness by collecting quantitative and qualitative data about student learning and engagement and incorporates the results for future planning and implementation.

### **Standard 9: Integrity, Transparency and Public Disclosure**

**Integrity:** As the Commonwealth’s public liberal arts college, the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) provides access to the fundamental components of a liberal arts education: small class sizes, a focus on critical thinking, problem solving and integrative learning, and a living-learning environment built around a predominantly residential campus. Throughout the self-study and in digital and print representations, the institution adheres to the ethical standards as expected by NECHE in its dealings with students, faculty and staff and with the public at large.

As a member of the state university system, MCLA must adhere to laws governing Massachusetts state universities, federal laws, and many specific federal requirements such as FERPA and Clery Act reporting. The College displays a commitment to operating in compliance with these laws, regulations and policies, and devotes resources and staff across multiple areas to ensuring same.

A broad range of policies, both institutional and those required by the Board of Higher Education/Department of Higher Education, are in effect and can be found either on the website, within the catalog, within the Student Handbook (Community Standards) and within the collective bargaining agreements; some of the same information is available on the internal institutional portal. MCLA affirms its commitment to academic freedom within relevant bargaining agreements, catalogs and handbooks. The MSCA agreement is an example of this and includes intellectual property for faculty. For students, this is evidenced within the Core curriculum through the engagement in courses and ideas outside their area of study. Students have access to a diverse array of classes and non-classroom academic experiences. The Community Standards outline student-related policies and the student conduct process; all student-related policies are equitably applied to students. Academic programs conduct reviews every seven years and assessment is a part of their review. Some internal units, such as Residence Life, have conducted reviews, and the NSSE, a campus climate survey and other student-focused surveys are conducted to gain additional insight into the effectiveness of certain policies and procedures.

All College employees must acknowledge receipt of a summary of the Commonwealth's conflict of interest law and must complete an online training program offered by the State Ethics Commission every other year. Faculty must disclose to the State Ethics Commission the use of any instructional materials in which they have a financial interest. Certain public employees and their immediate family members are required to disclose private business associations and other financial interests via a Statement of Financial Interest under the state's financial disclosure law.

MCLA's Board of Trustees act as fiduciary on behalf of the government of Massachusetts, ensuring integrity at the institutional level. Various Board committees play a critical role in ensuring that full and open discussion occurs related to the budget and any audits, faculty appointments and progression to tenure, academic programming, enrollment and other major pieces of the operations of the institution. In fact, employees mentioned that they utilize Board meetings to learn more about initiatives at MCLA.

Faculty, staff and students are expected to commit to integrity and ethical behavior, and comprehensive policy statements appear in the Course Catalog, Community Standards, the HR website and within the main college website. A Director of Title IX provides training for students and staff and ensures that all students complete an online training, provides specialized trainings for groups like athletes, and provides leadership training for senior leadership and the Board of Trustees.

Non-discrimination policies are available via the College website and an annual email to students via the Community Standards. The Community Standards are shared annually with all students at the beginning of the fall semester and are also addressed within the First Year Experience program. Search committees receive guidance from the Chief Diversity Officer on ensuring equitable practices in the hiring process. An Equal Opportunity, Diversity and Affirmative Action Plan for all state universities provides policies and descriptions for non-

discrimination and diversity including but not limited to Title IX and affirmative action hiring procedures. The collective bargaining agreement spells out the process for all faculty personnel actions, including the review and promotion of full-time and part-time faculty and librarians. The CBA outlines clear documentation at all stages of the process and enables evaluation with integrity, permitting constructive feedback. Workshops are held each year (jointly by the Faculty Association and Academic Affairs), promoting clarity and understanding of processes and procedures connected to personnel actions.

Discussed earlier, a campus climate survey and several focus groups have been conducted to explore inclusion and belonging on campus. A campus REJI team is discussing how to address the results and, as an example, discussions are already under way about how to specifically support men of color through mentoring. The Center for Teaching and Learning is working with academic units to conduct equity audits with a focus on 100- and 200-level courses. Individual divisions and departments such as Student Affairs, are building their own REJI action plans which will serve as models for others in the institution. This is an area where filling the Chief Diversity Officer position becomes critical to ensure continued momentum.

MCLA complies with all state and federal laws pertaining to research integrity which includes IRB procedures and animal care and use (Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee - IACUC). These policies are available and clear and training is available.

Grievance reporting and resolution channels are available to all campus constituencies. The Community Standards describe the grievance policy for undergraduate students, who can report to any dean, and degree completion and graduate students can file an online complaint form which is available during student onboarding, on the DGCE website and emailed to students each term. Each collective bargaining agreement details the grievance policies and procedures for employees. In speaking with students, although they are aware of the existence of grievance policies, they are not aware of the channel for a grievance.

Policies are shaped by ethical guidelines and are reviewed by the governance system of the institution, institutional leadership or through legal consultation. Academic policies, including academic integrity and course information policies, and information about senior staff are posted on the website. Appropriate policies are included on course syllabi. Policies on academic honesty and integrity define academic dishonesty, describe the reporting and sanctioning process, and lay out the appeal process. Academic dishonesty is also included within the student conduct policy. These are repeated on the website, in the course catalog and in the Community Standards. These policies are evaluated and assessed periodically to ensure continued integrity and ongoing appropriateness.

**Transparency:** The College's website is the primary source of information for members of the campus community, the general public and prospective students. The website and other sources include information necessary for current and prospective students to make informed decisions about their education, including but not limited to the academic catalog, graduate program descriptions, institutional mission statement and values, requirements and procedures



for admission, information about academic programs, and a list of faculty. Academic policies are located within the College's internal SharePoint system, the Academic Affairs section of the website and relevant catalogs. DGCE complies with institutional policies and the same policies are in place for undergraduate and graduate students. DGCE is currently developing a catalog that will include all policies and procedures; this is making its way through the MCLA governance process. Average loan debt for students who receive degrees should be publicly available, but the team was unable to locate it other than within the data first forms. The website also includes information about employment opportunities at the college.

MCLA's Board of Trustees, as the College's governing body, demonstrates integrity and transparency through conducting regular public meetings, notice of which are posted on the website in compliance with state open meeting laws. Members of the public are encouraged to attend as observers, and local and campus press are often in attendance. Minutes of these meetings are posted after the meeting.

Internal governance committees make their meeting agendas, notices and minutes available on SharePoint, accessible to any member of the campus community with computing credentials. Press releases and additional information about important campus events are also posted on the website.

Internal communication was mentioned throughout the self-study and in many meetings as a gap. With numerous new people in new positions and changing roles and responsibilities, the campus community feels and seems uninformed; more importantly, an open, transparent and accessible mode of communication with the campus community is critical and central to effectiveness.

MCLA complies with all public records laws and responds to requests in a timely manner. The front page of the website provides the ability to request information for prospective students. While general inquiries can be directed to the Office of Communications and Marketing, a member of the public would not be able to discover this. The same is true for freedom of access/public records requests which are directed to the President's office. Audited financial statements including the independent auditor's report for both the College and the MCLA Foundation (back to 2011) are clearly displayed on the Administration and Finance section of the MCLA website.

Print and digital communications representing the College are consistent with catalog content and are updated regularly. Most publications are in electronic form only (the Academic Catalog and the Admissions Viewbook as examples). The College has archived copies of catalogs as far back as the 1970-71 academic year. The College requires press releases to be issued by the Office of Communications and Marketing to ensure uniformity. The Webmaster in IT (who recently left the institution) handles webpage changes associated with updates, templates and coding. Newly approved curricular items are made available online, and individual academic and administrative offices can edit the content of their own web pages, allowing for more currency of information. An issue noted by the team is that individual departments don't

necessarily have the training needed to do these updates. Admissions coordinates with academic units annually to update program sheets to ensure an accurate reflection of the current conditions and opportunities of a given program.

In order to ensure accurate “claims of excellence and alumni success,” MCLA maintains a rigorous program assessment process that creates demonstrable records of learning and provides evidence of the caliber of the learning experience. Data on educational effectiveness is reported publicly to federal, state and regional authorities. The annual President’s Report includes information about faculty achievements. The Office of Institutional Advancement, which includes the Alumni Office, maintains alumni records, including information on graduate employment and job placement.

**Public Disclosure:** The undergraduate catalog clearly describes the institution consistent with its mission. The information specific to mission and values, the campus diversity statement, outcomes, affiliations, academic and student related policies, tuition and fees and refund policies, student conduct, appeals and complaints, academic programs and their learning outcomes, courses, other educational opportunities and requirements for degrees can be found within the academic catalog and on the website. Lists of continuing faculty, senior members of the administration and members of the Board of Trustees are included in the catalog. Much of this information is duplicated in both the catalog and the website.

The Factbook, available through Institutional Research, is a valuable additional resource and is available on the website but is difficult to locate. It provides a wealth of information about the size and characteristics of the student body, admissions, overall enrollment (undergraduate and graduate) and retention and graduation. MCLA might want to consider providing a link to the Factbook within the “About MCLA” page on the campus website as an additional approach to providing more complete information from a public disclosure perspective.

The Registrar’s Office publishes undergraduate and graduate course offerings for each upcoming semester. Courses which have not been offered for two consecutive years and will not be offered in the third consecutive year are not listed. Lists of these courses are provided to department chairs each year for review. Students did mention that some courses are offered on a rotating basis so may not be available every year, necessitating close coordination with advising to ensure timely degree completion.

Admissions, in collaboration with Communications and Marketing, publishes an annual viewbook (available for the last two years only online) that provides information on academic programs, cost of attendance, financial aid and student outcomes. The Office of Student Financial Services annually updates its web page and publications to reflect and clarify cost of attendance, financial aid, scholarship opportunities and refunds. The Dean of Students maintains and publishes the Community Standards and compiles the annual Clery Report. All of these publications are also available on the website.

As a public institution, MCLA regularly reports information on student achievement and institutional performance to state and federal agencies. The Commonwealth's Performance Measurement Reporting System tracks key metrics across public higher education institutions, including access and affordability, student success and completion, workplace alignment and development and fiscal stewardship. The College Navigator is a dashboard that draws down data from IPEDS to present student expenses, financial aid, enrollment, admissions, retention and graduation rates and other items relevant to demonstrating to the public MCLA's value to the community. The Office of Institutional Research provides links to both from its web page, and also provides the Student Right-to-Know report. Information related to licensure can be found on the appropriate program's website.

MCLA requires all faculty and staff to make clear their relationship to the College when interacting with students, prospective students, or members of the public; for example, all digital communication must be conducted using a MCLA email address. Employees are encouraged to use signature blocks within their campus email accounts to include information specific to their role at the College.

For MCLA, transparency and public disclosure go hand in hand, and the use of their website and multiple other sources of information ensures that this is provided with integrity. MCLA's website has a significant amount of information covering every part of the organization, meeting the various requirements of this standard. However, as was stated in the self-study and experienced on-site, navigating the website is beyond challenging. Its design is focused on the needs of prospective students only. Numerous clicks are needed to locate much of the information, and the search function is not facile. Also, while one can find the information either on the website, the catalog or in other publicly available sources, MCLA should consider one location that contains all the expected information from a public disclosure perspective. Students, faculty and staff commented on the website and mentioned the issues with navigation and sometimes dated information; as a result, they rely on their campus portal for information (which means that the campus portal has to replicate much of the same information). Last updated in 2020, MCLA should consider a refresh of the website, especially in light of its importance in recruiting and retention, and in recognition of its critical role in informing the public about MCLA.

### ***Affirmation of Compliance***

To document the institution's compliance with Federal regulations relating to Title IV, the team reviewed Massachusetts College of Liberal Art's Affirmation of Compliance form signed by the president. MCLA's transfer policies and transfer agreements, discussed in this self-study, are featured on the institution's website.

Grievance reporting and processes for resolution are available to all members of the campus community. Grievance procedures for students are outlined in the handbook, "MCLA Community Standards."

MCLA uses a variety of methods to verify student identity in its online courses, giving each student a unique identifier and PIN. Recently the campus has added multi-factor authentication for additional security. Students in online courses use their MCLA credentials to log into Canvas for course delivery.

Public notification of the evaluation visit and of the opportunity for public comment was made by the College one month prior to the visit in the Berkshire Eagle and on Berkshire.com.

Title IV compliance, as discussed throughout this report, is primarily documented on the institution's website and also other documents of the institution.

### **Summary**

Massachusetts College of Liberal arts used the self-study as an engaging opportunity (more than 70 participated) to reflect on its mission and direction. The accreditation process overall will be used to guide a comprehensive planning process that will commence in short order. MCLA is still contending with the effects of the pandemic and demographic changes, which have caused enrollment and financial challenges.

MCLA completed the implementation of its core curriculum in a manner that was collaborative and engaged the campus community. Two other reporting requirements from the 2018 interim report and NECHE response were derailed by the pandemic and leadership changes: addressing enrollment issues and a multi-year financial plan. The institution is now in a place to take these on.

The campus did an effective job of articulating themes that run through the self-study: equity, diversity and inclusion, communication, enrollment concerns and finances. MCLA raised these themes as both pain points across all standards and top priorities for the institution to address. The visit confirmed the prevalence of these themes in the work of MCLA. The college is ready to move beyond the grip of the pandemic to address its challenges head on and to build, as one staff member put it, "a new version of MCLA."

## Strengths

1. The new core curriculum was implemented in Fall 2021, thus fully addressing one of the three areas of emphasis in the 2018 interim report. During the site visit, the team learned that the process for developing the new core was faculty-driven, collaborative, and highly successful—one person called it a “rejuvenating” process. Faculty reported a great deal of administrative support for their work. The team commends the new core’s emphasis on integrative learning and diversity and inclusion across the curriculum.
2. A new and creative first-year experience program, designed to provide more intentional support and coaching for first-year students, supports student success.
3. MCLA has a strong program review process. The program self-study is a rigorous and comprehensive system for assessment of academic programs. A clear rubric is designed for consistent evaluation of the program review. Faculty expressed that the self-study process is an effective tool for documenting their needs to the administration. Overall, the program review process is well done and leads to continuous improvement for the departments. Robust processes are in place for the assessment of student learning outcomes and external program review, including active use of both qualitative and quantitative information.
4. Enrollment has stabilized for Fall 2023, with increases in the key areas of full-time, first-year students and transfer enrollment.
5. The Board of Trustees is currently engaging in an internal process for self-appraisal. The Board of Trustees also has a clear sense of MCLA’s mission. The board characterizes the mission as an engine of regional workforce development combined with a state and national public liberal arts mission. The liberal arts core fundamentally undergirds all MCLA majors, both professional programs and traditional liberal arts programs. This is something the board articulates clearly and supports passionately.
6. The process through which the foundation has developed the comprehensive campaign is an institutional strength. The potential areas for funding were vetted both internally and externally to determine potential donor interest and projected funding models. The silent phase of the campaign has been successful with the potential to go public soon.
7. Collaboration seems to be a hallmark of how work is accomplished at MCLA and seems to be a positive indicator of the potential for MCLA moving forward. Engaged staff are committed to the success of the institution and aligned to major initiatives. Faculty work hard to deliver the best programs possible. Their engagement in the governance process, program review process, ongoing assessment is a testament to their dedication to their students and the success of the institution.
8. The library provides a welcoming and inclusive space, including a recently renovated area with much-needed space for commuter students. The staff is clearly focused on priorities and future needs that support the students, such as diversity within collections, digital resources and accessible textbook reserves.

9. MCLA identified several areas of revenue enhancement, including men's and women's ice hockey. New academic programs, including Radiology Technology and Nursing, were primarily funded through grants and not institutional funds.

## **Concerns**

### **1. Integrated Planning Processes**

The pandemic and leadership transitions contributed to a delay in planning, including a multi-year financial plan (first requested in 2013 and again in 2018), enrollment goals and plan (requested in the 2018 interim report) and a strategic plan (which expired in 2022). This gives MCLA an opportunity to engage in integrated comprehensive planning in which each plan informs the other.

### **2. Diversity Equity and Inclusion/Accessibility**

The evaluation team observed that MCLA has great pride and great frustration in its efforts to promote equity and inclusion on campus. The campus demonstrates a commitment to DEI and an understanding of the need to employ strategies addressing community, inclusion and belonging for employees and students. Recruitment and retention of students of color and other minoritized students remains an issue for MCLA, as does campus climate. The institution also has significant work to be done to meet the goal of a vibrant diverse faculty and staff. Additionally, issues of accessibility were brought to the team's attention in several campus meetings.

### **3. Communication**

With numerous people in new positions and changing roles and responsibilities, the campus community reports general unawareness of various changes regarding job responsibilities and organizational flow; more importantly, with serious enrollment and financial issues needing collective and creative problem solving, an open, transparent and accessible mode of communication to the campus community becomes critical and central to effectiveness.

### **4. Website**

Transparency and public disclosure go hand in hand. MCLA's website has a significant amount of information covering every part of the organization, meeting the various requirements. However, as was stated in the self-study and reinforced by faculty and staff, navigating the website is beyond challenging. Its design was focused on the needs of prospective students as opposed to other populations. Numerous clicks are needed to locate much of the information, and the search function is not facile. Given its importance in recruiting and retention, and in recognition of the critical role the website plays in internal communication and informing the public about MCLA, addressing the many issues of the website will be important.