Report to the
Faculty, Administration, Trustees, Students
of
Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts
by
An Evaluation Team representing the
New England Association of Schools and Colleges
Prepared after study of the institution’s self-study report
and a visit to the campus on September 28-October 1, 2003

The Members of the Team:
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This report represents the views of the evaluation team as interpreted by the Chair; it goes directly to the institution before being considered by the Association. It is a confidential document prepared as an educational service for the benefit of the institution. All comments in the report are made in good faith, in an effort to assist Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. This report is based solely on an educational evaluation of the institution, and of the manner in which it appears to be carrying out its educational objectives.
Date when instruction began:

1894

Year of first graduating class:

1899

President/CEO:

Dr. Mary K. Grant

Chief Academic Officer:

Dr. Stephen A. Green (Interim)

Chair of the Board of Trustees:

Eugene W. Leibowitz, M.D.
INTRODUCTION

Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts was founded in 1894 as North Adams Normal School. In 1932 it became the State Teachers College at North Adams and was authorized to offer a four-year program leading to the Bachelor of Science degree in Education; graduate courses for the Master of Education degree were added in 1937. When the teachers college became North Adams State College in 1960, it was authorized to grant degrees in liberal arts and professional fields. Like many state colleges and universities, North Adams State grew rapidly in the 1960s, from 800 to more than 2000 students. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, physical facilities were also greatly expanded.

In 1992, the College adopted a new mission statement, clearly establishing its identity as a public liberal arts college. This process of change and redefinition culminated in 1997, when the Massachusetts legislature formally designated the institution as the state’s public liberal arts college and changed its name to Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. In 1999 the College was admitted to the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC). Currently, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts serves 1458 undergraduates (1308.7 FTE) and 354 graduate students (158.4 FTE).

Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts submitted a comprehensive self-study document, addressing in order each of the New England Association’s standards. The self-study process involved all segments of the College community, and, by all accounts, was marked by openness and widespread participation over a period of more than two years. The self-study document, edited and revised by the former Vice President for Academic Affairs (who resigned a month before the arrival of the visiting team) and a senior faculty member, is clearly written. In the opinion of the team, it accurately and honestly represents the condition of the College. Occasionally, however, it would have been helpful to supply more detailed annual data in tabular form in the body of the document, as, for example, in the discussion of the crucial issue of student persistence (Standard IV, p. 13), especially since such data was not readily available in an appendix or current data profile. During our visit to campus, from September 28 to October 1, 2003, we met with the senior administration of the College, the academic department chairs, significant numbers of faculty, professional staff, and students, and a majority of the Trustees. We found these members of the MCLA community to be forthcoming, honest, thoughtful, and engaged. Their insights and observations helped bring the College into clearer focus for us, and we are grateful to them.

Accreditation visits are two-fold processes. On the one hand, visiting teams play the role of judges or surveyors. In this light, we have measured Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts against the eleven major standards of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges; on the basis of those standards we have made careful judgments about institutional effectiveness and concluded that the College meets those standards in most respects. On the other hand, team members are also on campus as friends and colleagues,
seeking to help a sister institution to improve and develop its potential. In the following report, we make many suggestions and articulate several concerns in order to assist MCLA as it grapples with a challenging situation and seeks to chart its course for the future. We trust that our suggestions will be taken in that spirit, and hasten to point out that our recommendations are offered in the spirit of helpfulness and not as panaceas or detailed prescriptions for action. We expect the institution to exercise its own judgment, and we note that the NEASC policies permit extensive opportunities to respond to this report.

I. MISSION AND PURPOSES

This is the central standard from which everything else related to the institution flows. In the case of the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, Standard One is especially important, as the institutional self-study makes abundantly clear. The ten-year period covered by this evaluation has seen the articulation of a new mission, increased selectivity in the student body, and new programs, followed in 1997 by a change of name. In many ways, as the self-study points out, the central issue for Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts is “to integrate the mission fully into the culture of the College,” to continue to explore, define, and implement what it means to be a public liberal arts college. Though each succeeding standard has a different focus, we shall be looking at the issue of implementing this mission throughout the team report.

Standard One requires: (1) that the institution have a mission that is appropriate and defines its distinctive character; (2) that its mission and purposes are set forth in a concise statement; (3) that they are accepted and widely understood by trustees, faculty, and administrators; and (4) that the mission is periodically reviewed. Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts meets these requirements.

Massachusetts College’s mission is not only appropriate to the institution but also important and inspiring; it has entailed risks in the past several years, but it is ultimately valuable. The College’s mission is set forth clearly and prominently in the catalog and other major documents; it is widely understood by trustees, faculty, and administration; and it has been reviewed regularly in the past ten years.

Strengths

- The mission is itself a strength because it defines a distinctive niche for MCLA in Massachusetts public higher education. There is general commitment to the mission on the part of students, faculty, and trustees. As is often the case in an intellectual community, however, there is not universal agreement on the precise definition of the public liberal arts mission. At the same time, commitment to such a mission by its very nature also involves the process of exploring and more clearly defining that mission.
• A particular strength is the Trustees’ understanding of, and enthusiasm for, the College’s mission.

Concerns

From the major strength of the mission come three concerns:

• A high quality liberal education involves looking at the whole range of human knowledge. Becoming a successful liberal arts college entails the obligation to maintain programs or courses in a critical mass of fields from the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences in the curriculum; and the further obligation to see undergraduate education steadily and whole—avoiding intellectual silos or overspecialization and integrating the various ways in which the education and development of students as whole human beings occur. Because of its small enrollment and reduced funding, MCLA’s curricular and developmental resources are stretched thin and the institution must carefully shepherd those resources to maintain a full liberal arts program.

• In revising its mission, changing its name, and becoming a public liberal arts college, Massachusetts College was initially allowed to decrease enrollment without a reduction in funding under the Board of Higher Education’s budget distribution system, but it is by no means clear at this point that all the needed resources for the College’s unique mission have been provided; nor is it clear that the Massachusetts State Colleges system administration or the BHE fully understand and actively support this special mission.

• In a culture of pragmatism—John Dewey was born to the north of MCLA in Vermont and William James taught and lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts—and in an environment of public higher education that often stresses vocational education, a liberal arts mission must be clearly articulated and forcefully advocated. This is always true, but especially true in the particular situation of Massachusetts College.

Suggestion: Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts should continue to articulate and advocate for its public liberal arts mission, realizing that its mission is a distinctive strength rather than an institutional characteristic that must be explained away or apologized for. In other words, play to the College’s strengths.

Recommendation: As part of its planning process, MCLA should develop strategies specifically designed to advance its public liberal arts mission and explore ways to secure targeted funding for this distinctive mission from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

II. PLANNING AND EVALUATION

Since adopting its new mission in 1992, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts has undertaken a series of strategic planning activities, with formal reports generated in 1993,
1998, 2001, and 2002. The last of these reports was overtaken by events—the hiring of a new president, the departure of a chief academic officer, financial emergencies, and the necessity of undertaking a comprehensive Self-Study for re-accreditation. Having completed its Self-Study, MCLA is now poised to embark upon a new round of planning under the guidance of energetic and committed leaders, both in the President’s office and on the Board of Trustees. They are committed to institutionalizing a new strategic planning cycle that will dovetail with the five-year rhythm of accreditation Self-Studies and mid-term reports to NEASC.

Since her appointment, the new president has held a series of open campus forums and has met with the faculty and staff in every department. Despite painful budget cuts, campus morale is generally good. These facts bode well for the upcoming planning cycle, which will undoubtedly require many difficult decisions.

In the past, strategic planning has been undertaken by a college committee, some of whose members have been appointed by the President, others by the All-College Committee. This has insured participation by a variety of faculty, staff, students, and administrators. Other planning has been carried out by a variety of taskforces, whose recommendations are then acted upon through the formal governance structure, or by particular administrative offices. While planning activities have tended to be somewhat compartmentalized, the current leadership is committed to a more integrated process that includes all segments of the institution.

In addition to a Strategic Planning process, MCLA engages annually in the completion of a Mission Implementation Plan, which must be submitted to the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education. The Board is also implementing new performance measurement standards, which will enable them to compare institutions of higher education across Massachusetts. It is not clear how useful these standards will be for campus-specific planning or assessment. In any event, MCLA will definitely need to develop its own sets of measurements of institutional effectiveness in order to make a compelling case for the value of its mission and the need for further investment from the state. This process will undoubtedly require support from Institutional Research—an office that was created in 1993, but now faces increasing challenges in supplying data for planning activities, routine decision-making, and external reporting.

There are many signs that MCLA is making substantial progress toward its goal of “becoming a public liberal arts college of distinction.” Unfortunately, however, evaluations of institutional effectiveness have not been systematic or based upon measures of student learning outcomes. Assessment activities, especially in the academic area, have fluctuated between periods of markedly greater and lesser activity. Turnover in the VPAA office has not helped in this regard. In addition, the College has not implemented a practice of regular academic program review, except in a few cases where this has been externally mandated.

Despite the lack of systematic assessment, the College has engaged in several important data-gathering activities. For example, the Campus Life Experience Survey has enabled the Student Services area to gauge both student satisfaction and the effectiveness of
Student Affairs programming. Various national instruments, such as the CIRP and NSSE surveys, have been utilized and have permitted the institution to engage in comparative benchmarking, for example with other schools who are members of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges. This has permitted MCLA to identify potential areas of concern. However, follow-up has been inconsistent, again perhaps because of turnover in the VPAA office.

Several other challenges remain. Among them is a need to broaden assessment activities so that all operational areas of the College are periodically reviewed. A second is the need to invest in faculty development in the area of assessment. Finally, MCLA needs to develop procedures for evaluating the effectiveness of its planning and evaluation activities on an ongoing basis.

**Strengths**

- MCLA’s administrative leadership and trustees have recently made strategic planning an institutional priority and are determined to institute a five-year planning cycle that takes advantage of the current NEASC self-study.
- Evaluation and assessment activities appear to be relatively well developed in the Student Affairs area. The focus has begun to extend beyond measurements of student satisfaction to include assessments of program effectiveness.

**Concerns**

- Academic program reviews have only been undertaken when externally mandated.
- The campus lacks a broad-based culture of assessment. There does not appear to be an administrative champion with appropriate resources to support learning outcomes assessment and enhance institutional capacity in this area. Solving this problem will require greater stability in the office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, targeted investments in faculty development, and presidential leadership.
- Data from the National Survey of Student Engagement, which have been cited as a cause for some concern, were discussed at a widely attended campus meeting, but there apparently has been little formal follow-up.
- The measures of institutional effectiveness typically cited by campus leaders (development of the Core, a common reading program, increases in the number of applicants who have made MCLA their first or second choice, increases in matriculants’ SAT scores, faculty accomplishments, etc.), while important, do not include rigorous assessments of student learning outcomes or alumni success beyond anecdotal information.
- Major initiatives that are integral to the College mission, such as the now suspended First-Year Seminars and the Core Curriculum, appear to have been launched without a clear determination of resource implications and, as a result, have been difficult to
sustain. These visions are often exciting; however, they need to be supported by realistic implementation plans.

• The Office of Institutional Research appears to be overwhelmed with external reporting requirements. Combined with limited staffing and the limitations imposed by legacy data systems, this has made it difficult to keep up with basic information dissemination (there is no current institutional data profile available, for example) and information generation for planning. The I.R. office has not had a direct relationship to the Strategic Planning Committee. It has supported some academic programs, such as the First Year Seminar program and since 2001 the Core Curriculum, with data gathering and analysis.

• Because of budget cuts and financial uncertainties, MCLA has too often remained in a reactive mode. As a result, the College’s ability to allocate resources on the basis of a strategic plan has been limited. There is a need for a more firmly grounded planning process that clearly sets institutional priorities, both in the context of the college’s mission and on the basis of a hard-nosed analysis of current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. While the “Projection” sections of MCLA’s Self-Study identify important needs and hopes, taken together they do not add up to a realistic agenda for the next planning cycle.

Suggestions

• MCLA needs to establish formal criteria or measures of institutional effectiveness independent of the Performance Measurement Standards of the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education. These should reflect the institution’s distinctive mission and should become “dashboard indicators” for campus leadership and the Board of Trustees.

• In order to promote assessment beyond the Core and to foster a sense of commonality across arts and sciences and pre-professional programs, MCLA faculty should attempt to reach a common understanding of what they mean by a liberally educated person or well-prepared college graduate. What skills and dispositions, for example, might be articulated as learning objectives in all major programs?

• MCLA needs to explore means to engage faculty and staff in a culture of assessment. Professional development and institutional support in this area are critically needed. Most importantly, the College needs to begin to construct processes for the assessment of student learning outcomes. Goals and objectives for academic programs need to be clarified. Attention should also be given to assessing the effectiveness of academic support services such as Admissions, Records, Library, etc.

• MCLA participated in the pilot administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in 1999 and has participated annually since then. The College should make greater use of the NSSE data, however, to promote a rich conversation among faculty, staff, and students. It is essential that these data inform ongoing conversations about curricular reform and about possible collaboration between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. In addition, MCLA should make sure procedures are in place to insure a high response rate, in order to assess the reliability of the data already collected.
Recommendations

- MCLA should establish without delay policies and a cycle for formal academic program review. Simultaneously, departments—e.g., through annual reports—should be encouraged to discuss what their own strengths and areas of concern are and, to the greatest extent possible, link these to an evidentiary base. This ground-up approach will enable faculty to build on valuable but sometimes embedded assessment activities that already exist but have not yet been formalized. It should also permit the institution to begin to cultivate a culture of assessment while avoiding the imposition of standardized assessment expectations from above. The latter approach may lead to compliance, but it is unlikely to produce over time a genuine commitment to assessment.
  - Follow through on plans to create a five-year strategic planning cycle, insuring that this planning is data driven, realistic, and connected to a web of interrelated planning initiatives—e.g., campus master plan, comprehensive academic plan, enrollment management plan, etc.
  - Develop processes to “close the loop” by clearly connecting the results of assessment and evaluation to the planning process and to resource allocations.
  - Finally, develop approaches for assessing the effectiveness of its planning and evaluation activities.

III. ORGANIZATION AND GOVERNANCE

The organization and governance of the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) are adequate to accomplish its mission. Lines of authority and responsibility are clarified in terms of labor and management through four different contracts negotiated at the system level for faculty; professional administrators; and clerical, maintenance and public safety staff. The full-time faculty contract stipulates four governance committees, including the umbrella All College Committee, through which issues related to curriculum, academic policy and student affairs are considered. Faculty, administrators and students are represented on these committees.

The formal governance structure provides faculty with substantial voice in matters related to academic programs and policy. The governance structure provides some flexibility to create ad hoc task forces to focus on strategic issues such as retention and the core curriculum. Some expressed concerns about the need for the College to create governance structures in addition to those prescribed by the Agreement to more effectively address local needs and priorities. Department Chairs expressed the desire to be more fully engaged as an academic advisory and planning group. Students report having a strong voice in College affairs, including ample representation on governance committees and frequent opportunities to interact with the President and other administrators. The Student Government Association is active, and members report that the administration is responsive to their issues.
Beyond the four contracts, the institution lacks standard documentation related to roles, responsibilities, policy and practice. The Student Handbook clarifies student policies and responsibilities, but the College does not maintain handbooks for faculty or staff. There is no policy manual; there is no personnel manual. New employee orientation and ongoing professional development are not fully developed as regular institutional activities. The College has established by-laws regarding the composition, functions and duties of the Board of Trustees.

The MCLA Board of Trustees is deeply committed to the College and its mission. The Trustees represent strong support from across sectors, including business and private higher education. They understand the distinction between their role in policy and support and the administration’s role in management and implementation. The Board conducts its work through four standing committees and ongoing communication with key constituents. The Board has not established performance indicators upon which to evaluate its own effectiveness or to monitor institutional effectiveness. The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education is in the process of establishing statewide performance indicators. Across the Massachusetts system of public higher education there has been concern expressed by local boards regarding the shift of the Board of Higher Education from coordinating to regulating activity. The MCLA board shares this concern. In any event, there appears to be significant tension at this time in Massachusetts between state and local roles and responsibilities in public higher education.

The new President of MCLA enjoys broad support from faculty, staff, students, Trustees and the North Adams community. In her first year at MCLA, she has demonstrated a high degree of responsiveness to the needs of faculty, staff and students. Most report that campus climate and morale have improved during her brief tenure, including management-labor relations. She is working to strengthen relations as well between the College and the Legislature and the Board of Higher Education. She recognizes the centrality of aligning policies, structures and practice with the revised mission and College priorities.

MCLA is organized into four divisions: academic affairs, enrollment and external relations, administration and finance, and student affairs. The executive leadership team has suffered from considerable turnover, particularly in the area of academic affairs, where the College reports having three vice presidents and five interim vice presidencies since changing its mission in 1992. An interim Vice President was named just prior to the NEASC visit, but it should be noted that he is an experienced hand, having served twice before in the interim role. Under the terms of the faculty contract, the Dean of Academic Affairs position rotates every two years. Faculty and staff expressed concerns about the lack of integration across divisions, for example, to better connect in-class and out-of-class learning and to align business practices with the needs of students. There was significant concern about the lack of integration between academic and student affairs in particular. Additionally, several faculty members and administrators expressed concerns about the organizational (and academic) effectiveness of many small academic departments.
It is unclear whether the existing organizational structures, while currently adequate, will best serve the College as it attempts to fully implement the new mission, strengthen its market position and create a culture of evaluation. The College has not evaluated the effectiveness of its systems of organization and governance. The President is exploring different organizational structures, including the recent creation of a new vice president position in enrollment management and external affairs that will enable a long-term enrollment management strategy and will provide greater emphasis on creating new continuing education programming. The College is just beginning to consider organizing to provide distance learning options and has only recently integrated administrative computing and network management.

**Strengths**

- A deeply committed Board of Trustees that is appropriately focused on mission implementation and fundraising.
- An energetic, talented and highly regarded new President who recognizes strengths and weaknesses, is responsive to a broad range of constituents and is committed to institutional effectiveness.
- A general willingness to participate in governance committees and task forces.
- A governance structure that provides a key role for faculty in ensuring academic integrity and allows for the creation of ad hoc task forces and planning committees.

**Concerns**

- Academic and administrative structures that have operated largely in silos during the period of the report, while successful implementation of the mission will require campus-wide commitment and the participation of all College employees.
- Tensions between the State Board of Higher Education and local boards of trustees.
- Lack of formal organization to conduct college-wide planning and assessment.
- Lack of formal organizational structures to provide ongoing professional development for all employees to support the mission through in-class and out-of-class experiences.
- Lack of standard documents to communicate policies and procedures.
- Lack of understanding of how governance committees function, particularly as related to bringing issues to the Student Affairs Committee.

**Suggestions**

- Continue to investigate ways better to utilize the Department Chairs as an advisory and academic leadership structure.
- Assess the effectiveness of existing organizational structures in relation to mission
and strategic priorities.
• Continue Board and Presidential focus on improved communications and relations with key constituents, both external and internal.
• Make further use of the Graduation Education Council, which (commendably) has been recently reconvened.

Recommendations

• Develop organizational structures that are fully integrated across divisions to sustain ongoing college-wide planning and evaluation.
• Develop and maintain faculty, staff, personnel and policy manuals.

IV. PROGRAMS AND INSTRUCTION

After controversies about fundamental change in institutional mission and the speed with which a new college name was adopted, the vast majority of faculty and staff now seem solidly if not enthusiastically supportive of the current vision for the institution. Many report that because of confidence in President Grant’s leadership style and capacity, optimism about the future—even in times of demonstrable austerity—is at unprecedented levels.

MCLA is blessed with dedicated, hard-working faculty and wonderful students, a large percentage of whom enthusiastically report satisfaction with their educational experience. Faculty morale is good in spite of an unsupportive climate for higher education at the state level and bleak prospects for funding.

Faculty retirements coupled with state budget cuts have negatively affected areas of the curriculum in an almost random way, posing tremendous challenges to the academic departments. Under these circumstances, the must diligently avoid the temptation to over-market popular but thinly resourced concentrations. Catalog course listings for certain disciplines that have lost faculty are now unrealistic and, hence, misleading. As noted above, MCLA does not routinely review its academic programs. Absent such reviews, institutional attitudes about the number of low-enrolled programs that can be maintained seem unrealistic.

The College falls far short of meeting contemporary expectations for student learning outcomes assessment. Efforts undertaken in the mid- to late-1990s resulted in near-annual submission of program assessment reports, but many of these lacked depth. MCLA is commended for the fact that all programs publish educational objectives in the college catalog. Learning outcomes have been established for the Core. College-wide surveys potentially provide important reflections of student opinions as well as indications
of what they do in the course of their education. But interviews revealed that few knew much about these data and in no case had they led to institutional improvement efforts.

Most academic programs have identified quite appropriate educational objectives, but some have adopted objectives that are both too few and too generic, while others have committed to achieving as many as a dozen detailed objectives—probably more than any modestly supported department could be expected to accomplish.

Assessment procedures developed in this same 1995-2000 time frame also need review and suggest that the College should support extensive professional development to help faculty understand current “best practices” in discipline-based program assessment. Responsible program assessment must become an important institutional priority for both faculty and administrators.

Interviews with students suggest that many courses require students to engage in significant degrees of analysis and reflection, and are suitably challenging. Though most courses are rigorous, the team concluded that some academic programs expect too little library work of their students. Certainly, drastic reductions in the library acquisition budget have had a seriously negative effect on information resources. Book purchases have all but stopped in the past year. Hard-copy serials have been cut from approximately 500 subscriptions to 90, though improved electronic database subscriptions have substantially offset this reduction. These deficiencies in library support may increasingly discourage library-friendly faculty from requiring students to make appropriate use of information resources and, continuously unaddressed, will jeopardize the College’s ability to fulfill its public liberal arts college mission. But even in the meantime, some faculty should raise their expectations for student library assignments.

MCLA has invested a great deal of faculty energy and time in the development of an admirable new Core Curriculum. This program, based on interdisciplinary courses divided into three “tiers,” requires instructors to adopt substantially new approaches and can, over time, become a source of distinctive identity for the College. Regrettably, this innovation has occurred at the expense of the First-Year Seminar program—generally regarded as quite valuable by most with whom we spoke—and has drained human resources that might otherwise be devoted to equally important matters such as student outcomes assessment.

The new curriculum also reduced the visibility of disciplines unknown to or not particularly popular with entering new students. These disciplines were previously able to recruit most of their majors through introductory courses that were part of the former general education requirements. A proposal developed as a result of a 2003 summer study committee calls for subtle but significant changes that may alleviate this problem. Some professional programs feel “hidden” or have felt underappreciated following the shift to a high-profile liberal arts mission.

With investment of limited resources, MCLA has developed a sizeable graduate program in Education. The Education Department and its chair are to be commended for
investing in the development of offerings that undoubtedly meet many needs of regional schools and their educators. These programs also provide much needed revenue for the College. It is important that the College consider the special library information needs generated by graduate programming.

As reported in the self-study, a number of faculty members engage in research and discipline-appropriate scholarship. In light of its public liberal arts college mission, the College should attempt to ascertain the level of faculty scholarly productivity that prevails at MCLA’s new cohort group of similar institutions (the COPLAC schools) and, if need be, seek ways to support College faculty in attaining comparable levels.

Student interviews revealed that many faculty members have long embraced or recently adopted active, learner-centered pedagogies. Further support for faculty development focused on instructional approaches will allow the College both in substance and in process to stand proudly among the select group of public liberal arts colleges.

Admissions trends suggest that the prospective students, parents, and guidance counselors of MCLA’s primary and secondary recruiting areas appear to be gaining a clearer understanding of the new mission of the institution. While some new students are drawn to the liberal arts focus of the College, many are drawn to the location or size of the College and/or specific programs it offers. Nevertheless, a growing percentage seems more at home within the newly defined mission. Faculty members report that the vast majority of students are qualified for and motivated to pursue the kind of education that MCLA is choosing to emphasize. A program providing additional support for high-need students who meet federal Student Support Services criteria permits these students to succeed at essentially the same rate as regularly admitted students.

The College has engaged in efforts to increase retention in the period of the review, establishing an advising office and surveying students who withdraw, for example. Given its desire to increase enrollments to 1700, however, these efforts need to be redoubled and fully coordinated. While data on retention and graduation rates are available, a surprising percentage of administrators and faculty do not know what they are, and they are not regularly focused on. Both first-year retention rates and six-year graduation rates have improved recently, yet they remain relatively low.

**Strengths**

- Dedicated, qualified, hard-working faculty, who appreciate MCLA’s students.
- Strong faculty and staff support for the mission of the College.
- Wonderful students appreciative of the College’s current mission and climate.
- An ambitious, innovative Core Curriculum.
- Successful, relevant educational leadership program strongly supported by full-time Education Department faculty.
Concerns

• Limited progress in establishing a system of student learning outcomes assessment.
• Critical resource needs, especially for library acquisitions and faculty positions in under-supported curricular areas.
• Lack of academic planning.
• No coordinated college-wide plan to increase retention for regular students.
• Low levels of awareness throughout the College of data on retention and graduation rates.
• Enrollment levels that may not be sufficient to maintain critical mass of academic programs that characterize a strong and vibrant public liberal arts college.

Recommendations

• Immediately commit to ongoing, systematic, college-wide outcomes assessment and begin process of educating the campus and its faculty regarding best practices in this regard.
• Seek new revenue—for library acquisitions, faculty-student research, and other resources likely to benefit academic quality—through lobbying, solicitation of private funds, and alternative funding sources such as those available through continuing education and graduate programming.
• Develop academic plan for curricular expansion if new resources are available and curricular contraction should resources continue to decline.
• Exercise caution in the development of new programs, including concentrations, to ensure adequate resources and high quality.
• Continue to consider the role of professional programs in the context of a public liberal arts college, exploring ways to strengthen the linkages between professional education and liberal learning and to market the College’s programs in light of its mission.

V. FACULTY

The 84 full-time members of the faculty at MCLA are at the heart of the institution. They are well qualified to fulfill the mission of the College. Six of every seven faculty hold terminal degrees in their respective fields; all of the faculty appointed since the previous self-study hold doctorates or appropriate terminal degrees in their disciplines. The level of professional preparation and experience of the entire faculty is certainly appropriate to the level of instruction they provide. Some 31 part-time faculty, including a small cohort of retirees who have continued to teach in their respective departments, teach 45 courses that cannot be staffed by full time faculty. These part-timers are also well qualified for the instruction they offer. They offer courses for undergraduates, graduate students (in Education), and continuing education.
Salaries, benefits and workload are contractual matters regulated by collective bargaining between the faculty, through their representatives, and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Board of Higher Education. Evaluation of faculty for tenure and promotion occurs through the academic departments, a College Committee on Promotion, individual Tenure Committees, and administrative review. Grievance procedures are appropriate and are similarly specified by contract.

Faculty retirements in recent years, along with reductions in state funding, have eroded the number of full time faculty by approximately 20 percent since the last NEASC review. Some disciplines have suffered serious attrition. Most notably, mathematics and modern languages are in particular need of faculty to teach in their programs. At the same time, the College has been able to develop several new programs—the Fine and Performing Arts and the new Core program, for example—despite the staffing shortages of recent years. Indeed, the retirement of long-serving faculty represents an opportunity to appoint a cohort of new faculty dedicated to the new mission and versatile in terms of curriculum, even if the number of new faculty is as little as 20 percent of those who retire.

The College offers several professional development opportunities for faculty. While funding for professional development has not kept pace with perceived need, some funds exist for travel to conferences, equipment and materials, and other aspects of professional growth. The initiation of a process of self-improvement grounded in a culture of inquiry and assessment may similarly serve the end of faculty development by offering evidence of what students have learned and hence how faculty can enhance curricular and pedagogical performance.

Strengths

• A well-qualified faculty, thoroughly prepared in their academic disciplines and experienced in teaching. Faculty members are committed to a balance between teaching and research which, while weighted heavily toward the former, frequently links the two as a seamless endeavor.

• Commitment of the faculty to their students individually and collectively, and to the institution. They accept the combination of substantial teaching loads (12 credits per term), the rigors of ongoing scholarly enterprise, responsibility for advising students (an average of 17 students per term), and the considerable amount of voluntary committee work in which they engage. Many refer to their work as a “calling.”

• A receptivity to the new mission of the College as a liberal arts institution, and a willingness to participate in the work of implementing the mission and its initial curricular formulation, the Core program now in its third year (and currently undergoing revision). While hardly unanimous in their enthusiasm for either the mission or the Core, faculty members have increasingly accepted them and are working to guarantee their success.

• A clear concern among senior faculty for mentoring and supporting junior colleagues. Department chairpersons have generally provided positive support for research
opportunities, equipment and materials, and other aids to professional growth. Above all, junior faculty are counseled and guided along their career tracks, leading to tenure and promotion.

- Faculty are optimistic about the future of the institution. This condition, as generally agreed, stems from the arrival of the new President. There is a sense that she understands faculty concerns and will advocate for their interests. Even in her second year in office, this confidence remains vibrant.

Concerns

- The decreasing number of full-time faculty has made it difficult to carry out the mission of the College. Staffing the Core courses has diverted many faculty from courses in their disciplines, causing difficulty for some students in obtaining courses in their majors. Course rotation cycles are longer, and faculty in some departments must offer courses by individualized arrangement to enable students to complete the major. The College needs additional support from the state so that it can fill much needed faculty positions.

- Distribution of faculty across departments is uneven, largely because positions lost (usually through attrition) have not been replaced. Mathematics has only two full-time faculty; modern languages only one. Decreased state funding in recent years (with further reductions on the horizon) is one culprit in this predicament. Low enrollments are another. Absence of a systematic faculty allocation plan has further exacerbated this circumstance.

- The process for recruitment of new faculty might be streamlined and enhanced. A six-page document details every step in the search process. However, lack of funds for advertising, especially in minority journals, and little money for candidate travel have limited the scope of searches. Over the past few years a number of searches were cancelled because of insufficient funding.

- Diversity of the faculty might be substantially enhanced. There are currently five faculty members of color among the full-time cohort. Faculty cite the location of the College as a prime deterrent to the appointment of more people of color. For an institution that seeks to prepare students for the world beyond its borders, however, increasing the numbers of international faculty as well as faculty of color may be a promising strategy.

- Tenure and promotion standards need to be more clearly articulated and consistently applied. The Collective Bargaining Agreement sets forth the categories relating to personnel actions -- teaching, scholarly/creative activity, and service. The relationship among these categories is, however, not explicit. Moreover, the level of rigor to fulfill these requirements can vary or be unevenly applied, perhaps because of shifting membership on departmental or college committees and by the varying interpretations of the several academic vice presidents over the past decade. What is evidence of successful teaching? How much and what kind of scholarship is appropriate? How is the quality of committee work to be assessed?
Suggestions

- Although the MCLA full-time faculty base is too small to warrant a full-scale Vacancy Allocation Protocol, it may be useful to have a more formal plan for projecting retirements and filling vacant lines in priority order.
- Developing and yearly updating a Faculty Handbook could go far to alleviate concerns related to the consistency and application of tenure and promotion standards (see below).
- It may be useful to explore the possibility of linking faculty development with aspects of the assessment process. As faculty members in their role as dedicated professionals assess the effectiveness of their teaching, ideally they create a culture of inquiry in which their own development as teachers and scholars is enhanced. Rather than being perceived as “checking up on” faculty, the inquiry process that constitutes assessment in its most valuable form can address the responsibility of faculty to guide their students in the learning experience. Given the student-centered focus of the College, such a process might significantly enhance faculty performance.

Recommendations

- Prepare a Faculty Handbook, within the parameters of the CBA, to be updated annually and distributed to all faculty. The Handbook would contain policies, procedures and guidelines for faculty in their various roles. It might include the relevant portions of the CBA; a protocol that sets out the importance of the various elements in relation to one another; assistance in the construction of syllabi; sample evaluation documents; recitation of the role of the various levels of the process, guidance in construction of a renewal, tenure or promotion file, and numerous other aids to faculty.

VI. STUDENT SERVICES

Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts offers a strong student affairs program consonant with the mission of the College and compliant with NEASC standards. Over the past decade as MCLA has evolved from a comprehensive state college to a liberal arts institution, student services have changed to reflect the new mission. The Division of Student Services comprises a number of units, sufficiently sized and staffed to provide the services and programs offered. Both professional and student staff members deliver the services listed in the various catalogs and other publications. Students are actively engaged in co-curricular programs that enhance the College’s liberal arts focus. The small size and residential nature of the campus allow it to provide a vibrant sense of community and student engagement. Students receive a great deal of individualized attention from faculty and staff, helping ensure that both academic and non-academic needs of students are met. This translates into a sense of close community according to the vast majority of students interviewed by team members. Advising and support services are available, and generally
appreciated by students. Some students reported confusion about curricular requirements, but these frustrations may be a product of the transition from the old general education curriculum to the new Core.

Student affairs staff are clearly committed to offering all programs and services in a manner that supports diversity. This is evidenced by the student affairs division’s funding and support for the ALANA/International programs, which includes able full-time staff. Diversity is also fostered by the intentionally heterogeneous manner in which students are housed on campus, ensuring that students from various backgrounds share their cultural heritage. Cultural diversity is encouraged, affirmed, and celebrated at MCLA. Another example of the College’s respect for diversity is the thoughtful and sensitive manner in which the change in mascot from the “Mohawks” to the “Trailblazers” was handled.

The visiting team noted regular efforts to assess and evaluate student satisfaction—and to a lesser degree learning outcomes—within the student services area. Surveys are regularly conducted, and the results are used by unit heads in evaluating programs and services and making changes as appropriate.

There is evidence to support the assertion that MCLA is providing an effective transition/orientation program for first year students. Throughout a student’s career at college, appropriate advising, career development, counseling and access to health and wellness services are available. Student records are well maintained and students’ right privacy adequately protected. The creation of a unified wellness center in 2001, bringing together health and counseling services and the offices of campus clergy, supports a well-conceived model of student development in a newly renovated facility that serves the needs of the whole human being.

The team found that MCLA provides and supports a variety of opportunities for student leadership and service learning. Ongoing “leadership series” sponsored by the division and by student government and an annual Leadership Conference provide additional chances for student participation. Students indicated awareness of these opportunities, and most students with whom we met believe that their voices are heard and they can have an impact on the governance of the College. Athletic programs, another area for leadership and engagement, are managed appropriately and in compliance with NCAA Division III and NEASC expectations. Over the past ten years, the College has changed its activities to keep pace with NCAA requirements relating to number of sports, Title IX, and fiscal necessity. Practice fields and athletic facilities present serious concerns, however. Practice facilities are inadequate and the playing fields are located a mile from campus. Further budget reductions would make it difficult to maintain the current ten varsity sports.

A three-year residency requirement for traditional undergraduates helps to keep upper-class students involved in the life of the campus. This requirement was in part a response to decreased enrollment, but the visiting team agrees with student affairs staff that it should be maintained when college enrollment returns to previous levels.
Strengths

• Students are actively engaged in co-curricular programs that enhance the College’s liberal arts focus.
• Students feel very connected both to the institution and to their fellow students, faculty and staff. Campus size and atmosphere provide affirmation for the intellectual and personal development of each student.
• Staff members are professional and passionate in their desire to serve students, in keeping with the “whole person” development model.
• Enthusiasm, commitment and openness to the liberal arts model are evident at all staffing levels.
• Staffing in student affairs is well aligned to deliver services effectively.

In particular, Student Affairs is commended for engaging in assessment, both of student satisfaction and (in part) of learning outcomes, for many years.

Concerns

• Careful scrutiny is required to ensure that eliminating (or not filling) positions because of budgetary constraints does not vitiate the College’s mission of “education for the whole person.” In addition, alternative methods of program delivery, such as computer-based education for alcohol infractions currently employed instead of filling the vacant ADEPT position, should be assessed for effectiveness.
• Planning for the construction of a new residential facility should occur before projected enrollment increases occur. This would affirm the importance of housing a high percentage of the student body of a liberal arts college on campus.
• Energetic planning is evident in many individual departments in student affairs, but more coordinated efforts as part of an all-college strategic plan would be even more effective.
• MCLA was once regarded as a model of integrating the curriculum and the co-curriculum. With the loss of the first-year seminar, it is important to continue to build and foster collaboration between academic and student affairs. A “holding pattern” seems to be in place. Programs that involve collaboration are in place (service learning, orientation, open-house sessions, and faculty advisors to student clubs), but a catalyst is required to revitalize this important liberal arts model.
• Secondary staffing levels are thin in some areas, potentially inhibiting expansion of services as new initiatives are explored.

Suggestions

• Further efforts should be made to use assessment results in division-wide program planning for student services, tied to the College’s mission and evolving strategic plan.
• A co-curricular transcript would help document and celebrate student learning outside
the classroom and help bridge the gap between student affairs/services and academic affairs.

• Continue to participate in, and make further use of, national benchmarking programs, such as EBI and those of CAS, NASPA, and ACUHO, which will provide valuable data for program improvement.

• Insure that student affairs professionals are fully engaged in the planning for integrated first-year experience seminars and programs.

VII. A.  LIBRARY

The Freel Library was built in 1970. Of the 26,000 square feet of usable space in the facility, the library operations occupy somewhat less than 20,000 feet. Several other functions are housed in the building including Learning Services, recently relocated because of the renovation of Murdock Hall. Storage space in the library is minimal. In addition, valuable archival and historical materials are housed in a damp and cluttered basement area. Shelf space throughout the library is crowded at best, but might be increased by significant weeding; and a 20-seat teaching lab specifically dedicated to bibliographic instruction would be a valuable addition to the library (though some bibliographic instruction now takes place in the Learning Services lab). On the positive side, the library roof has been recently replaced, helping reduce further damage to the building and its resources, and the open space on the second floor of the library is sunny, comfortable, and well used by students. The library is able to offer full program access under ADA requirements, though the elevator is in a remote area of the building.

As recently as Fiscal Year 2001, the MCLA collections were relatively strong. For the past three years, however, the library has been able to purchase very few books. These years without book purchases have severely limited the library’s ability to serve its constituents and created holes in the collection (e.g., materials on the September 11 attacks and Iraq war) that may never be filled. The State’s Educational Resource Material funds dedicated to state college library materials (approximately $220,000 for MCLA) have been entirely eliminated because state revenue shortfalls and apparent changes in policy. Graduate education resources are limited and also need attention.

In order to maintain subscriptions to essential databases, the College has reallocated funds to the library in this period. The $85,000 per year allocated for this purpose, however, is only half the minimum amount needed to maintain the collections. Though it is anticipated that the College will be able to find a similar sum this year, a return to the previous funding level is badly needed. Reductions in paper journal subscriptions from approximately 450, to 90, are another example of the impact of budget shortfalls. Fortunately, subscription to EBSCOHost has provided some excellent full-text online resources – available in the library and on campus desktop computers.
Staffing in the library is not adequate to manage the current resources or support the college curriculum appropriately. A vacant MLS librarian line should be filled with all due speed. As part of the library and academic strategic planning process, a study of library staffing needs in relation to the College’s should be initiated.

There is a general concern by the visiting team that even the resources maintained by the library staff are under used. It appears from comments from faculty, students and staff members that the library is not integrated into the current curriculum or planning for the new core. There is only modest evidence that students are expected to use the library. A strong library is essential to a liberal arts college, and at this point there is little indication that the library has been involved in the process of curriculum development.

The development of information literacy and library use among all students at MCLA is essential, but appears in only a number of limited areas, although it is done well in those instances. Staff limitations and loss of the traditional required College Writing course have exacerbated this trend. Plans to reinstate first year writing requirements are underway, and provide an opportunity to reintegrate library use instruction and information literacy development into the curriculum. It is the visiting team’s belief that a general lack of clarity about the role of the library is at the heart of the problem.

The Media Center provides support for all offices, departments and classrooms on campus. Media Services is seen as one of the excellent links to the faculty from the library. As with other areas, level of staffing is a concern.

The library supports a regional history and college archive collection. As mentioned above, part of this collection is in the damp basement area and needs to be moved to a better location. The possibility of an off-campus location for this collection is being investigated. Moving materials to such a location, perhaps in collaboration with the local historical society, would relieve the library of some space problems as well as better protect the materials, as suggested in a 2001 grant funded study.

Preparing a three-year strategic plan for the library closely tied to curricular and instructional planning is critical to the future of the library and the College’s liberal arts curriculum. The library director’s role in this process should be to champion the library and what it can do to support the liberal arts curriculum. To do this well, the library must more clearly articulate its role in MCLA’s distinctive brand of liberal arts education. It is not clear that this has been done.

Strengths

- The library staff members have done a commendable job managing the library under very difficult conditions, including providing access to licensed full-text databases to replace print journals.
- Even in difficult budget times, the College has made a decision to allocate scarce funds to the library.
Concerns

• Library space is limited and crowded.
• Funding for the collection is highly uncertain.
• Staffing in the library is not up to its full complement of funded positions.
• Library use by students appears to be relatively modest.
• Library instruction and development of information literacy skills among students are limited.
• The regional history collection needs more appropriate space.

Suggestions

• Increase shelf space by significant weeding of collections.
• Explore creating a 20-seat teaching lab specifically dedicated to library and information literacy instruction.
• Identify a single individual responsible for copyright and fair use education for faculty and staff members.
• A new climate controlled space, ideally not in the library, should be found for the historical collections.
• Investigate whether membership in another college library resource sharing consortium would benefit MCLA and its students more than its current affiliation with C/WMARS.

Recommendations

• Implement a library strategic planning process aligned with curricular and instructional planning as soon as possible.
• Ensure ways to sustain the library materials budgets. If last year’s $85,000 budget is roughly doubled, the library will be able to maintain its collection commitments at a minimum level. Ideally, the overall materials budget should return to previous levels (<$222,000), but this recommendation is dependent upon resource decisions not entirely under the control of the campus.
• Fill the funded MLS librarian line in the library as soon as possible.

VII. B. COMPUTING SERVICES

Computing at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts is divided into separate administrative and academic units: Administrative Computing and Computer Support Services. Together, they effectively collaborate to meet the needs of campus users.
While MCLA is probably the last Massachusetts state college still using VT220 terminals linked to the campus mainframe, the administrative support staff members do an exceptional job providing data management and timely, customized reporting from the mainframe to users. Despite their age, the limited use of VT220 terminals in certain areas allows quick access to the College’s mainframe for registration, programming, and system operation. They are used as a resource when “multi-tasking” or when internet access is not needed. Administrative Computing is to be commended for taking user needs seriously and developing priorities to respond promptly.

There is valid concern in the administrative computing area, however, that the current mainframe will last only a few more years in its current state. The last replacement drives had to be purchased, for example, as used parts because they are no longer made. Moving to a web environment will be necessary at some point and will require sizeable investment in new hardware and software systems. Some of these major investments will involve the acquisition of “enterprise” software such as Banner or PeopleSoft in order to increase functionality, as well as bring student and administrative data online for all users. To reduce costs, a shared or grant-funded collaborative arrangement with another college or colleges might be explored. It is nonetheless worth noting that, with the coaxing of Administrative Computing staff members, the current SCT +2000 software is doing its job.

The second division of computing at MCLA, Computer Support Services, brings together computing services for students, faculty and staff members. There are 103 1.7GB Pentium IV machines in public student labs and teaching classrooms. These are replaced every three years on average and are purchased with Tax Exempt Loan Programs from commercial lenders paid back in same timeframe. The lab and network equipment is purchased as part of the College’s general operating expenses. A “technology fee” is charged to residential students to cover the cost of the residence hall network, local phone service, and cable television. Faculty and staff have at least 300 MHz machines on their desks, and these are replaced with either newly purchased machines or hand-me-downs from campus labs. All new faculty members are issued new computers during their first semester on campus. The average age for faculty machines is about 2.5 years.

Routers, hubs, firewalls, traffic shapers and lines all seem to be in good order and well managed. New high capacity lines to the dormitories were installed over the summer, and the campus fileserver will be upgraded over semester break. Worthy of note is the new packet shaper and network manager the Director put in place to assure efficient functioning. It is apparent that he and his staff have worked effectively with the resources they have.

Seven multimedia classrooms, two lecture halls and three teaching labs have been created by Computer Support Services and serve the campus well. One video conferencing room in the library supports interactive courses in the Business Department and is available for general media use at other times. These courses utilize a state supported ATM network that has the capacity for handling more traffic.
As is the case in several MCLA departments, staffing is minimal in Computer Support Services. Certainly, as web functionality becomes the norm for employees and students, this department will need to become a priority for new funding and/or reallocation.

Approximately 30 faculty members are using a course management system or web sites to augment their in-person teaching, and interest is increasing. These activities could serve as a first step in the direction of taking MCLA courses to off-campus locations where niche or specialized demand exists. Again additional attention will be needed to expand this area.

The MCLA web presence is divided into two parts: the intranet managed by Computer Support Services and the external website contracted to a local company. Each department is expected to develop and maintain its own pages, but this decentralized model is not working well. (See Section X for further recommendations.) In any event, the external college web pages need to become a higher priority for marketing, image development, and information sharing; and, regular use and maintenance of departmental pages needs to become a more integral part of the MCLA culture, more fully supported by the College.

Finally, it is critical that all computing functions be integrated into departmental, and college strategic plans to anticipate future hardware and software replacement, enterprise system implementation, and network demands. Realistic and integrated planning and budgeting or reallocation to support core computing needs is essential if the College is to develop in the direction of its vision.

**Strengths**

- The leadership of both Administrative Computing and Computer Support Services are to be commended for their personal dedication and high standards of delivery and customer service.
- Student computing labs and teaching labs are in excellent condition.

**Concerns**

- The current student information system is mainframe-based; both it and the mainframe are coming to the end of their usefulness.
- Increasing functionality from the data systems, especially desktop access and manipulation, is not possible with the current system.
- The web pages need additional support and attention.
- Long-range planning is limited by staff and resources.
Suggestions

- The visiting team believes it would be useful to standardize campus software usage for faculty and staff members, along with e-mail tools, in order to make better use of limited support resources.

Recommendations

- Strategic planning for the computing functions at MCLA consistent with the College’s liberal arts mission is essential to the success of the College. Key elements should include prioritization of equipment purchases and support for conversion to a web-based environment.
- Immediate improvements in the coordination and staffing of web-page development at the campus level would greatly enhance the College’s image and communication, both internal and external.

VIII. PHYSICAL RESOURCES

MCLA’s physical resources include land, infrastructure, and buildings. Thirty-five acres on the main campus accommodate 11 buildings for administrative, academic, athletic, and student service functions; a 491-bed residential townhouse complex; a 216-bed traditional-style residence hall; and a 320-bed traditional-style high-rise residence hall. The College also owns 82 acres of athletic fields located approximately two miles from the main campus, as well as 32 acres of undeveloped land on Corinth Street approximately two miles from campus. The College manages and maintains, on behalf of the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management, an ice rink located within two miles of campus. Also, the MCLA Foundation recently acquired five residential properties on the perimeter of campus, which the College leases for use as the Office of Admissions, the Wellness Center, and for housing two academic departments. Other Foundation-owned land is leased for parking and green space. The residence hall complexes are owned by the Massachusetts State Building Authority.

Within the last ten years, an impressive number of renovations have taken place. In 1998 the College completed a major renovation of the dining and food service area, financed by a no-interest loan from the College’s food service company, Aramark. Other renovations include portions of the Campus Center, lounge space in Bowman Hall, the updating of twelve classrooms in Bowman Hall, a biology lab and new greenhouse in Venable Hall, the campus radio station and the campus television studio. A State-funded beautification project created additional green space and a College gateway. In FY2002, a comprehensive energy audit was conducted on campus, as a result of which a private firm was contracted to implement some $1.6 million in energy conservation initiatives. Several
ADA projects have also been completed to insure building accessibility for all students. As a result, the College now substantially meets ADA guidelines for program access.

No new construction has occurred on campus for over twenty-five years, but several renovation projects are anticipated in the next few years. Beginning in Spring 2004, a major renovation is scheduled for Murdock Hall that will result in state-of-the-art classrooms, new computer laboratories, faculty offices, conference rooms, and a reception area. Progress on the Murdock Hall renovation has been delayed because of the economic problems at the state level. Funding has been approved, but the release of the construction bond had not yet been authorized at the time of the site visit. Funding is adequate to improve the interior of the building, including fifty percent of the third floor. The College has listed completion of the third floor area as its only add-alternate. In addition, an architectural consulting firm has recently begun to study the feasibility of renovating the Campus Center. This study is being managed by the Massachusetts State College Building Authority.

The Massachusetts State Building Authority has substantially completed scheduled renovations of all three residence halls in the past 10 years, and student housing stock on campus is in generally good shape. The College completed an extensive telecommunications renovation in 1994, providing upgraded phone equipment, computer networking, and internet access for all areas, and television cable access in the residence halls. Since then, other cable upgrades and expansions of computer laboratories have also been accomplished.

Facilities are maintained in-house. The facilities and maintenance operation is centralized and provides service for all campus buildings, including residence halls. Custodial service is provided around-the-clock, and the Power Plant is staffed 24 hours a day. A Resident Engineer is shared with Berkshire and Greenfield Community Colleges. The facilities and maintenance area is significantly understaffed, often with only one employee in key areas (one electrician, one plumber, one tradesperson to handle heating calls) and in several critical areas (e.g. plumbing, electrical) is supplemented by outside contractors.

The College has not completed a facilities master plan since 1988. Physical resource planning is conducted through the college’s Strategic Planning Committee. Recommendations of this committee are forwarded to the President’s Cabinet for consideration during operating budget discussions. Individual departments may also submit new equipment requests and capital project proposals during the annual budget process. For residential facilities, the College submits an annual operating and capital projects budget to the Massachusetts College Building Authority. MCLA recently participated in a study of facilities at public colleges and universities, sponsored by the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education. Completed in November 2002, but not yet released, this study reveals a combined total of over $40 million in deferred maintenance, renovations, and upgrades at MCLA. When it is released, this study will provide an opportunity to make the case to the State for securing bond funding to address areas identified as in need of urgent attention.
State budgeting requirements call for the College to set aside 5% of its operating budget for capital improvements and deferred maintenance. The total amount of deferred maintenance other than renovations and upgrades totals approximately $5 million.

Strengths

- Despite limited resources, the College has been able to undertake an impressive number of renovations.
- The College has shown considerable creativity in converting the Campus Center pub to an expanded, modern main dining room through a no-interest loan from its food service vendor.
- Recognizing rising energy costs and the need to address energy efficiency, the College moved pro-actively to undertake an energy efficiency study, thus conserving funds at a time of rapidly rising costs.
- The College recognizes the importance of a modern and friendly Campus Center in the liberal arts experience, and is moving to renovate this building.
- The College has proactively addressed environmental issues. The EPA has been taking a tough stance on colleges, resulting in many cases in heavy fines for violations; the College has undertaken an EPA self-audit and is addressing the few issues it revealed.

Concerns

- Long-range facilities master planning has not been updated since 1988 and is overdue.
- With the exception of Bowman Hall, most labs, performance spaces, and academic space have not been upgraded in a decade or more, which could be detrimental to the mission if not addressed, particularly science labs and fine arts space.
- The Athletic fields and recreational space have problems with poor drainage, which frequently renders the playing fields unusable for practices or games, and the tennis courts are in poor condition. These problems should be addressed.
- The Campus Center is inadequate, which is of concern given its importance to the overall mission.
- The total amount of deferred maintenance outstanding remains of concern.
- The maintenance and security areas are understaffed. It will be particularly important to address this deficiency as more buildings are renovated and new buildings are acquired.
- The ice rink, which is actually owned by the state but managed by the College, is in poor condition, requires approximately $2 million in renovations, and is losing money.

Suggestions

- The Campus Center architectural study should be completed as soon as feasible.
- A plan for addressing the athletic and recreational space issues should be completed.
• A definite plan should be put in place to address the problems related to the operations of the ice rink so that they will not have a negative effect on College operations or resources. Since the College makes little or no direct use of the facility, it may be wise to find another entity to manage it.

Recommendations

• The College should update their facilities master plan, which would address outdated classroom, lab, and fine arts space. This master planning process should be linked to the strategic planning process, to ensure that the master plan supports the strategic plan and the College’s mission.

IX. FINANCIAL RESOURCES

MCLA’s long-term financial stability is uncertain. The College did not make significant advances in its fiscal situation during the favorable economic times of the 1990s. For six years, from FY 1996 through FY 2001, all Massachusetts State and Community Colleges were prohibited from raising fees by the Board of Higher Education. Enrollment for 2002 predictably is lower than it was in 1993 and state funding has not been adequate to meet the College’s needs. Over the past ten years, increases in state funding have typically been tied to collective bargaining for salary increases, while decreases in state funding have been tied to across-the-board cuts for public higher education in an effort to balance the state’s budget. Until FY 2003, State funding covered 100% of salaries (including all associated fringe benefits) as well as some utility costs. However, in FY 2003, the State appropriation was reduced to such a degree that it does not even cover all salaries, meaning that the university must fund not only those salaries, but the associated fringe benefits as well, from Trust Funds. The College’s ability to hire new or replacement faculty and staff has been severely strained. However, the College has been able to generate a limited degree of other revenue through such programs as the Evening and Graduate Division, Lifelong Learning, and the Office of Lifelong Learning at General Dynamics in Pittsfield, MA.

The College has appropriately emphasized its educational mission over non-academic pursuits. Approximately 58% of its Operating Expenses in the FY 2003 pro forma financial statement was spent on Instruction, Academic Support, and Student Services, consistent with spending in prior years and in comparative terms representing an admirable contribution to the academic enterprise.

However, while the spending emphasis is appropriately placed on instruction and related areas, it is not clear that the College’s financial resources will be able to sustain the mission in the future without some fundamental change in circumstances, particularly if the economy continues as it is. The institution has been able to respond to emergencies and
unforeseen circumstances to date, thanks to emergency State funding and, in some cases, use of reserves. However, these responses have been on a case-by-case basis, and reserves are low, though improving due to increases in fees in the last two fiscal years.

Fundraising has been very successful. The MCLA foundation is a separate 501(c)3 organization founded in 1978. The Foundation has been able to increase its assets from approximately $19,000 in FY92 to $5.8 million in FY00. The Foundation has provided the College with scholarships, programming, and expansion of the College’s physical resources; the College has leased several properties acquired by the Foundation since the last self-study, for such purposes as housing the Office of Admissions, the Wellness Center, and academic departments, as well as parking and green space. Fundraising operates under clear guidelines, and all gifts are directed toward the donor’s stated wishes. The Foundation’s financial statements are independently audited, and its endowment funds are managed by two outside investment firms.

The College’s long-term debt consists mainly of debt service costs assessed by the Massachusetts State Building Authority for existing housing facilities, as well as capital leases entered into to finance equipment and capital improvements. The debt service on the residence halls amounts to approximately $1.2 million per year. The capital lease amounts are modest, with a long-term balance of approximately $1.6 million at the end of FY 2003. In addition, in 1998 the College completed a major renovation of the dining and food service area, financed by a no-interest loan from the College’s food service company, Aramark. This note is payable in quarterly installments of $10,000 through FY 2008.

Auxiliary enterprises do not contribute significantly to the financial operations of the institution. Residence hall occupancy rates are projected to be at 82% of capacity in FY 2004, even with the three-year residency requirement and Berkshire Tower A off line. The Massachusetts State Building Authority sets housing fees, with significant input from the College. While residence hall operations have the potential of generating some funding, fees must be paid from these funds to the Authority each year for debt service related to the residence halls, based on 87% occupancy. Food service operations at the time of the visit had a positive fund balance, but a negative cash balance due to receivables.

The annual budget process has been simplified in recent years. Once the College ascertains all levels of funding, including the State appropriation, fee revenue, and other revenue (grants, conference expectations, and contracts), each department receives an allocation based on prior year spending adjusted for any new or one-time initiatives or requirements as derived from discussions with the departments; this budget is distributed into cost object codes. The administration maintains direct control over the budget on behalf of the Board of Trustees. However, academic departments have significant autonomy in deciding their highest priority budgetary needs. The College maintains written policy for substantially all fiscal policies.

The College’s finances are audited annually by an independent auditor. Over the past several years the College has received unqualified opinions, meaning that its financial statements present fairly, in all material respects, the financial position of MCLA. No
Management letter has been issued for the last two years due to a commendable lack of findings. In FY2002, the College adopted the provisions of the Governmental Accounting Standards Board Statement No. 34 and all related statements.

Strengths

• In spite of the difficult fiscal situation, the operations of the College have not only continued, but expanded, as the College has moved forward with its mission, its strategic plan, the implementation of the new Core Curriculum and new academic programs.
• The College is to be commended for devising innovative ways to stretch its dollars, such as the use of lease-purchase agreements to make major equipment purchases.
• The College places appropriate emphasis on academic spending. Approximately 58% of its Operating Expenses in FY03 were for Instruction, Academic Support, and Student Services.
• The Foundation has done an excellent job in fundraising, providing important support for the College.
• Grant funding has been generally successful.
• Thanks to increasing fees, the College is managing to put aside some limited reserves.

Concerns

• The financial situation of the College is challenging, with Current Liabilities again exceeding Current Assets, as they did in FY02 (although FY03 shows some improvement in the level of unrestricted net assets), and continued low levels of fund balances.
• Because of the county’s small population base, the College does not have a sizeable Continuing Education division, as several other State colleges do; this results in greater dependence on State funding.
• Given the resource-intensiveness of MCLA’s liberal arts mission, the recent pattern of inadequate and declining state support is troubling.
• A significant portion of the reserves the College is putting aside will be directed to fund accrued compensated absences. While it is advisable to project probable accrued compensated absences for a given year, in general the amount of accrued compensated absences shown on the financial statements is a cash charge, rather than a cash requirement.

Suggestions

• In the short term, the College should aggressively pursue other sources of funding (e.g., increased Graduate Continuing Education) that are less sensitive to the vagaries of the economy and State funding in order to shore up its fiscal position.
• A timely investment in increased grant writing capability would yield positive results.

**Recommendations**

• Engage in strategic planning that takes into consideration long-term solutions to funding issues, with the goal being to render the College less dependent on State funding, in ways that are consistent with the mission.
• Undertake a strategic analysis to determine the best use of additional reserves.

**X. PUBLIC DISCLOSURE**

The Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts generally meets all of the criteria for successful public disclosure. One specific action is recommended better to meet the requirements of the Clery Act (Campus Crime and Safety) for all institutions of higher education. Though crime and safety information is readily available, a “one-jump” link to the campus crime report on both front pages of the College’s website would be helpful to anyone interested in the access to this information. All future publications should also refer readers to this website link.

It appears that the community of Berkshire County has a good understanding of MCLA’s mission. The new president and her husband are commended for reaching out to all members of the community, especially to the business and political leadership. A great deal has been accomplished in one year.

College publications, some produced in-house and some outsourced, include the essential information for student and community readers. There are limitations, however, in what the College’s external website has been able to accomplish in marketing, image building and transmission of general information. Not all information on the website is up to date. More effective coordination of the College’s decentralized web development strategy is needed. All departments and administrative units on campus should receive support for creating and maintaining their web pages. Approving the draft publication style manual, provision of better software for the use of departmental staff in creating and updating web pages, as well as training for all staff are recommended to help the process along. Consideration should also be given to reinstating the college’s Image and Marketing Committee.

As noted in the Self-Study, course listings and courses in the catalog that have not been taught or offered as independent or directed study for five years should be clearly identified. This needs to be accomplished before the next catalog goes to press. The Information Release grid relating to FERPA regulations near the back of the catalog is a very useful tool.
Now that MCLA has firmly identified itself as a public liberal arts college, a more extensive discussion of the meaning of the new mission and how the institution prepares educated citizens should be included in the catalog.

The Student handbook seems to be complete and thorough. The College’s data profile, which needed to be updated at the time of the visit, should be made available on both websites.

**Strengths**

- The new president and her husband are commended for reaching out to all members of the community, especially to the business and political leadership.
- Print materials, such as the catalog, viewbook and other admissions materials, strongly present the new image of the College and have taken full account of MCLA’s new identity.

**Concerns**

- Public Safety information about the College is difficult to find.
- The College’s external web presence is limited, though apparently beginning to be effective in reaching prospective students.
- Out-of-date courses are listed with current ones in the catalog.

**Suggestions**

- Provide support so that all departments and administrative units on campus can effectively develop and maintain their web pages. Approval of the draft publication style manual, better software for departmental staff, and training would be helpful.
- Include a more extended discussion of MCLA’s liberal arts mission and definition of an educated person in the college catalog.
- A “one-jump” link to the campus crime report should be added to both College websites and all publications should point to this web address.
- The College’s Data Profile should be updated and made available on both websites.

**Recommendations**

- In the current competitive environment, the College should clearly commit to using its external college pages to provide information, market itself and communicate with all of its constituents. Information on the intranet website that is useful to college constituents should be included on the external site as well.
XI. INTEGRITY

Massachusetts College meets Standard Eleven. The institution subscribes to high ethical standards. It adheres to non-discriminatory policies. An open and affirming culture is evident. Despite fiscal constraints, solid efforts have been made to make policies, standards, expectations, and legal requirements available to the institution’s external and internal audiences. It is clear that members of the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts community take seriously their responsibility to act as custodians of honesty, integrity, and non-discrimination. Time spent with students and their publications (The Beacon) demonstrate that these values are part of the culture at MCLA. Interviews with all groups on campus were conducted in an open, honest fashion. The visiting team was impressed with the individual integrity demonstrated during our visit. It is clear that MCLA has the legal and legislative authority to fulfill its mission and to deliver all of the academic programs offered.

Strengths

• Students, faculty and staff value diversity and the individuality of each member of the campus community. Non-discrimination policies are clearly stated.
• Processes for resolving grievances appear to be well defined and utilized.
• Publications are readily available in written form and in some cases on the web.

Concerns

• As the self-study document indicates, a systematic review of academic policies across the campus has not taken place; a more comprehensive review would be helpful.
• Publications in the graduate studies area are not comprehensive.

CONCLUSION

In the period covered by this review, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts has taken bold steps to redefine its mission, change its name, and transform itself into a public liberal arts college of distinction. Although that transformation is not complete, the process is well under way. MCLA has sought, with some success, to improve the quality of its student body and to serve the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and surrounding states as a unique undergraduate institution—small in scale, intimate in tone, warm in atmosphere—
where campus community makes a difference. It has made significant progress toward its goals during an era when public institutions of higher education in Massachusetts have faced great challenges in funding and governance. Despite the uncertain and often tumultuous environment in which Massachusetts College finds itself, it was abundantly clear to the visiting team that MCLA brings major strengths to its task of educating citizens in the liberal arts tradition for the twenty-first century—an endeavor that is firmly grounded in the tradition of higher education carried out on its campus in North Adams for more than a century. Some of the greatest of these strengths include the following.

- Massachusetts College has a strong, clearly stated mission as a public liberal arts college, which is generally agreed upon by the College community and understood and supported by its Trustees. With a new name that expresses its mission and several years of experience in promoting it, MCLA has passed the “tipping-point” in realizing and capitalizing upon its new identity. Though the public liberal arts mission is not yet mature, it has been successfully implemented in many important ways in the past decade.
- MCLA is a student-centered institution, and it shows. Faculty, professional staff, administration, and clerical/classified staff throughout the College show a genuine commitment to students that is reflected in a student-centered instruction and concern for the welfare of students on the part of every employee, from the president to the staff who clean and maintain the residence halls. There is special energy and dynamism here.
- Massachusetts College has a strong student affairs operation, which is poised and eager for further integration into the liberal arts mission of the College, and committed to diversity and the intellectual and social development of all students.
- In these challenging times, MCLA is fortunate to have a new and well-regarded president—an alumna herself who is deeply appreciative of the College’s history, warmly committed to the institution, and willing to reach out into the political and civic community of the region and the state. President Grant’s open leadership style and enthusiasm themselves create an opportunity for new beginnings and forward progress on the path the College has set for itself.
- The faculty of MCLA are at the heart of the institution. Dedicated teachers and scholars committed to providing individual attention to their students, they have increasingly responded to the wider range of intellectual and professional challenges in a public liberal arts college setting, but they still remain willing to engage in curriculum reform and discussion that improves the community.
- MCLA is blessed with a remarkable Board of Trustees, deeply committed to the institution, who understand its mission and understand their role.
- As the College faces its next decade, its campus is itself a strength—with improved physical appearance, the right scale, and an excellent location. The renovations of Murdock Hall now under way will add to its appeal.

The visiting team was impressed with the strengths of Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. Plainly, MCLA has been able to do much to advance its mission in a challenging environment where resources have often been scarce. Over the three days of our campus visit, however, several concerns emerged as recurring themes that are reflected
in more than one chapter of this report. Many of these concerns relate to planning and assessment, and involve creating a culture of evidence in order to measure institutional effectiveness, gauge progress toward goals, and enhance the quality of the College’s educational processes and outcomes. We believe the following concerns need to be addressed thoughtfully and comprehensively by the college community if Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts is to reach its full potential as a public liberal arts college.

- Although Massachusetts College has clearly stated and promulgated its mission as a public liberal arts college, it still needs to do more to define the meaning of that mission in the experiences of its students, and it needs to integrate all aspects of its operations under the single rubric of a public liberal arts mission. It needs to eliminate silos, more fully integrate the work of academic affairs and student affairs, and take advantage of its small size and intimate scale to generate outstanding results in the education of its students.

- Massachusetts College needs to develop a culture of evidence that leads to informed decisions, that both documents and improves institutional effectiveness. During its visit, the accreditation team found many good things happening at MCLA, but the institution’s accomplishments and results need better documentation. The College needs to define the broad educational outcomes it seeks to achieve, assess them carefully, and use the results of this assessment to modify and improve its programs. Except in Student Affairs, where student satisfaction surveys are a promising beginning for program evaluation and improvement, assessment activity has not advanced very far. Though the College has gathered data through its participation in NSSE and CIRP and through local surveys, it needs to do much more to make use of this data (and gather further data) in a comprehensive process of assessment and improvement. The College needs to measure and demonstrate its effectiveness—especially in the teaching and learning process—far more rigorously and comprehensively.

- While planning activity has occurred in the past decade, MCLA is in need of better, more coherent planning processes. Current leadership is committed to such processes, and the self-study and review process provides a good opportunity to begin a comprehensive strategic planning process.

- With three vice-presidents and five interim vice-presidencies in academic affairs since 1992 (though, fortunately, the same highly respected senior faculty member has served in the interim post on three of the five occasions), administrative turn-over in academic affairs and elsewhere has had a negative effect on many areas of the College’s operations, ranging from the curriculum to faculty hiring and planning. Massachusetts College will benefit from greater continuity and sustained attention to larger goals in order to progress as a public liberal arts college; and indeed, better to meet the challenges it faces each year.

- Underfunding and under-staffing in the library is a major concern; if this situation is not attended to, it will hamper the College’s ability to provide a liberal education to its students. The College needs also to explore ways to promote more use of library resources and involve the library more fully in the delivery of the curriculum in this information age.

- In order to maintain the critical mass of faculty in appropriate fields required to staff a reasonable range of liberal arts majors and to deliver a sound general education
curriculum, careful planning will be necessary in academic affairs to ensure proper allocation of faculty lines and timely course offerings.

- In many units of the College, with the exception of Student Affairs and such offices as admissions, registrar, and financial aid, written documents clearly setting forth policies and procedures are lacking. The College Website offers an excellent opportunity to create manuals covering personnel policies, purchasing, promotion and tenure, faculty development and teaching resources, and the various roles of all college employees.
- Although the College has paid thoughtful attention to student recruitment in the past several years, enrollment management and student retention issues remain as concerns. First-to-second year persistence rates, though somewhat improved remain relatively low. Although significant efforts have been made over the years, still more attention needs to be paid to retention issues. The report of the Committee on Student Persistence completed in May 2002 may provide useful guidance in this regard and perhaps serve as a basis for a comprehensive student retention plan. As the College is well aware, enrollment management affects both the financial welfare of the institution and its success as a liberal arts college. Current enrollment levels create further resource and funding problems.
- MCLA needs again to examine its distinctive mission as it plays out in the area of resources and political support, fashioning strategies to garner appropriate support from the legislature, the Board of Higher Education, and private sources.

The visiting team scrutinized every aspect of the operations of Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. While we have been rigorous in our examination and unusually detailed in our suggestions in an effort to assist the College in reaching its goals, we reached the end of our visit with a clear and positive impression of the institution. Despite the many questions we raise and the level of detail in this report, we are impressed with the strengths of MCLA. And, in the final analysis, for us the bottom line is clear. We wish to stress it as we conclude this report. Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts has a clearly defined mission and purposes that are thoroughly appropriate to higher education. It has assembled and organized the resources necessary to achieve its purposes and is substantially achieving those purposes. We believe that it has the ability to continue to achieve its purposes and to do so at a higher level in the future.

The visiting team was grateful for the opportunity to learn more about Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and to interact with so many of its students, faculty, and staff. While we are keenly aware of the harsh realities of the external environment for public higher education in Massachusetts, we remain optimistic but not starry-eyed about the future of this distinctive and dynamic institution. We believe the College now has a moment in time to take advantage of a new spirit of leadership, to take full stock of its strategic situation (the self-study provides a good basis for this), and to plan and work together even more purposefully to become a “public liberal arts college of distinction.” Despite very real financial constraints, Massachusetts College is poised to maintain and defend its position and to move ahead to achieve its full potential as a college of distinction. We wish the College well in this endeavor.