May 18, 2004

Dr. Mary K. Grant  
President  
Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts  
375 Church Street  
North Adams, MA  01247-4100

Dear President Grant:

I write to inform you that at its meeting on April 23, 2004, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts:

that Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts be continued in accreditation;

that the College submit a report for consideration in Spring 2006, demonstrating its progress in:

1. establishing a five-year strategic planning cycle that is data-driven and comprehensive;

2. developing campus-wide assessment, including periodic program review in academic and non-academic units;

3. developing policy and personnel manuals for faculty and staff;

4. achieving enrollment levels and faculty staffing appropriate for the institution’s mission;

5. ensuring appropriate levels of staffing and use of the College’s library and information resources;

that the College submit a fifth-year interim report for consideration in Fall 2008;

that in addition to providing information included in all interim reports, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts give emphasis to its continued progress in the above-specified areas;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Fall 2013.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action
The continuation of Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in accreditation is based on the Commission’s finding that the College substantially meets the Standards for Accreditation. The institution is commended for achieving its change in mission and name over the past decade, a major institutional change that has involved risk and the continued commitment of the institutional community; the Commission concurs with the team that the new mission is a valuable institutional asset. The Commission also takes favorable note of the institution’s capable new leadership, the dedicated faculty, and the student-centered focus throughout the College.

The areas specified for the report in 2006 are related to the Commission’s standards on Planning and Evaluation, Organization and Governance, Programs and Instruction, Faculty, and Library and Information Resources.

While there has been a significant amount of planning activity in the past decade, with reports generated in 1993, 1998, and 2001, in general those efforts have been somewhat compartmentalized. With new leadership, the institution has undertaken a more integrated approach to planning, consistent with our standard on Planning and Evaluation which specifies that these activities be “systematic, broad-based, and interrelated” (2.2). We anticipate that the institution’s commitment to a five-year planning cycle will have demonstrable results by the time of the report due in 2006, and we look forward to learning of the results.

The Commission concurs with the team’s finding that the College lags behind current expectations for student learning outcomes assessment. Some significant preliminary work has occurred: program assessment reports in much of the 1990’s, published educational objectives for each program, and learning outcomes for the Core. However, until recently, the College did not have a systematic program of faculty development to increase capacity in understanding what and how students are learning. We take favorable note of recent initiatives in this area. Also, the institution has committed to a regular system of program review for all academic and non-academic areas, thereby increasing its capacity to support institutional effectiveness by strengthening the quality and reliability of evaluative information that can help inform planning. We note that the development and implementation of this system will represent a significant accomplishment for the institution, which has until now undertaken program reviews when externally mandated, has had limited useful information available through institutional research, and may be said to be in the early stages of developing a culture of evidence. The report due in 2006 will afford the College the opportunity to report its progress in this area, consistent with our standard on Planning and Evaluation, which says:

The institution allocates sufficient resources for its planning and evaluation efforts (2.2).

The institution evaluates the achievement of its mission and purposes, giving primary focus to the realization of its educational objectives. Its evaluative procedures are appropriate and effective for addressing its unique circumstances. To the extent possible, evaluation enables the institution to demonstrate through verifiable means its attainment of purpose and objectives both inside and outside the classroom (2.4).

While the College benefits from a community generally willing to participate in governance activities and a structure that provides a key role for faculty, it has not documented roles, responsibilities, policies and practices in manuals and other publications that provide the framework to support effective institutional governance. Since the time of the visit, the College reports some progress in developing and making available documentation to ensure that the “board, administration, staff, and faculty understand . . . their respective roles as set forth in the
institution’s official documents” (3.2). We expect to learn of further progress in this area through the institutional report in 2006.

The institution’s change in mission was undertaken with an understanding that at least in the short term enrollment would decrease, but that the funding would remain constant. However, as the team report notes, due to faculty retirements in recent years, along with reductions in state funding, the College currently has approximately 20 percent fewer faculty now than a decade ago. With losses due to attrition, and the concurrent development of new programs, some disciplines are significantly understaffed, making it difficult for students to get required classes in a timely fashion. The College’s goal to increase enrollment to 1700 from the current FTE of approximately 1350 can provide the basis to fund an expansion of the faculty numbers to support the curriculum. Enrollment strategies, including a focus on retention, will be important in this regard. Progress with these issues will help ensure that the College develops “a student body which as a whole is broadly representative of the population the institution wishes to serve” (4.33), and that “[f]aculty qualifications, numbers, and performance are sufficient to accomplish the institutions mission and purposes” (5.1).

Finally, we look forward through the report in 2006 to learning of the institution’s increased success in ensuring the appropriate levels of staffing and use of the institution’s library and information resources. The materials budget for the library is currently less than half of prior levels, a concern heightened by the centrality of the library to programs in the liberal arts. The Commission also expressed concern that the skills of information literacy are not systematically developed among the student body, and that the level of student use of the library and information resources may not be commensurate with that appropriate for a liberal arts institution. The review of library staffing now underway will help the institution determine whether additional investment here is warranted. The report in 2006 will provide the institution an opportunity to report on how it ensures that the College “makes available the library and information resources necessary for the fulfillment of its mission and purposes” (7.1), “ensures that students use these resources as an integral part of their education” (7.1), and provides “[p]rofessionally qualified and numerically adequate staff [to] administer the institution’s library, information resources, and services” (7.4).

Commission policy requires a fifth-year interim report of all institutions on a decennial evaluation cycle. Its purpose is to provide the Commission an opportunity to appraise the institution’s current status in keeping with the policy on Periodic Review. The items specified for review, discussed above, are related to our standards on Planning and Evaluation, Organization and Governance, Programs and Instruction, Faculty, and Library and Information Resources. The Commission recognizes that these issues represent significant matters that require sustained attention on the part of the institution, and therefore specifies that through the interim report, the College report its continuing progress in each of the above specified areas.

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2013 is consistent with the Commission’s policy of requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation every ten years.

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

The Commission expressed its appreciation for the self-study prepared by the institution and for the evaluation report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the
opportunity to meet with you and Dr. Stephen Green, Interim Vice President for Academic Affairs, as well as team chairperson, Dr. Christopher Dahl.

You are encouraged to share this letter and the team’s complete report with all of the institution’s constituencies. It is Commission policy to inform the chairperson of the institution’s governing board of action on its accreditation status. In a few days, we will be sending a copy of this letter to Eugene W. Leibowitz, M.D. The institution is free to release information about the evaluation and the Commission’s action to others, in accordance with Commission policy.

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

If you have any questions about the Commission’s action, please contact Charles M. Cook, Director of the Commission.

Sincerely,

Terrence J. MacTaggart

TJM/jm

Enclosure

cc: Eugene W. Leibowitz, M.D.
    Visiting Team