December 18, 2008

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

Dear President Grant:

It is my pleasure to inform you that at its meeting on November 20, 2008, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education considered the fifth-year interim report submitted by the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and voted to take the following action:

that the fifth-year interim report submitted by Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts be accepted;

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Fall 2013 be confirmed;

that, in addition to the information included in all self-studies, the self-study prepared in advance of the Fall 2013 evaluation give emphasis to the institution’s continued success with:

1) determining the effectiveness of its five-year strategic planning cycle in enabling the institution to achieve its planning goals;

2) creating a new library strategic plan that articulates measurable and achievable goals;

3) maintaining financial health given reductions in funding from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The Commission commends Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) for a well-organized and well-written report addressing the five areas of emphasis identified in Commission letters of May 18, 2004 and March 28, 2006. The College has made significant progress in strategic planning with the president enabling an open and systematic process that links planning across all the functional areas of the institution. We are pleased to learn that the institution has engaged in a significant number of assessment initiatives, and now plans to hire an associate dean to
support faculty and staff in these efforts. We note with approval that the College continues to dedicate considerable attention to providing greater access to electronic resources and tools, and now requires students to acquire laptop computers to use in their coursework. MCLA has improved its financial position by giving more attention to financial oversight and risk management. We are gratified to learn that the institution has experienced some success in ensuring appropriate numbers of full-time faculty (increased by 12 since 2003), and in achieving its enrollment goals. Finally, the Commission appreciates the care with which the College addressed student success through the new forms provided and made reference to the data provided in these forms as part of the narrative of the report.

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2013 is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years. The items the Commission asks to be given special emphasis within the self-study prepared for the comprehensive evaluation are matters related to our standards on Planning and Evaluation, Library and Other Information Resources, and Financial Resources.

The College has made significant progress in strategic planning across all the functional areas of the institution. The self-study for the Fall 2013 comprehensive evaluation will afford the institution the opportunity to assess the extent to which the College has achieved all of its strategic planning goals, as guided by our standard on Planning and Evaluation:

The institution has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning (2.3).

The institution regularly and systematically evaluates the achievement of its mission and purposes, giving primary focus to the realization of its educational objectives. Its system of evaluation is designed to provide relevant and trustworthy information to support institutional improvement, with an emphasis on the academic program. The institution’s evaluation efforts are effective for addressing its unique circumstances. These efforts use both quantitative and qualitative methods (2.4).

With the arrival of a new director of the library in March 2008, the institution plans to create a new library strategic plan that articulates measurable and achievable goals. As part of the next comprehensive review we look forward to learning about the success of this endeavor, as guided by the standard on Library and Other Information Resources:

The institution articulates a clear vision of the level and breadth of information resources and services and of instructional and information technology appropriate to support its academic mission and its administrative functions. Through strategic, operational, and financial planning, it works to achieve that vision (7.1).

MCLA has strengthened its financial position; however, given the reductions in support from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in this difficult economic period, we would like to learn about the continued success of the institution in managing and strengthening its financial resources. The standard on Financial Resources should inform this effort:

The institution preserves and enhances available financial resources sufficient to support its academic and other activities. It manages its financial resources and allocates them in a way that reflects its mission and purposes. It demonstrates the ability to respond to financial emergencies and unforeseen circumstances (9.1).
The institution is financially stable. Ostensible financial stability is not achieved at the expense of educational quality. Its stability and viability are not unduly dependent upon vulnerable financial resources or an historically narrow base of support. The institution's governing board retains appropriate autonomy in all budget and finance matters; this includes institutions that depend on financial support from an external agency (state, church, or other private or public entity) (9.2).

The Commission expressed appreciation for the report submitted by Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and hopes that its preparation 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.

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

If you have any questions about the Commission’s action, please contact Barbara Brittingham, Director of the Commission.

Sincerely,

Elsa M. Nuñez

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Enclosure

cc: Mr. Richard Lamb