May 2, 2017

Dr. James L. Vander Hooven  
President  
Mount Wachusett Community College  
444 Green Street  
Gardner, MA 01440-1000

Dear President Vander Hooven:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on March 3, 2017, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education considered the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Mount Wachusett Community College and voted to take the following action:

that the interim report submitted by Mount Wachusett Community College be accepted;

that the site visit scheduled for Spring 2018 to evaluate implementation of the Second Chance Pell program sites be confirmed;

that the College provide an update on the accreditation status of its associate degree program in Nursing following action by the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing at its March 2017 meeting;

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Spring 2022 be confirmed;

that, in addition to the information included in all self-studies, the self-study prepared in advance of the Spring 2022 comprehensive evaluation give emphasis to the institution’s success in:

1. developing an updated mission statement;
2. developing and implementing communications and strategic plans;
3. implementing strategies related to the recruitment and retention of students;
4. integrating its new institutional student learning outcomes into the curriculum and assuring that students continue to complete 20 credits in general education, as specified by the standards.
The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The interim report submitted by Mount Wachusett Community College (MWCC) was accepted because it responded to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letters of December 1, 2012 and December 16, 2014, and addressed each of the nine standards, including a reflective essay for Standard 8: Educational Effectiveness on student learning and success.

The Commission commends Mount Wachusett Community College for a comprehensive, well-written interim report that documents its continued fulfillment of the Standards for Accreditation and the progress the institution has made on the areas specified for emphasis. We are gratified to learn that the re-organization of the academic affairs department resulted in a “more coherent system” that facilitates collaboration with all constituents around student success initiatives. Both full-time and adjunct faculty participate in division meetings and professional development workshops on outcomes assessment led by the deans; department and program chairs evaluate course syllabi from all faculty. We further note that the “quality and range of information made available” on student success has improved due in part to curriculum mapping and technology and information sharing. Since 2012, Mount Wachusett Community College has renovated and restored the Haley Academic Center at the Gardner campus and built a new STEM building and greenhouse. We understand that the College received $37.9 million from the Commonwealth’s 2008 Capital Improvements Bond Bill to support these initiatives. Additionally, the College allocated $5.5 million for repairs to parking lots and roadways to be completed by summer 2018. We understand that the leases for MWCC’s two instructional sites in Devens and Leominster, MA will be renegotiated in 2017, and we note with approval the College’s commitment to ensuring the availability of comprehensive support services at the two sites comparable to the main campus. As noted in the key performance indicators of the College’s strategic plan, while MWCC did not meet its overall enrollment goals, it increased the number of students of color and non-traditional students, as evidenced by an increase of 22% in Hispanic students, the “highest level in the college’s history.” With the recent retirement of a successful, long-serving President, the College anticipates “tremendous change” in the next five years, as well as a “sense of opportunity” as it looks to the future.

In its thoughtful reflective essay, MWCC demonstrates that its “institutional transformation” over the years has “significantly impacted educational effectiveness across the college.” We are pleased to learn that data are collected, analyzed, and incorporated into planning and resource allocation, with significant funds dedicated to designing student support systems and measuring their effectiveness. The College has undertaken numerous initiatives to improve academic and student services which have contributed to increases in student performance and retention. These include the curriculum redesign of gateway courses in ESL, English, and the sciences; development of a new student orientation system; and the implementation of a comprehensive “intensive advising” system with degree audit software that aligns students, advisors, and transfer institutions to facilitate achievement of a “common goal of helping students graduate on time.” We note favorably that the College’s assessment efforts have been enhanced using Title III funds to acquire a software platform (Blackboard Outcomes) that is aligned with its existing learning management system. In addition, assessment initiatives are “directly linked” to state-wide projects, including the Multi-State Collaborative and the Davis grant. Furthermore, purposeful professional development opportunities on student learning outcomes and assessment are available for all faculty. We note with favor the College’s use of “measurable performance outcomes” from surveys, including the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, Survey of Entering Student Engagement, the Noel-Levitz Student Survey Inventory, and the Voluntary Framework of Accountability, to inform decision making. Also commendable are increases in fall-to-fall retention (from 53% to 61%, for the 2007 and 2013 cohorts, respectively) and in the four-year graduation rate (from 14.6% in 2010 to 21.8% in 2013).
The evaluation scheduled for Spring 2018 to assess the implementation of the Second Chance Pell program is confirmed. We remind you of our letter of January 23, 2017 that specifies matters to be addressed in the report prepared in advance of the evaluation.

The interim report also highlighted the College’s continued progress in addressing the areas of non-compliance noted by the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN) for MWCC’s associate degree program in Nursing (ADN) and Practical Nursing (PN) certificate program. Strategies to address these concerns include increases to the number of credentialed faculty, curriculum redesign and development, and improvements to assessment measures. We are pleased to learn that the October 2016 ACEN visit resulted in a recommendation for MWCC’s ADN to continue with full accreditation, with the final determination to be made by the Board of Commissioners in March 2017. Additionally, in August 2016, MWCC received written notification that MWCC’s PN program is in full compliance with all ACEN standards. The Commission asks MWCC to provide an update on the accreditation status of its associate degree program in Nursing following ACEN action in March 2017.

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Spring 2022 is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years. The four 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 Mission and Purposes, Planning and Evaluation, Organization and Governance, Students, Educational Effectiveness, and The Academic Program.

We commend Mount Wachusett Community College for the steps taken to revise the College’s mission statement, promote awareness of the mission across the campus, and develop a process to align the missions of the departments with that of the College. We understand the College anticipates further changes to the mission statement to make it “crisper, more focused, and easier to articulate.” We anticipate being apprised, in Spring 2022, of MWCC’s success in revising its mission statement. We remind you of our standard on Mission and Purposes:

The institution periodically evaluates the content and pertinence of its mission and purposes, ensuring they are current and provide overall direction in planning, evaluation, and resource allocation (1.5).

The Commission is pleased to learn of the inclusive process the College has designed to oversee development of its next strategic plan and a detailed timeline for implementing the plan. We understand that the College anticipates approval of the new plan by the Board of Trustees in May 2018 with implementation to begin in July 2018. We also take favorable note of MWCC’s intention to develop a “comprehensive plan for improving communications among and within the college campuses.” The Spring 2022 report will afford MWCC an opportunity to update the Commission on its progress in developing and implementing communications and strategic plans. Relevant here are our standards on Planning and Evaluation and Organization and Governance:

The institution plans beyond a short-term horizon, including strategic planning that involves realistic analyses of internal and external opportunities and constraints. The results of strategic planning are implemented in all units of the institution through financial, academic, enrollment, and other supporting plans (2.3).

The institution’s organizational structure, decision-making processes, and policies are clear and consistent with its mission and support institutional effectiveness. The institution’s system of governance involves the participation of all appropriate constituencies and includes regular communication among them (3.2).
In accordance with established institutional mechanisms and procedures, the chief executive officer and senior administrators consult with faculty, students, other administrators, and staff, and are appropriately responsive to their concerns, needs, and initiatives. The institution’s internal governance provides for the appropriate participation of its constituencies, promotes communications, and effectively advances the quality of the institution (3.13).

The Commission is gratified to learn of the College’s improved fall-to-spring persistence and fall-to-fall retention rates achieved through initiatives supported by MWCC’s Title III grant as exemplified by the increases in the fall-to-fall retention rate from a baseline of 4.9% and 8.1% in 2012 and 2013, respectively. We appreciate the College’s candid acknowledgment that its institution-wide retention efforts have “lacked individual efforts needed for special populations.” We understand that MWCC plans to acquire retention management software that will facilitate analysis of new student demographic data and to develop “distinct goals for retention and persistence according to student demographics,” as well as other “targeted” enrollment, retention, and student success plans and initiatives. The College also seeks to expand its recruitment activities to “focus on the increasing diversity” of its student body through initiatives that include strengthening relationships with community-based organizations, cultural networks and minority centers; increasing outreach to international students and to Hispanic students; and converting dual enrollment students to matriculated students. The Spring 2022 comprehensive evaluation will afford the College an opportunity to document its continued success in implementing strategies related to recruitment and retention of its students. We are guided by our standards on Students and Educational Effectiveness:

The institution demonstrates its ability to admit students who can be successful in the institution’s academic program, including specifically recruited populations. The institution’s goals for retention and graduation reflect institutional purposes, and the results are used to inform recruitment and the review of programs and services (5.6).

The institution defines measures of student success and levels of achievement appropriate to its mission, modalities and locations of instruction, and student body, including any specifically recruited populations. These measures include rates of progression, retention, transfer, and graduation; default and loan repayment rates; licensure passage rates; and employment (8.6).

The Commission notes with favor the progress Mount Wachusett Community College has made to review and revise its General Education program, led by the General Education Taskforce. Initiatives include using the AAC&U Leap Value Rubrics to guide the assessment of its general education competencies, developing goal statements with learning outcomes, renaming the general education competencies to Institutional Student Learning Outcomes (ISLOs), mapping the courses and programs to the ISLOs, and identifying “gaps” in the programs. While the Commission is pleased to learn of the College’s work on general education, it was not clear from the information submitted that the revised general education program will fulfill the expectation that students earn 20 credits in general education. We look forward to learning through the Spring 2022 self-study of the institution’s success in integrating its new institutional student learning outcomes into the curriculum and to receiving assurance that the students continue to complete 20 credits in general education, in keeping with our standard on The Academic Program:

Each undergraduate program includes a general education requirement and a major or concentration requirement. At the baccalaureate level, curricula include substantial requirements at the advanced undergraduate level, with appropriate prerequisites. The institution also affords undergraduate students the opportunity to pursue knowledge and understanding through unrestricted electives (4.14).
Graduates successfully completing an undergraduate program demonstrate competence in written and oral communication in English; the ability for scientific and quantitative reasoning, for critical analysis and logical thinking; and the capability for continuing learning, including the skills of information literacy. They also demonstrate knowledge and understanding of scientific, historical, and social phenomena, and a knowledge and appreciation of the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of humankind (4.15).

The general education requirement in each undergraduate program ensures adequate breadth for all degree-seeking students by showing a balanced regard for what are traditionally referred to as the arts and humanities, the sciences including mathematics, and the social sciences. General education requirements include offerings that focus on the subject matter and methodologies of these three primary domains of knowledge as well as on their relationships to one another (4.17).

The institution ensures that all undergraduate students complete at least the equivalent of 40 semester credits in a bachelor’s degree program, or the equivalent of 20 semester credits in an associate’s degree program in general education (4.18).

The Commission expressed appreciation for the interim report submitted by Mount Wachusett Community College and hopes 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 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 Ms. Tina Sbrega. The institution is free to release information about the report and the Commission’s action to others, in accordance with the enclosed policy on Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions.

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

Sincerely,

David P. Angel

DPA/jm

Enclosure

cc: Ms. Tina Sbrega