



March 21, 2023

Dr. James 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, 2023, the New England Commission of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Mount Wachusett Community College:

that Mount Wachusett Community College be continued in accreditation;

that the institution be asked to submit a report by January 15, 2025, for consideration in Spring 2025, that gives emphasis to the institution's success in:

1. implementing its strategic plan;
2. achieving its diversity, equity, and inclusion goals for faculty and staff;
3. achieving its goals for student retention, particularly for students of color and Pell grant recipients;

that the institution submit an interim (fifth-year) report by January 15, 2027 for consideration in Spring 2027;

that, in addition to the information included in all interim reports, the institution give emphasis to its success in:

1. continuing to address the matters specified for attention in the Spring 2025 report;
2. developing and implementing its financial plans;
3. achieving its goals for online program enrollment and providing sufficient support for faculty teaching online courses;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Spring 2032.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

Mount Wachusett Community College is continued in accreditation because the Commission finds the institution to be in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*.

The Commission commends Mount Wachusett Community College (MWCC) for its thorough and well-written self-study. We appreciate that the College's mission statement, which was revised in 2022 as part of the strategic planning process, includes a commitment to "diversity, equity and inclusion with a racial equity lens" and is prominently displayed on the website, the entrance to the Gardner and Leominster campuses, and in the student lounge on the Devens campus. The College has "worked hard to align its academic program with the needs of its surrounding community" by offering professionally accredited programs such as Nursing, Medical Assisting, Dental Hygiene and Assisting, Physical Therapy Assistant, and Automotive Technology. MWCC has also recently invested in a new space for its automotive program and completed a "significant upgrade" of its Leominster campus. We are pleased to learn from the visiting team that "[a]ssessment and data analytics have been used and there appears to be momentum for creating a system and processes to inform strategic decision-making." We note positively that, through "prudent" and disciplined financial stewardship, along with HEERF and CARES Act funding, the College has managed to maintain a balanced budget and posted increases to its net position – \$3.8 million in FY2019, \$5.2 million in FY2020, and \$8.5 million in FY2021 – with a similar net position projected for FY2023. The Commission concurs with the visiting team that "there is a very real commitment to student success" and that the institution continues "to seek out ways to improve." With its dynamic and forward-thinking leadership team, caring and committed faculty and staff, and engaged student body, Mount Wachusett Community College is well-positioned to transform "students by providing access to affordable, high quality, innovative, civic-minded, and relevant education and training opportunities" well into the future.

The items the institution is asked to report on in Spring 2025 are related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation; Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship; Institutional Resources; Students; and Educational Effectiveness*.

The Commission is gratified to learn that MWCC's 2023-2027 Strategic Plan, developed through a "college-wide process that was inclusive of the collective work of faculty, staff, students and external stakeholders," was approved by the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education in September 2022. MWCC is now updating its Master Plan, Academic Plan, Financial Plan, Enrollment Plan, and Development Plan to align with the Strategic Plan. As we concur with the visiting team that "there appears to be a need for continued work on prioritizing and a determination on how the plan can be operationalized and aligned with financial realities," we are gratified to learn that, as part of its operational plan, Mount Wachusett Community College will implement a "college-wide prioritization process ... to inform final decision-making on institutional priorities and resource allocation." We look forward to learning, through the Spring 2025 report, of the College's success in "implementing the results of its planning" (2.5) in this regard. We are further guided here by our standard on *Planning and Evaluation*:

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).

As noted above, Mount Wachusett Community College's revised mission statement makes an explicit commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We understand that, as of Fall 2021, "34.4% of the student body were persons of color, while 8.1% of faculty and 9.2% of staff were persons of color. In 2022, the College hired a Chief Diversity Executive who serves as a member of the President's Leadership Team; among the goals of this new position is "exploring strategies for diversifying the faculty and staff." We appreciate that every hiring committee at the College

must include “a diversity advocate” and that all search committee members complete a mandatory training to ensure “an unbiased, fair, and consistent interview and selection process.” The Spring 2025 report will provide the College with an opportunity to update the Commission on its success in achieving its DEI goals for hiring faculty and staff. We remind you of our standards on *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship* and *Institutional Resources*:

Compatible with its mission and purposes, it addresses its own goals for the achievement of diversity, equity, and inclusion among its faculty and academic staff and assesses the effectiveness of its efforts to achieve those goals (6.5).

The institution employs sufficient and qualified personnel to fulfill its mission. It addresses its own goals for the achievement of diversity, equity, and inclusion among its personnel and assesses the effectiveness of its efforts to achieve those goals (7.1).

From Fall 2017 to Fall 2020, MWCC’s fall to fall retention rates for first-time full-time matriculated students declined from 59% ... to 55.8%. The Commission understands that the pandemic “amplified trends in retention” that the College was already experiencing and that “minoritized groups are disproportionately affected” by these trends. We acknowledge the College’s use of “multiple methodologies” to collect and interpret disaggregated retention data in order to determine equity gaps among its subpopulations of Black, Hispanic, and Pell-recipient students. In 2020, Mount Wachusett Community College created the THRIVE Retention Center (THRIVE) to support its goal to increase retention, and we understand the College currently is “retooling” THRIVE to expand its scope and to build intentional connections with the Advising, Career, and Transfer Center. Further, the Academic Success and Testing Center has also expanded its services and scope. A formal Retention Plan, which includes the implementation of student tracking and communication software to support retention, is slated to be reviewed by the Senate no later than May 2023. We look forward to learning, in Spring 2025, of MWCC’s success in achieving its goals for student retention, particularly for students of color and Pell grant recipients. This section will be informed by our standards on *Students* and *Educational Effectiveness*:

The institution addresses its own goals for the achievement of diversity, equity, and inclusion among its students and provides a safe environment that fosters the intellectual and personal development of its students. It endeavors to ensure the success of its students, offering the resources and services that provide them the opportunity to achieve the goals of their educational program as specified in institutional publications (*Students*, Statement of the Standard).

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. The institution ensures that information about student success is easily accessible on its website (8.6).

Commission policy requires an interim (fifth-year) 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. In addition to the information included in all interim reports, the College is asked, in the Spring 2027 report, to give emphasis to its continued success in addressing the three areas specified above for attention in the Spring 2025 report. The Commission recognizes that these matters do not lend themselves to rapid resolution and will require the College’s sustained attention over time; hence, we ask that further information be provided in the report.

In addition, Mount Wachusett Community College is asked, in Spring 2027, to report on two matters related to our standards on *Institutional Resources*; *Students*; and *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*.

As mentioned previously, Mount Wachusett Community College has managed to maintain a balanced budget and increase its net position despite a 22% decline in enrollment over the past three years (from 1,021 FTE in Fall 2018 to 791 FTE in Fall 2022). With the College facing both a decline in college-age demographics and increased competition, we appreciate MWCC's attention to financially supporting both the new strategic plan as well as the operational needs of the College. We understand that the institution is "building the data infrastructure and process for moving forward with a rolling 3-year financial plan" and has hired a budget analyst to provide projections and guidance for both its operational and strategic plans. As informed by our standard on *Institutional Resources*, we seek assurance, in the Spring 2027 interim report, of MWCC's progress in developing and implementing its financial plans:

The institution's multi-year financial planning is realistic and reflects the capacity of the institution to depend on identified sources of revenue and ensure the advancement of educational quality and services for students (7.6).

The institution's financial planning, including contingency planning, is integrated with overall planning and evaluation processes. The institution demonstrates its ability to analyze its financial condition and understand the opportunities and constraints that will influence its financial condition and acts accordingly. It reallocates resources as necessary to achieve its purposes and objectives (7.14).

The Commission appreciates learning that approximately two-thirds of MWCC students in Fall 2021 enrolled in at least one distance education course and that there are plans "to expand online course offerings, expand the number of fully online degree and certificate programs, and ultimately to grow online enrollment." We note with favor the College has recently hired two instructional designers who offer professional development workshops and support for faculty teaching distance education courses. The Spring 2027 interim report will provide Mount Wachusett Community College with an opportunity to update the Commission on its success in achieving its enrollment goals for distance education and providing sufficient support for faculty teaching online courses. We are guided here by our standards on *Students* and *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*:

Consistent with its mission, the institution sets and achieves realistic goals to enroll students who are broadly representative of the population the institution wishes to serve (*Students*, Statement of the Standard).

Instructional techniques and delivery systems are compatible with and serve to further the mission and purposes of the institution as well as the learning goals of academic programs and objectives of individual courses. Methods of instruction are appropriate to the students' capabilities and learning needs (6.16).

The institution endeavors to enhance the quality of teaching and learning wherever and however courses and programs are offered. It encourages experimentation to improve instruction. The effectiveness of instruction is regularly and systematically assessed using valid procedures; the results are used to improve instruction. Faculty and academic staff accept their responsibility to improve instructional effectiveness. Adequate support is provided to accomplish this task (6.17).

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The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Spring 2032 is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years.

You will note that 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 appreciation for the self-study prepared by Mount Wachusett Community College and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you, John Eisler, Interim Vice President of Academic Affairs, Jason Zelesky, Vice President of Student Affairs, Sandra Quaye, Vice President of Finance and Administration, and Tiffany Parker, Director of Institutional Research and Assessment, during its deliberations.

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 and the head of the system of action on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Mr. Robert Antonioni and Dr. Noe Ortega. The institution is free to release information about the evaluation and the Commission's action to others, in accordance with the enclosed policy on Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions.

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

If you have any questions about the Commission's action, please contact Lawrence M. Schall, President of the Commission.

Sincerely,



Russell C. Carey

RCC/jm

cc: Mr. Robert Antonioni
Dr. Noe Ortega
Visiting Team

Enclosure: Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions