October 24, 2014

Dr. Robert L. Pura
President
Greenfield Community College
1 College Drive
Greenfield, MA 01301

Dear President Pura:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on September 19, 2014, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education considered the progress report submitted by Greenfield Community College and took the following action:

that the report submitted by Greenfield Community College be accepted;

that the fifth-year interim report scheduled for consideration in Fall 2015 be confirmed;

that, in addition to the information included in all interim reports, as well as the matters specified in our letters dated April 14, 2011, and October 21, 2013, the institution give emphasis, in the Fall 2015 report to its success in:

1) assessing student learning outcomes in online programs, with an emphasis on using assessment results for continuous improvement;

2) implementing additional fully online programming;

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Fall 2020 be confirmed.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its actions.

The report submitted by Greenfield Community College was accepted because it was generally responsive to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letter of November 15, 2012.

The Commission commends Greenfield Community College (GCC) for making steady progress in achieving its goals to implement and assess the effectiveness of its online Associate of Arts in Liberal Arts degree
program. We are particularly pleased to learn of the College’s work in establishing standards and systems to support the delivery of online programming. Faculty are well trained in online pedagogy and curriculum development; the Faculty Mentor Program for Distance Education, faculty workshops, and “drop-in support hours” provided by the Faculty Instructional Technology Support Team provide further evidence of the institution’s commitment to support its online faculty. We note with favor that representatives from departments across the institution meet regularly to evaluate the strengths and address the challenges of supporting GCC’s online student population. Results of their collaboration include a web-based orientation for online students, the implementation of Ask Alex (Ask a Library Expert), the posting of a research guide on the library’s main webpage, online tutoring support through Smarthinking, and, most recently, the piloting of a new online Financial Aid chat function. Finally, the report included evidence that GCC is implementing its plans to ensure that the necessary technology infrastructure is in place to support its “current and future levels of online learning activity.” We note with favor that a streaming server was integrated into the Moodle platform to improve the process of adding video to a Moodle course; Information Technology staff have implemented a schedule for Moodle backup and upgrades; MyGCC and Moodle have been redesigned to better support students using mobile devices; and a new web interface for the Student Helpdesk scheduled for Fall 2014 will increase the College’s capacity to assess and improve technology support.

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 and the items specified for attention in the Commission’s letters of April 14, 2011, and October 21, 2013, the College is asked, in Fall 2015 to report on two matters related to our standard on The Academic Program.

We appreciate the careful thought and attention that GCC has given to expanding the assessment of student learning in the online delivery format. Noteworthy is the College’s Online Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Pilot initiative that encourages faculty to explore and experiment with varied and innovative assessment strategies. We are particularly encouraged to learn that a number of strategies were implemented and found to be “worthy of continuation,” and that the College established through a comparative analysis that “student learning was comparable in the online and the face-to-face formats.” In addition to the information included in all interim reports, as well as the matters specified in our letters dated April 14, 2011 and October 21, 2013, the report submitted for consideration in Fall 2015 will provide GCC an opportunity to update the Commission on its continued success in assessing student learning outcomes in online programs, with an emphasis on using assessment results for continuous improvement. Our standard on The Academic Program is relevant here:

The institution implements and provides support for systematic and broad-based assessment of what and how students are learning through their academic program and experiences outside the classroom. Assessment is based on clear statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. Assessment provides useful information that helps the institution to improve the experiences provided for students, as well as to assure that the level of student achievement is appropriate for the degree awarded (4.48).

The institution’s approach to understanding student learning focuses on the course, program, and institutional level. Evidence is considered at the appropriate level of focus, with the results being a demonstrable factor in improving the learning opportunities and results for students (4.49).
The institution’s approach to understanding what and how students are learning and using the results for improvement has the support of the institution’s academic and institutional leadership and the systematic involvement of faculty (4.51)

We thank the College for including in the report its detailed plans to launch additional fully online programs “to address student and workforce needs and to build on the college’s [online] practices and procedures.” We note that the Business and Information Technology programs will be fully online as of Fall 2014, and the report assures that the College has taken steps to “ensure the support for all online students” enrolled in these programs. The faculty and student support systems, the strategies used to assess student learning outcomes, and the online infrastructure developed and implemented to support the online Associate of Arts in Liberal Arts degree will provide a solid foundation to support additional online programming. We look forward to learning, in the Fall 2015 interim report, of the College’s success in implementing additional fully online programming, as evidence that “[t]he institution has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning” (2.4).

Finally, the scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall, 2020, is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years.

The Commission expressed appreciation for the report submitted by Greenfield Community College and hopes that its preparation has contributed to institutional improvement. It appreciates your cooperation with 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. Robert Cohn. 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/sjp

Enclosures

cc: Mr. Robert Cohn