December 3, 2015

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 25, 2015, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education considered the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Greenfield Community College and voted to take the following action:

that the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Greenfield Community College be accepted;

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Fall 2020 be confirmed;

that, in addition to the information included in all self-studies, the self-study prepared in advance of the Fall 2020 evaluation give emphasis to the institution’s success in:

1. continuing to establish a record of success in achieving the College’s planning objectives, including meeting its goals for student enrollment and retention;

2. ensuring sufficient support to further develop a comprehensive approach to the assessment of student learning and using the results for program improvement.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Greenfield Community College was accepted because it responded to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letters of April 14, 2011, October 21, 2013, and October 24, 2014, addressed each of the eleven standards, and included a reflective essay on student learning and success.

The Commission commends Greenfield Community College (GCC) for a well-written and candid interim report that documents the College’s success
over the past five years to position itself as an institution that has as its “driving force” helping students reach their highest potential. We note with favor the integrated planning process developed by the institution using a “by us, for us” theme that resulted in broad community support, and are encouraged that the College’s use of data has become more routine. We understand that a regular review of the College’s mission will be incorporated into the planning timeline and that the next review will begin in Fall 2015. We acknowledge the “thoughtful and deliberate” faculty-driven approach GCC has used to expand its distance education offerings that now include three fully online programs, and commend the efforts underway to directly compare student achievement of learning outcomes across different delivery formats. A persistence rate of 71% in online courses that exceeds the College’s overall persistence rate of 69% is evidence of the success of these programs. The College’s commitment to degree completion is further demonstrated by its establishment of transfer pathways for students, the addition of new stackable certificates, and the partnerships developed to make bachelor’s completion programs available on campus. We are pleased to learn that GCC’s allocation from the State of Massachusetts increased $1.15 million in both FY2014 and FY2015; at the same time, we note that fee increases were necessary to offset the impact of decreased enrollment along with a subsequent reduction in the state appropriation and elimination of several economic development grants. Consequently, the contribution of the GCC Foundation to maintaining financial stability through fundraising ($928,442 in FY2014) and securing grants and contracts ($1,476,625 in FY2014) is admirable. Finally, the addition of a new Core wing of the main building in 2011 that includes a state-of-the-art library and a one-stop student enrollment services suite is noteworthy, as is the recognition the institution has received for its sustainability efforts.

From the reflective essay, we note with approval that the College has set a “consistent and empathic” goal to improve student learning. In keeping with GCC’s collaborative approach, faculty have led the effort to create a culture of assessment that is integrated in the institution’s planning processes. As documented by the “dramatic expansion” of the detail provided on the E-series forms, all program websites now present student learning outcomes in a consistent format. We recognize the involvement of adjunct faculty in the review of the Liberal Arts General program completed in 2013 and concur that it is a model for other programs and departments. An average fall-to-spring retention rate of 79% provides evidence of student success, as do the 49 recipients of Entrepreneurial Spirit Awards and the 29 recipients of full-tuition scholarships from Smith College. “High impact” retention practices that have been implemented include a mandatory orientation for new students, an advising day with no classes, and career advising supported by a federal training grant. Also noteworthy is the decrease in new students taking developmental education courses – from 65% in Fall 2010 to 57% in Fall 2013 – and the offering of self-paced math courses, linked college and developmental courses, and reduced class sizes for English courses.

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 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, Students, and The Academic Program.

We are pleased to learn of the creation of a Director of Assessment position that was filled in August 2011 to take the lead in designing the integrated planning process and understand that, to retain the College’s responsive nature, the system developed includes a “one-year Annual Planning for Improvement Cycle nested inside a 10-Year Integrative Planning timeline.” Outcomes of the first annual planning cycle included an Academic and Student Success Plan 2014-2017 endorsed by the College Assembly in May 2014; a Recruitment Plan 2014-2016; a Technology Infrastructure Plan 2014-2016; and exploration of a child care center on campus that received approval for the first phase of construction design as part of the Governor’s FY2015-
FY2019 Capital Investment Plan. Three priorities have been identified for the 2015/2016 academic year: enrollment planning, retention support, and workforce support and wellness that will examine sustainable workloads for faculty and staff to “advance the delivery of services to students.” We ask that the Fall 2020 self-study give emphasis to the College’s continued success in achieving its planning objectives, including meeting its goals for student enrollment and retention, as evidence that “the institution has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning” (2.4). Our standard on Students provides this additional guidance:

Consistent with its mission, the institution sets and achieves realistic goals to enroll a student body that is broadly representative of the population the institution wishes to serve and addresses its own goals for the achievement of diversity among its students. (6.1).

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. (6.8).

Data on retention, graduation, and other measures of student success are regularly reviewed within the institution, with the results being used for planning, resource allocation, and improvement. (6.9).

We understand that as of 2011 the College’s annual reporting guidelines were standardized to ensure consistency across programs, including both instructional and co-curricular areas, and that these guidelines were revised to include two sections focused on assessment and changes made to improve student learning. In addition, the College Assembly formally approved General Education Abilities, and each academic program is now expected to report on student achievement related to at least one ability as part of its annual reporting. As acknowledged by the College, however, “institutional-level student learning outcomes are still a work in progress.” While much momentum exists to build a more comprehensive approach to assessment, the College reports that the sustainability of these efforts is dependent on “increased resources with attention to staffing, funding, and time constraints.” Internal funds are needed to replace the grant funding received in FY2012 and FY2013 from the State’s Vision Project, as are stipends to support the continued involvement of adjunct faculty. In addition, time is “an even bigger constraint” for many of the College’s smaller departments that are finding there is a trade-off between time spent on assessment activities and that available to work with students. Given this concern, we support the College’s efforts to examine issues related to a sustainable workload for faculty and staff as a planning priority. Through the Fall 2020 self-study, we seek assurance that sufficient support is provided to continue development of a comprehensive approach to the assessment of student learning and using the results for program improvement. This section of the self-study should be informed by our standards on Planning and Evaluation and The Academic Program.

Based on verifiable information, the institution understands what its students have gained as a result of their education and has useful evidence about the success of its recent graduates. This information is used for planning and resource allocation and to inform the public about the institution. (2.7).

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 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 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. 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
Enclosure
cc: Mr. Robert Cohn