



November 14, 2024

Dr. Ellen L. Kennedy
President
Berkshire Community College
1350 West Street
Pittsfield, MA 01201-5786

Dear President Kennedy:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on September 26, 2024, the New England Commission of Higher Education considered the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Berkshire Community College and voted to take the following action:

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

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Fall 2029 be confirmed;

that, in addition to the information included in all self-studies, the self-study prepared in advance of the Fall 2029 comprehensive evaluation give emphasis to the institution's success in:

1. implementing the redesign and assessment of its general education core competencies and new Liberal Arts courses;
2. monitoring the effectiveness of initiatives implemented to reduce barriers to student success created by developmental education and the cost of textbooks;
3. assessing the effectiveness of its new shared governance model;
4. achieving its enrollment and financial projections.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Berkshire Community College was accepted because it responded to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letters of June 27, 2022 and March 20, 2020 and addressed each of the nine standards, including a reflective essay for Standard 8: *Educational Effectiveness* on student learning and success.

The Commission commends Berkshire Community College (BCC) for its thoughtful and comprehensive interim report. We are pleased to learn of the College's continued success in blending a "rigorous liberal arts core with transfer and technical curricula" to meet workforce needs. We recognize the institution's implementation of a new shared governance model and the development of a "Shared Governance Guide" focused on creating "mutual stewardship and accountability," inclusivity, and transparency. In addition, the Commission appreciates the collaborative effort undertaken to revise the College's Mission, Vision, and Values statements that engaged a wide range of stakeholders including students, and appreciates the institution's five-phased process for creating its 2022-2027 Strategic Plan designed to "better align with the revised NECHE Standards" as well as to leverage "what was working well at the College." We also commend BCC's commitment to equity that was thoughtfully embedded in the 2022-2027 Strategic Plan and closely aligned with its aim to be a "student-ready" institution; the hiring of a Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and participation in the "Leading for Change Racial Equity and Justice Institute" and "Achieving the Dream" further demonstrates the College's dedication to equitable student success.

The Commission thanks BCC for its well-written reflective essay that details its initiatives and activities that support academic effectiveness and data-driven decision-making. The relocation of the Office of Institutional Effectiveness within Academic Affairs and the appointment of an Assessment Fellow provide evidence of BCC's commitment to "data literacy, integrity, and using the data responsibly." The Commission is further pleased to learn of the College's plans to launch new data warehousing software in Spring 2024 to track enrollment trends and financial aid distribution, and of its initiative to use both quantitative and qualitative data to "identify gaps in performance and deficiencies in student satisfaction." In addition, after a hiatus since 2009, we are encouraged that the re-administration of CCSSE data collection will provide the institution with critical student engagement data. The institution's revision of its academic program review process, specifically the introduction of annual assessment plans that demonstrate an integrated approach to assessment, is also noteworthy.

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2029 is consistent with Commission policy requiring that each accredited institution 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 Fall 2029 comprehensive evaluation are matters related to our standards on *The Academic Program*; *Students*; *Educational Effectiveness*; *Organization and Governance*; and *Institutional Resources*.

The Commission commends Berkshire Community College's ongoing efforts to redesign its General Education program and recognizes the work of the General Education Task Force to align Student Learning Outcomes with best practices to provide transparency for students and faculty. We also acknowledge that the addition of the courses "Introduction to the Liberal Arts" and "Liberal Arts Capstone" aims to give students a cohesive experience that highlights the benefits of a liberal arts education. The Commission is further pleased to learn that including an ePortfolio in the capstone course allows students to "market their liberal arts skills," and that offering liberal arts courses both in-person and fully online provides increases scheduling flexibility. As we appreciate BCC's candor that the College's revision of its general education remains a "work in progress," we look forward to learning, in the Fall 2029 self-study, of the institution's continued progress to redesign and assess its core competencies and new Liberal Arts courses. Our standard on *The Academic Program* is relevant here:

Programs leading to degrees or other awards have a coherent design and are characterized by appropriate breadth, depth, continuity, sequential progression, and synthesis of learning. Coherence is demonstrated through learning goals, structure, and content; policies and procedures for admission, retention, and completion; instructional methods and procedures; and the nature, quality, and extent of student learning and achievement (4.3).

The general education program is coherent and substantive. It reflects the institution's mission and values and embodies the institution's definition of an educated person and prepares students for the world in which they will live. The requirement informs the design of all general education courses, and provides criteria for its evaluation, including the assessment of what students learn (4.16).

The Commission understands that Berkshire Community College's decision to eliminate all developmental English courses, together with a reduction in the number of developmental mathematics courses, was done in an effort to increase student retention. We therefore are encouraged by early momentum metrics that indicate the percentage of students earning zero credits in their first term fell for both LatinX students (from 28% in 2020 to 18.6% in 2023) and Black/African American students (from 40.7% in 2020 to 17.6% in 2024) and that, as a result, retention rates increased for the "first time ever in college" student cohort from 42.4% in 2019 to 56.5% in 2022. To reduce the cost of textbooks, another barrier many students face, the Commission is aware that offering Open Educational Resources is a priority in BCC's 2022-2027 Strategic Plan and thus view positively the institution's initial finding that "no-cost option" courses led to improved DFW rates. We welcome further information, through the Fall 2029 self-study, of the success of these and other initiatives designed to reduce existing barriers to student success such as those created by developmental education and the cost of textbooks. This section of the report will be informed by our standards on *Students* and *Educational Effectiveness*:

The institution systematically identifies the characteristics and needs of its student population and then makes provision for responding to them. The institution's student services are guided by a philosophy that reflects the institution's mission and special character, is circulated widely and reviewed periodically, and provides the basis on which services to students can be evaluated (5.8).

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).

The Commission appreciates that, following a multi-year inclusive process, Berkshire Community College launched a new shared governance structure in 2022 that incorporates five guiding principles: student success; inclusive, data-informed decision-making; transparency and communication; mutual stewardship and accountability; and dynamic process. We further commend the College for implementing an annual survey to assess and refine its new governance structure and note positively that an analysis of the results will take place during Summer 2024 and be presented at a fall meeting of the Governance Council. As informed by our standard on *Organization and Governance*, the Commission looks forward to learning, as part of the Fall 2029 self-study, of BCC's progress in ensuring that "the effectiveness of the institution's organizational structure and system of governance is improved through regular and systematic review" (3.19).

Attributed to the state-supported MassReconnect initiative and BCC's partnerships with Motimatic and EdAmerica, we are pleased to learn that Berkshire Community College's headcount and credits were up 13% over Spring 2023 thereby reversing the institution's multi-year enrollment decline. We understand that BCC experienced a 59% increase in applications of which 69% came from applicants aged twenty-five and older. At the same time, while BCC's operating revenues grew 11.3% in FY2023, the institution reported a decline of 12.7% in net student fees due to the impact of the state-subsidized tuition programs. The Commission is therefore encouraged to learn that BCC expects to release a new enrollment plan by

AY2024-2025 that will be aimed at stabilizing its student population and tuition revenue, and that it will implement a new CRM and AI-based communication system by Fall 2024 to enhance student engagement and enrollment processes. In keeping with our standards on *Students* and *Institutional Resources*, we anticipate being apprised, in the Fall 2029 self-study, of the institution's success in achieving its enrollment and financial projections:

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).

The institution preserves and enhances available financial resources sufficient to support its mission. 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 (7.4).

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 Commission expressed appreciation for the report submitted by Berkshire 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.

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 Julia Bowen and Noe Ortega. The institution is free to release information about the evaluation and the Commission's action to others, in accordance with the attached policy on Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions.

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

Sincerely,



Michael Whelan

MW/sjp

cc: Julia Bowen
Noe Ortega

Attachment: Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions