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COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

January 25, 2016

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Dr. Lane A. Glenn
President
Northern Essex Community College
100 Elliott Street
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Dear President Glenn:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on November 19-20, 2015, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education considered the interim (fifth-year) report and the substantive change proposals submitted by Northern Essex Community College and voted to take the following action:

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

that the proposal to establish an off-campus instructional location at Greater Lawrence Technical High School (GLTHS) in Andover, Massachusetts be accepted and the location encompassed within the institution's accreditation, with an effective date of November 20, 2015;

that a site visit to assess implementation of the GLTHS site be scheduled for Fall 2016;

that the proposal to offer a Computer Applications Certificate and two Art courses through a competency-based education (CBE) model be accepted and the CBE program and courses encompassed within the institution's accreditation, with an effective date of November 20, 2015;

that a site visit to assess implementation of the CBE program and courses be scheduled for Fall 2017;

that the report prepared in advance of the Fall 2017 evaluation give emphasis to the institution's success in:

- 1) assessing student learning, including course completion rates, across the two modalities in which CBE courses are offered;
- 2) providing faculty who teach CBE courses with appropriate professional development;

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 implement its competency-based education courses;
- 2) achieving its goals for enrollment, retention rates, and number of graduates;
- 3) coordinating responsibility for institutional research, academic and institutional effectiveness, and planning and strategic initiatives under a single dean;
- 4) implementing its approach to the assessment of student learning and expanding faculty involvement in assessment efforts;
- 5) continuing to implement plans to improve student advising.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Northern Essex Community College (NECC) was accepted because it responded to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letter of March 31, 2011, addressed each of the eleven standards, and included a reflective essay on student learning and success.

The Commission commends Northern Essex Community College for the progress it has made since the last comprehensive evaluation. We note with favor the many achievements that have been realized under the leadership of the president and his stable team of senior officers, including the development of a new strategic plan, implementation of several student success initiatives, enhanced community and government relations activities, strengthened financial planning and reporting systems, and expansion of the Lawrence campus. We appreciate the College's candid discussion of the impact of declining enrollment on the number of courses offered at the College and the percentage of courses offered by full-time faculty members. We are gratified to learn that the number of full-time faculty at NECC has remained "fairly constant" during the past three years and that the College anticipates it will be able to make further progress "in the near future" towards its goal to have 65% of courses taught by full-time faculty.

We take favorable note of NECC's new mission statement and its strategic plan that incorporates five strategic directions: support success, strengthen community, respect diversity, foster leadership, and maximize resources. The College has been successful in implementing dual enrollment programs with local high schools and articulation agreements with Salem State University and University of Massachusetts Lowell and has also developed new pathways to facilitate students' transition from developmental to college-level coursework. The establishment of a Student Success Center and an Information Literacy Lab on the Lawrence campus is noteworthy, as is the implementation of a requirement that all associate-degree students take an Information Literacy Intensive course as part of their programs. Significant improvements have been made to both the Haverhill and Lawrence campuses, and several new technology services, including Degree Works, CollegeNet, and Blackboard Learn, have been adopted.

Northern Essex Community College's thoughtful reflective essay highlights the institution's accomplishments with respect to the assessment of student learning as well as the "limitations" to the institution's assessment processes. We note with approval the adoption of six Core

Academic Skills and the development of intensive courses in each skill area. NECC acknowledges that the processes designed to assess student learning in these courses are "not optimal" but represent a "healthy start" upon which to build further work. The College has developed a "systematic and structured" approach to program review, and the reflective essay includes examples of how NECC has used results to make improvements in several programs, including Radiography, Dental Assisting, and Laboratory Science.

The report submitted by Northern Essex Community College regarding its plans to establish an off-campus instructional location at Greater Lawrence Technical High School (GLTHS) was accepted and the GLTHS site encompassed within the institution's accreditation because the Commission finds the activity to be substantially in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation* and relevant Commission policies.

The Commission commends NECC for its well-developed proposal to establish a 7-course, 25-credit Automotive Technology Certificate program. Four of the courses (12 credits) will be taught at NECC; the other 13 credits will be offered at Greater Lawrence Technical High School, which has an Automotive Shop with the specialized equipment and tools needed for three of the courses: Introduction to Automotive Technology (3 credits), Automotive Technology: Brakes (5 credits), and Steering, Suspension, and Alignment (5 credits). The curriculum follows the standards of National Automotive Technicians Education Foundation and has been designed to "assure alignment and transferability" to associate degree programs in the field. The courses offered at GLTHS have been approved by NECC's college governance and will be taught by appropriately qualified full-time and adjunct faculty employed by the College. The agreement between NECC and GLTHS includes provision for a "teach out period" to protect students enrolled in the program in the event the agreement is terminated before all students have completed their studies. The College anticipates enrollment of 12 new students each semester and expects to generate almost \$37,000 in revenue over the first three years.

In keeping with Commission policy on the establishment of additional instructional locations, an on-site evaluation of the program offered at the GLTHS location will be scheduled for Fall, 2016. A copy of the relevant procedural statement is enclosed for your information and use.

The report submitted by Northern Essex Community College regarding its plans for competency-based education was accepted, and the CBE Computer Applications Certificate and Art courses encompassed within the institution's accreditation, because the Commission finds the activity to be substantially in compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation* and relevant Commission policies.

The Commission takes favorable note of the extensive planning undertaken by Northern Essex Community College to develop its model for competency-based education. We understand that the College, which is participating in the U.S. Department of Education's experimental sites initiative for competency-based education, has established a course-based CBE approach for its Computer Applications Certificate program and two Art courses in its General Studies program. The competencies established for each course are appropriate and have been aligned to professional industry standards; project-based assessments have been developed for each competency. Students will be expected to complete "high-stakes assignments" at a mastery level of 80% or higher in order to progress through the competencies. Feedback, support, and additional resources will be provided to students who are not successful on their first attempt at mastering a competency. The faculty who will teach CBE courses have appropriate academic credentials and teaching experience and will, for each course, develop a Distance Education Course Interaction Plan that will detail how they will engage with students on an individualized basis. NECC has set a goal to enroll 15 students in each of 10 CBE course sections. Students will complete an online orientation to familiarize themselves with competency-based education

and will work with an Academic Coach to establish academic goals, a communication plan, and a "pace chart" to guide their progress through the program.

In keeping with Commission policy, an on-site evaluation to assess implementation of the competency-based education program and courses will be scheduled for Fall, 2017. A copy of the relevant procedural statement is enclosed for your information and use.

In the report prepared in advance of the Fall, 2017 site visit, the institution is asked to give emphasis to two matters related to our standards on *The Academic Program and Faculty*.

We note from the proposal submitted by Northern Essex Community College that the institution's CBE courses will be offered in both online and hybrid formats. The Fall 2017 evaluation will afford NECC an opportunity to report on its initial progress in assessing student learning, including course completion rates, across the two modalities in which CBE courses are offered, as evidence that, regardless of course delivery format, students acquire equivalent "levels of knowledge, understanding, and competencies" (4.39).

The Commission is gratified to learn of NECC's commitment to provide "support and professional development" to faculty as they adapt existing courses to the competency-based education format. We note that such opportunities are expected to include the iTeach program offered by the College's Center for Instructional Technology (CIT), biweekly meetings and conference calls with CIT staff, monthly webinars provided by CBE4CC, and Quality Matters rubrics training. We look forward to learning, through the Fall 2017 evaluation, of the College's success in providing CBE faculty with "substantial and equitable opportunities for continued professional development" (5.13).

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, The Academic Program, and Faculty*.

Northern Essex Community College is asked, in the Fall 2020 self-study to give emphasis to its continued success with its competency-based education courses, as evidence of its "demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning" (2.4).

The Commission understands that NECC has adopted a Recruitment Plan that outlines strategies to achieve a "modest" four percent increase in enrollment by Fall 2017. The interim report also notes the College's goals to increase overall retention rates by "8-10%" during the next five years and to increase the number of degrees and certificates conferred to 1,500 by 2020. We look forward to learning, in Fall 2020, of the College's success in achieving these goals, in keeping with our standard on *Students*:

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 measures student success, including rates of retention and graduation and other measures of success appropriate to institutional mission (6.6).

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 note that Northern Essex Community College has recently restructured responsibility for institutional research, academic and institutional effectiveness, and planning and strategic initiatives into a single dean position. We understand that the new Dean of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Strategic Planning will begin in January 2016 and look forward to learning, through the Fall 2020 comprehensive evaluation, of the effectiveness of this structure in assuring that NECC engages in planning and evaluation that are "systematic, comprehensive, broad-based, integrated, and appropriate to the institution" (2.1) and that its approach to institutional research is "sufficient to support planning and evaluation" (2.2).

As noted above, NECC's reflective essay candidly acknowledges the "limitations" of the institution's assessment processes. The essay also outlines a number of assessment initiatives the College intends to undertake under the leadership of the Dean of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Strategic Planning and with the support of a "new, enlarged outcomes assessment committee with much more involvement of deans, coordinators, and faculty." We look forward to receiving evidence, through the Fall 2020 comprehensive evaluation, that NECC "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" (4.48). Our standard on *The Academic Program* provides this additional guidance:

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).

Finally, the Commission is gratified to learn that Northern Essex Community College has become "even more intentional and structured about orientation and advising" during the last five years to improve student persistence to graduation. Each campus has a Career Planning and Advising Center, and the College is using the DegreeWorks software program to facilitate faculty advising and to enable each student to prepare an Academic Plan. Currently, approximately 60% of NECC students have an Academic Plan in place; the College has set a goal of 100% participation. The Fall 2020 comprehensive evaluation will afford NECC an opportunity to update the Commission on its progress in achieving this goal and in continuing its many efforts to enhance the effectiveness of student advising. We remind you of our standard on *Faculty*:

The institution has in place an effective system of academic advising that meets student needs for information and advice and is compatible with its educational objectives. Faculty and other personnel responsible for academic advising are adequately informed and prepared to discharge their advising functions. Resources are adequate to ensure the quality of advising for students regardless of the location of instruction or the mode of delivery (5.19).

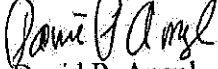
The Commission expressed appreciation for the reports submitted by Northern Essex Community College and hopes that their preparation has contributed to institutional improvement. It appreciates your cooperation in the effort to provide public assurance of the quality of higher education in New England.

Dr. Lane A. Glenn
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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. Jeffrey Linehan. 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. Jeffrey Linehan