



February 23, 2021

Dr. Christina Royal
President
Holyoke Community College
303 Homestead Avenue
Holyoke, MA 01040

Dear President Royal:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on January 21, 2021, the New England Commission of Higher Education took the following action with respect to Holyoke Community College:

that Holyoke Community College be continued in accreditation;

that the institution be asked to submit a report for consideration in Fall 2023 that gives emphasis to the institution's success in strengthening its culture of assessment with attention to the assessment of student learning outcomes and student support services;

that submission of the report be followed by a visit to validate its contents;

that the institution submit an interim (fifth-year) report by August 15, 2025, for consideration in Fall 2025;

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

1. continuing to strengthen its culture of assessment with attention to the assessment of student learning outcomes and student support services;
2. updating and evaluating the effectiveness of the institution's shared governance model with emphasis on committees, policies, and practices;
3. achieving its enrollment and financial goals;
4. developing and evaluating the effectiveness of its comprehensive Equity Plan;

that the next comprehensive evaluation be scheduled for Fall 2030.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

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

The Commission joins the visiting team in commending Holyoke Community College (HCC) for its thoughtful, mission-centric self-study that included evidence of wide participation by the campus community, highlighted the institution's strengths and accomplishments over the last decade, and presented an accurate and candid overview of the challenges facing the College. The Board's commitment to HCC is impressive, and we are especially gratified to learn that a Trustee Guidebook will be developed as a supplement to the by-laws (currently in the process of being updated) that details the role and responsibilities of Board members (e.g., orientation; attendance at meetings; participation on committees), and the process for assessing the effectiveness of the Board. The recently developed Strategic Plan 2019-2022 illustrates HCC's collaborative and systematic approach to strategic planning; transitioning from five large implementation teams to 12 smaller project-based groups to facilitate implementation of the strategic plan during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates HCC's resiliency and ability to quickly adapt to change. The team confirmed that the effectiveness of the support and "wrap around" services HCC provides to its students is a real strength, and we further note positively that the College has significantly improved its technological infrastructure which contributed to the smooth migration to an online/remote learning environment during the pandemic. In addition, automating processes (e.g., Docusign; Live Chat; Early Alert student management system) has made communicating with and tracking the progress of students much more effective. It was apparent to the team that well-qualified faculty and staff maintain the same level of academic rigor and support to students whether they are attending on the main campus in Holyoke, online, or at one of the institution's off-campus locations. We congratulate HCC on its success in serving its students and the community and achieving its mission for 75 years. With the continued engagement of the Board combined with the College's strong leadership team and its dedicated faculty and staff, Holyoke Community College is well positioned to continue achieving its mission and addressing its challenges well into the future.

The institution is asked to submit a report for consideration in Fall 2023 related to our standards on *The Academic Program, Students, and Educational Effectiveness*.

We concur with the judgment of the visiting team that, while Holyoke Community College has made some progress toward establishing a culture of assessment over the last decade, there is still much work to be done. For example, the General Education Assessment Committee began assessment work on five learning outcomes (effective communication, quantitative reasoning, information literacy, knowledge of diversity, and critical thinking) in Spring 2007 and each outcome was assessed between 2010 and 2016. It was not evident to the team, however, that assessment of the five outcomes has progressed beyond the course level to the program and institutional levels. The team further noted in its report that HCC has not established a comprehensive approach to assessing the effectiveness of non-academic areas (e.g., student services and learning resources), policies, or procedures. In the few areas where assessment does take place, it was not apparent to the team that the results are used to inform decision-making, planning, resource allocation, or continuous improvement. We concur with the College that the recent hiring of a Director of Planning, Curriculum, and Assessment and a Coordinator of Instruction Design with a strong assessment background and the scheduling of a college-wide assessment day in March 2021 are positive steps toward advancing the institution's culture of assessment. However, as HCC candidly acknowledges, faculty and departments will need "the tools and time" to accomplish assessment activities and it will also be necessary to "dive deeper into co-curricular assessment and use data more effectively." We look forward, in the Fall 2023 report, to receiving evidence of HCC's success in strengthening its culture of assessment with attention to the assessment of student learning outcomes and student support services. We are

informed here by our standards on *The Academic Program, Students, and Educational Effectiveness*:

The institution develops, approves, administers, and on a regular cycle reviews its academic programs under institutional policies that are implemented by designated bodies with established channels of communication and control. Review of academic programs includes evidence of student success and program effectiveness and incorporates an external perspective. Faculty have a substantive voice in these matters (4.6).

Through a program of regular and systematic evaluation, the institution assesses the effectiveness of its efforts to achieve an equitable educational experience for all of its students and the appropriateness and effectiveness of its student services to advance institutional purposes. Information obtained through this evaluation is used to revise these efforts and services and improve their achievement (5.20).

Assessment of learning is based on verifiable statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. The process of understanding what and how students are learning focuses on the course, competency, program, and institutional level. Assessment has the support of the institution's academic and institutional leadership and the systematic involvement of faculty and appropriate staff (8.3).

The institution with stated goals for students' co-curricular learning systematically assesses their achievement (8.4).

The institution uses a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods and direct and indirect measures to understand the experiences and learning outcomes of its students, employing external perspectives including, as appropriate, benchmarks and peer comparisons (8.5).

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 results of assessment and quantitative measures of student success are a demonstrable factor in the institution's efforts to improve the curriculum and learning opportunities and results for students (8.8).

The institution integrates the findings of its assessment process and measures of student success into its institutional and program evaluation activities and uses the findings to inform its planning and resource allocation and to establish claims the institution makes to students and prospective students (8.10).

The submission of the report will be followed by a visit to validate its contents. A copy of the procedures for the Fall 2023 focused evaluation are enclosed for your information and use.

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 Fall 2025, to report on four matters related to our standards on *Educational Effectiveness; Organization and Governance*;

Students; Institutional Resources; Planning and Evaluation; and Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship.

As noted above, the Commission acknowledges that Holyoke Community College is taking steps to strengthen its culture of assessment. We also recognize that these efforts do not lend themselves to rapid resolution and will require the institution's sustained attention; hence, in keeping with our standard on *Educational Effectiveness* (noted above) we look forward, through the interim report submitted for consideration in Fall 2025, to receiving an update on the institution's continued success in this area.

We understand that HCC is in the process of updating its current shared governance structure and, in addition to committees that have historically been a part of the governance model, the updated structure will include a standing assessment committee that will ensure the connection between planning and assessment is clear. In addition, policies and practices will be reviewed and revised as necessary to ensure that the faculty senate and other bodies are able to work together in a "more cohesive fashion." We look forward, through the Fall 2025 interim report, to receiving an update on the College's success in this area along with evidence that "[t]he effectiveness of the institution's organizational structure and system of governance is improved through regular and systematic review" (3.19). Our standard on *Organization and Governance* will further guide this portion of the report:

The institution's organizational structure, decision-making processes, and policies are clear and consistent with its mission and support institutional effectiveness. The institution's system of governance involves the participation of all appropriate constituencies and includes regular communication among them (3.2).

We share the considerable concern of the visiting team that headcount enrollment at HCC has decreased from a high of 7,473 in 2009 to 4,886 in 2019 (a drop of 43%), leaving the institution in a financially fragile position. Although a total of 26 programs have been eliminated and many programs have been merged during this period, the team noted that the financial strain is becoming increasingly evident. We understand that HCC has taken additional steps to strengthen its financial position, including implementing early retirement and unpaid leave programs and reduced staffing in some areas, and the College is exploring new, industry-relevant programs and advancement initiatives. We further note that HCC recently engaged the UMass Donahue Institute to conduct an enrollment projection analysis and are pleased to learn that, even considering enrollment declines related to the pandemic, the analysis "points toward increased enrollment trends in years to come." As evidence that HCC is "financially stable (7.5) [and that its] 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), we ask that the Fall 2025 interim (fifth-year) report update the Commission on the institution's success in achieving its enrollment and financial goals. Our standards on *Students* and *Institutional Resources* will further inform this portion of the report:

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'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. The institution implements a realistic plan for addressing issues raised by the existence of any operating deficit (7.14).

Opportunities identified for new sources of revenue are reviewed by the administration and board to ensure the integrity of the institution and the quality of the academic program are maintained and enhanced. The institution planning a substantive change demonstrates the financial and administrative capacity to ensure that the new initiative meets the standards of quality of the institution and the Commission's Standards (7.15).

Finally, we are gratified to learn that the College's Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Council "will lead the development of a comprehensive Equity Plan in FY2020-2021 in alignment with the College's Mission, Vision, Values, and student experience statements and Strategic Plan objectives." The Fall 2025 interim report will provide HCC an opportunity to update the Commission on the institution's success with this matter as evidence that "the institution has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning" (2.5). We are further informed here by our standards on *Organization and Governance*; *Students* (cited above and below); and *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship*:

The board addresses its goals for diversity within its membership ... (3.8).

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 ..." (*Students*, Statement of the Standard).

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 scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2030 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 Holyoke Community College and for the report submitted by the visiting team. The Commission also welcomed the opportunity to meet with you, Bob Gilbert, HCC Board Chair; Narayan Sampath, Vice President of Administration and Finance; Renee Tastad, Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs/Dean of Enrollment Management; Kris Ricker Choleva, Director of Planning, Curriculum, and Assessment; Veena Dhankher, Director of Institutional Research; and Scott Knapp, team chair, 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 W. Gilbert, Jr. and Dr. Carlos E. Santiago. 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.

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

Sincerely,



George W. Tetler

GWT/jm

cc: Mr. Robert W. Gilbert, Jr.
Dr. Carlos E. Santiago
Visiting Team

Enclosures:

Procedures for Focused Evaluation Visit
Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions