



Office of the President

February 7, 2023

Dr. Noe Ortega, Commissioner
Massachusetts Department of Higher Education
One Ashburton Place
Boston, MA 02108

Dear Commissioner Ortega,

I wanted to provide additional information and context following yesterday's Executive Committee meeting of the Board of Higher Education. First, I'd like to express my gratitude for the deep consideration, thoughtful discussion, and concerns brought forward by members of the Executive Committee. The approval process for new programs creates stronger and more responsive programs, and we are witness to those benefits on the MCLA Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree. We feel strongly that our proposal explicitly meets the three major requirements of the Letter of Intent: our BSN program is aligned with MCLA's mission and Strategic Plan; the program addresses a critical regional workforce need in alignment with the Massachusetts goals for higher education; and MCLA stands well-resourced and operationally sound to recruit a diverse cohort of nursing students both regionally and nationally that will directly contribute to enrollment growth.

I want to highlight the ways we are look forward to meaningfully collaborate with Berkshire Community College and other key partners:

- We have a working model for an RN to BSN program that we will share with both Berkshire Community College (BCC) and Greenfield Community College (GCC) as soon as we have DHE approval for the BSN degree. We are already planning a nursing working session that will bring together our community college partners to address ways to strengthen the nursing pipeline across all campuses.
- Our nursing strategic plan includes developing in the future a Master of Science in Nursing degree that will directly support both our healthcare partners and nursing programs in the region. The MSN is the minimum credential for nursing faculty, without our own BSN program, this would not be a possible program.
- Our Admissions Office has developed a nursing admissions plan that will funnel applicants not accepted into our pre-nursing program to our community college partners – both BCC and GCC – to begin their nursing training there. Given that most of our applications come from outside both counties, this has the potential to bring more nursing students to our region.
- In addition to our agreement with Berkshire Health Systems to provide clinical spots, we have also discussed opportunities at Southwestern Vermont Health Care in Bennington. SVHC only accepts BSN students for clinicals and MCLA will be their closest partner with the closure of Southern Vermont College in 2019.

I need to stress the urgency in moving MCLA's BSN forward with Fast-Track Approval. It has been a long road since 2017 to bring this program forward and it was particularly hampered by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Any delay, even a few weeks, means that MCLA will miss this year's recruitment cycle and will have to postpone the first nursing cohort until Fall 2024. Students will be considering their choices for fall over the next several weeks with a national enrollment deadline of May 1st. In November, we will welcome the New England Commission of Higher Education to campus for our decennial review and they will be interested in the success of our strategic initiatives, especially nursing which is so central to our previous strategic plan.

We appreciate your recognition of the urgency to create a diverse pipeline of highly qualified nurses in Berkshire County and the surrounding region. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

James F. Birge, Ph.D.

cc: Chris Gabrieli, Chair, Massachusetts Board of Higher Education
Dr. Winnifred Hagan, Senior Associate Commissioner for Strategic Planning and Public Program Approval