Northern Essex Community College

Report to the
Faculty, Administration, Trustees, Students
of

NORTHERN ESSEX COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Haverhill, MA
by

An Evaluation Team representing the
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
of the
New England Association of Schools and Colleges

Prepared after study of the institution's
self-evaluation report and a virtual visit
April 11, 2021 – April 14, 2021

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This report represents the views of the evaluation committee as interpreted by the chairperson. Its content is based on the committee's evaluation of the institution with respect to the Commission's criteria for accreditation. It is a confidential document in which all comments are made in good faith.

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New England Commission of Higher Education

Preface Page to the Team Report

Please complete **during the team visit** and include with the report prepared by the visiting team

Date form completed: 3/25/21

Name of Institution: Northern Essex Community College

1. History: Year chartered or authorized 1960 Year first degrees awarded 1963

2. Type of control: ☒ State ☐ City ☐ Other; specify: _____

☐ Private, not-for-profit ☐ Religious Group: _____

☐ Proprietary ☐ Other; specify: _____

3. Degree level:

☒ Associate ☐ Baccalaureate ☐ Masters ☐ Professional ☐ Doctorate

4. Enrollment in Degree Programs: (Use figures from fall semester of most recent year):

	Full-time[a]	Part-time[a]	FTE[a]	Retention[b]	Graduation[c]	# Degrees[d]
Associate	1447	2375	2418.6	62.21%	17%	711
Baccalaureate	N/A					
Graduate	N/A					

(a) Students enrolled in Associate and Certificate Programs as of Fall 2020 (b) Retention of Students enrolled in Associate and Certificate Programs from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020 (c) Most Recent IPEDS 150% Graduation Rate, reporting year 2020-2021 (d) Degrees and Certificates awarded Summer 2019, Fall 2019, and Spring 2020, not unduplicated graduates

5. Student debt:

	Most Recent Year	One Year Prior	Two Years Prior
Three-year Cohort Default Rate	14.6%	13.4%	14.4%
Three-year Loan Repayment Rate	45.17%		

	Associate	Baccalaureate	Graduate
Average % of graduates leaving with debt	38%	N/A	N/A
Average amount of debt for graduates	$11,110	N/A	N/A

6. Number of current faculty: Full-time 82 Part-time 349 FTE 169

7. Current fund data for most recently completed fiscal year: (Specify year: FY20)

(Double click in any cell to enter spreadsheet. Enter dollars in millions, e.g., $1,456,200 = $1.456)

less; Student Fin. Aid	($8.900)
Net Tuition	$13.400
Gov't Appropriations	$30.700
Gifts/Grants/Endowment	$22.700
Auxiliary Enterprises	$0.000
Other	$1.500
Total	$67.800

Research	$0.10
General	$35.900
Auxiliary Enterprises	$0.000
Other	$4.500
Total	$64.200

8. Number of off-campus locations:

In-state 2 Other U.S ____ International ____ Total ____

8. Number of degrees and certificates offered electronically:

Programs offered entirely on-line 24 Programs offered 50-99% on-line 52

10. Is instruction offered through a contractual relationship?

☒ No ☐ Yes Specify program(s): ____

Introduction

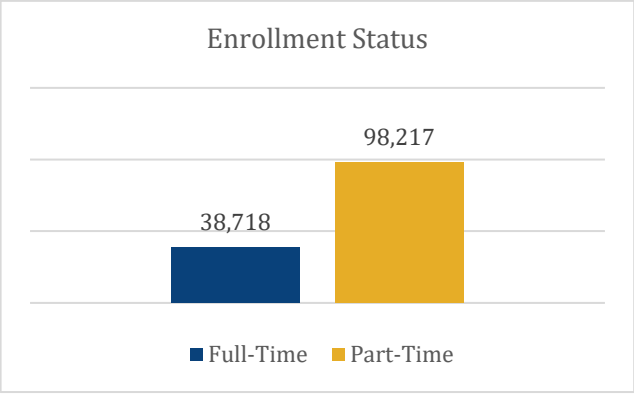
Established in 1961, North Essex Community College serves the communities in the Merrimack Valley from two campuses: the Haverhill campus on the shore of Kenoza Lake and the Lawrence campus at the center of Lawrence in the northeastern corner of Massachusetts. North Essex provides a welcoming environment focused on teaching and learning to a student body of almost 5000 students (pre-COVID), 68% of whom attend part-time. As the first community college in Massachusetts to offer Competency-Based Education, North Essex is "strongly committed to unlocking the potential within each student and empowering [its] diverse community of learners to meet their individual goals." North Essex is also the first federally designated Hispanic Serving Institution in all of New England with a student body that was 43% Hispanic/Latino pre-COVID.

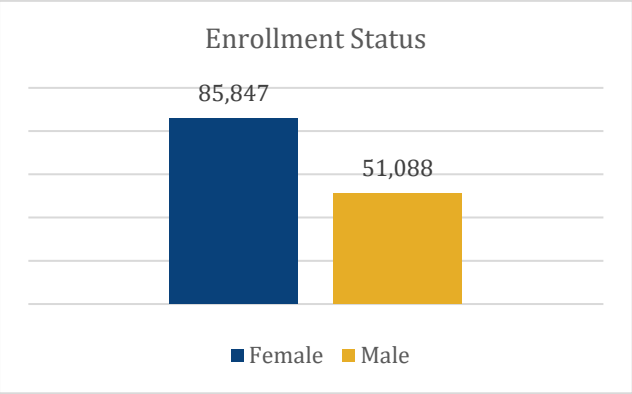
With decreasing state support and declining enrollment, NECC serves mostly students of color who are largely low-income, and often the first in their families to experience higher education. This combination of scarce resources and vulnerable students has led faculty and staff at the college, over time, to develop a culture of **innovation and resiliency** that, despite the challenges they face, has enabled them to become recognized regional higher education leaders. Some of the most important qualities of that culture, which sometimes push the boundaries of "standard" practice, include:

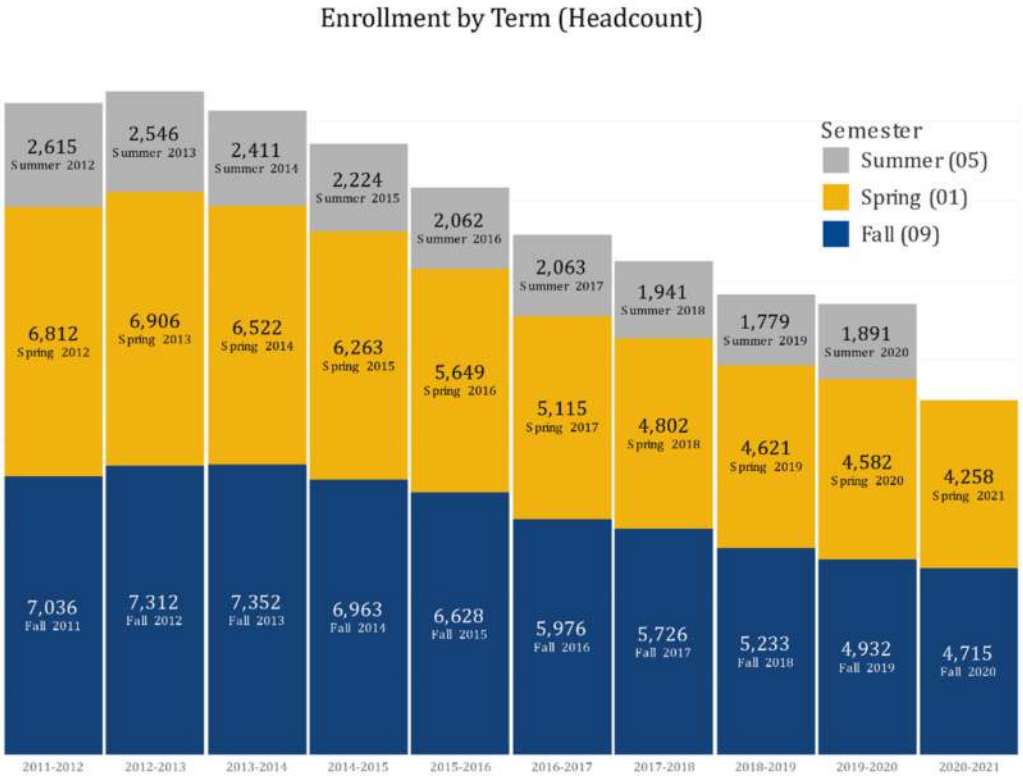
1. Encouraging and supporting experimentation among faculty and staff
2. Creating minimal structures that allow for maximal flexibility and "improvisation"
3. Encouraging "leadership at every level" of the college

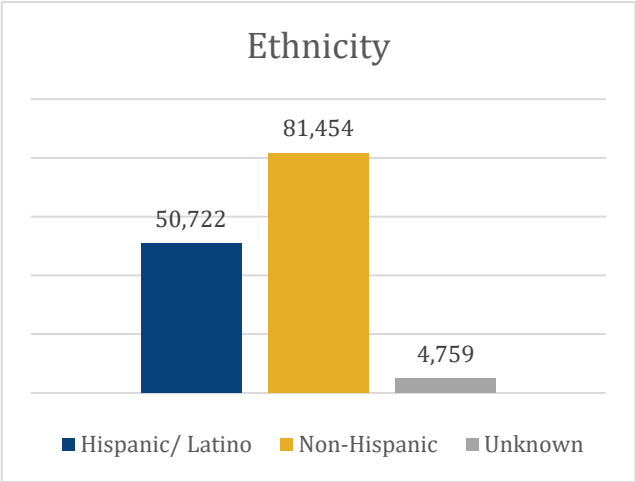
These qualities can be found in a number of NECCC's most important initiatives.

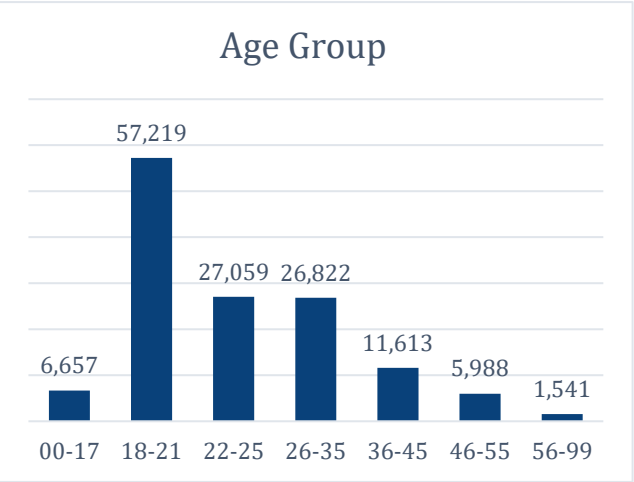
Northern Essex offers about 60 credit programs in 14 areas of study including 36 associate degrees, 24 certificates, and 1 special course in EMT and non-credit courses in five areas of professional development and personal interest. All programs except Sleep Technology include one or more courses online as well as the usual face-to-face.











The site visit team's determinations and evaluative statements given below are based on a thorough review of Northern Essex Community College's Self-Study report, the Self-Study evidence documents, other documents provided to the site visit team in a virtual workroom, the NECC website, and interviews with individuals and larger forums during the virtual site visit. The College provided a well-written and up-to-date Self Study (including the impact of COVID-19) with extensive documentation and data and communicated openly and honestly with the site visit team during the virtual site visit in a spirit of genuine hospitality.

Standard One: Mission and Purposes

Northern Essex Community College (NECC) is one of the fifteen community colleges in the state of Massachusetts. The Massachusetts Association of Community College (MACC) was formed after a state audit conducted in 1958 recommended the creation of the association in order to address the need for more diversity and access to higher education in the state. The MACC Mission Statement adopted by the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education in 1999 states that its mission is to "*advocate, communicate and collaborate in order to strengthen community colleges for the benefit of students, communities and The Commonwealth of Massachusetts."*

The NECC Mission Statement, Vision Statement, and Core Values complement and support the state's higher education mission statement by focusing on the needs of students and enhancing the communities in the greater Merrimack Valley part of the state. Core priorities of the NECC mission statement are unlocking each student's potential, empowering a diverse community of learners, and creating vibrant, innovative opportunities that enhance the cultural and economic life of the region.

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Northern Essex Community College's commitment to their designation as a Hispanic Serving Institution by the United States Department of Education in 2001 is seen in its Core Values and Vision Statement that include a culture of inclusion and embracing all identities in their diverse community of learners. Now the largest ethnicity at NECC, Hispanics represent more than 40% of the College's population. Responding to this and the state's new *Equity Agenda,* President Glenn announced at the start of the 2019-20 academic year, the College's adoption of the *Equity Imperative* to help close equity gaps for its underserved students.

The current NECC Mission Statement was approved by the College in fall 2014, affirmed by the Board of Trustees in December 2014 and formally approved by the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education on March 10, 2015. The NECC Self-Study reflected a desire to update the Mission Statement for current times and special populations and this desire was echoed in interviews during the site team visit.

The Mission Statement is widely and easily visible to students, faculty, staff and the broader community through the college website and the College's presence on multiple social media platforms. The College has intentionally moved away from publishing the Mission Statement in printed publications.

Standard Two: Planning and Evaluation

Introduction

The NECC Self-Study and interviews during the site team visit show that NECC has a well-established culture of flexible and responsive planning and evaluation that enables the College to effectively achieve and improve in its mission and purposes. Northern Essex Community College has created minimal structures that allow for maximum flexibility and encourage innovation and innovation at the local level. The comprehensive and collaborative planning and evaluation process is the result of the College's long-standing commitment to transparency and including external perspectives.

Planning

Northern Essex Community College's latest strategic plan, NECC 2020, was created using the Appreciative Inquiry approach the College has used since 2007 to develop a planning and assessment system that reflects the College's mission and values. The site visit team found from interviews of staff and faculty that this approach, with a focus on strengths and aspirations, resulted in a high degree of participation by staff and faculty, as well as, a strong sense of ownership on the part of employees in the final product of these planning activities. In accordance with the Core Value of a culture of inclusion, one interviewee noted that NECC's planning process provides opportunities for College employees to "hear other voices" and better understand the challenges, aspirations, and perspectives of their peers.

Northern Essex Community College enhances its planning efforts by using third party consulting firms to collect and analyze data. The firms provide data and insights to the NECC leadership that the leadership would not have been able to obtain on their own.

There is an increased appreciation for data collection that has allowed the College to build momentum for cultivating a culture of data-driven decision-making at the College. In an interview of staff and faculty, one employee stated that a deep desire to act as "citizen data scientists," by making more and better use of data within their own positions and departments.

The College has increased its use of data and database-related tools and analytics. The recent wide-spread implementation of the ZogoTech analytics system and Tableau visualization illustrate not only NECC's forward-looking posture in using data to structure its evaluation efforts but also the College's desire to share institutional data across the entire institution.

While NECC's institutional planning process is rigorous and inclusive, the site visit team's review of activities within the College's departments and operation units revealed that there is frequently a disconnect between institutional and departmental planning and activities. For example, the NECC Self-Study notes that there is no actual Academic Master Plan and that the "Integrated Student Experience" goal of NECC 2020 doubles as the Academic Master Plan. Furthermore, a review of the Self-Study shows that financial planning exists primarily at the fiscal year level and not much further beyond.

Finally, while it appears that strategic "Goal Team" committee and departmental activities are supposed to "reach upward" toward the strategic plan, in practice this process seems uneven, and has mixed results. A review of provided documentation illustrates that, while important, focused work is being conducted across the College, the activities overseen by the Goal Teams

were not outlined in a structured, systematic fashion at the beginning of the strategic planning process. While being aligned with the strategic plan's stated goals, the activities were instead devised and executed after the planning process was concluded.

Recent enrollment declines and resulting revenue reductions have hampered NECC's ability to translate many of its planning activities into action. Budget reductions have resulted in the paring down of the Office of Institutional Research from four to two positions. Although this office is currently able to conduct its core functions, these personnel reductions have not allowed it to meet the growing demand for timely, actionable data across NECC's two campuses.

Evaluation

Site visit team interviews of NECC leadership and the Office of Institutional Research confirm that an important facet of the College's assessment strategy is the comparison of outcomes with peer, national, and Commonwealth benchmarks. Standard assessment tools such as the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data Systems (IPEDS) measures, Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool (ICAT) along with NECC's long-standing partnership with Achieving the Dream (ATD) provide valid information to support institutional improvement.

Northern Essex Community College maintains a meticulous process of academic program review that includes reflection and continuous course and curricular improvement appreciated by faculty and department chairs. The College's annual Program Review Summit is described by participants as a useful, clear and comprehensive method for understanding the performance and evolution of the College's curricula.

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Reviewing the highlighted survey instruments reveals that several of them are singular, one-time surveys that preclude a pre- and post-activity comparison. With no baseline metrics against which NECC might measure key performance indicators, these survey tools are not as useful to the College's evaluation efforts as they otherwise might be. In a similar way, the lack of a formal listing of activities created as part of the strategic planning process has also hindered the College's ability to assess the impact of these activities, and therefore to assess the success and impact of NECC 2020 as a whole.

Standard Three: Organization and Governance

Introduction

The Board of Trustees (BOT) is the operating authority and policy-making body for the college. The legal authority of the system, the officers, committees and meeting structure of the Board of Trustees is codified in Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15A. The Board of Trustees is charged with overseeing the administration of NECC, appointing and evaluating the college's president, and determining the policies and procedures for the college. Authority is granted to the president to appoint additional appropriate advisory boards' specific to the college and its programs.

Governing Board

The Board of Trustees is composed of eleven voting members who meet regularly. The BOT attempts to draw from a wide range of constituencies as described by legislative decree in the BOT bylaws. The nominating committee of the BOT is strictly advisory and final decisions on the selection of nine BOT members are made by the Governor. One member is elected by the Alumni Association, and one student representative is elected by the Student Government Association.

Each member of the Board of Trustees is required to complete a conflict of interest statement that identifies any potential conflicts (including financial benefit transactions) and requires the BOT to address potential conflicts through the college's Managed Ongoing Awareness and Training (MOAT) system. BOT members must comply with the Public Education Nominating Council Statement of Commitment and Responsibilities for Massachusetts Public College and University Board of Trustees.

Constituencies providing input to the BOT include individuals from the public and private sectors, college alumni, and students. Standing agenda items such as the Education Report show that the internal college's constituencies, bring information to the BOT. The site visit team met with three of the eleven BOT members. During the meeting, the BOT members provided examples of how outside constituencies engage with the BOT and how BOT members are active and involved in promoting the interests of all of the college via local community boards and communication to state legislative representatives. While significant progress is being made, particularly over the last two years with the creation of a new BOT subcommittee in response to the *Equity Imperative*, more attention must still be paid to diversifying the BOT to better reflect the students and communities the College serves.

The Board of Trustees meeting minutes, posted online on the NECC website, reflect the BOT's ability to set fees, approve hiring of full-time personnel, approval of budgets, accepting of grants, gifts, and trusts, and the authority to award certificates and degrees. The BOT is able to strategically confront unforeseen circumstances. For example, the BOT worked with the College President to adjust the budget as a result of COVID-19's impact on enrollment. The Board's Audit and Finance Committee reviews the institution's systems of enterprise risk management, external audits, regulatory compliance, internal controls, and contingency management. With the vacancies of senior-level administrators over the recent years, the site visit did discuss with the BOT how it assures appropriate attention is given to succession planning for institutional leadership and, where applicable, the composition of the board itself. For example, several vice

presidents are engaged in professional development to prepare them to become a president of a college should the need arise.

In addition to annual training, the BOT participates in an initial detailed and well-designed orientation. The BOT members are also allowed the opportunity to attend the Statewide Trustees Annual Conference. Attendance reports show active participation by many of the trustees with ongoing training.

Faculty have a substantive voice in matters of educational programs, faculty personnel, and other aspects of institutional policy via the Academic Affairs Committee of the ACA.

The College President functions as the chief executive officer and was appointed by the BOT in 2011. The President reports to the BOT and is granted the authority and responsibility for the general administration and direction of all operations at the college. The Board of Trustees meeting minutes show that the BOT regularly reviews the performance of the College Presider via the Presidential Evaluation Committee. A recent College President evaluation along with the makeup of the Presidential Evaluation Committee shows a thorough process with clear measures of performance and engaged a number of stakeholders. Through standing agenda items, the BOT assures that senior officers identify, assess, and manage risks and ensure regulatory compliance.

Internal Governance

The College President, supported by four vice presidents, has oversight over a wide variety of areas of the college. The College's established organizational structure includes responsibilities for academic affairs, student affairs, business, finance, and administrative functions. The internal governance structure of NECC ensures the appropriate consideration of relevant perspectives from faculty, staff, students, and administration in decision-making.

The President's Leadership Cabinet, consisting of the senior administrative leaders, assists the President with decision-making. In the site visit team interview of the Cabinet, Cabinet members offered few examples of how they consult with faculty, staff, students, and other administrators, and are appropriately responsive to their concerns, needs, and initiatives. Although faculty, staff, and students expressed in other interviews with the site visit team that their voices were heard, they could not give examples of how their input led to any actionable changes or implementation of their recommendations.

The All College Assembly (ACA) provides an official body for faculty and staff to identify and discuss collegewide concerns and issues with the administration. The ACA holds meetings twice each semester. The ACA has a number of standing/operational committees, composed of faculty and staff, that provide input and coordinate initiatives affecting the entire College. Although the ACA could benefit from measurable success indicators, the meeting minutes report out the accomplishments of the Assembly and committees. Recently, NECC paired a senior administrator with a respective ACA committee. While this change did lead to ensuring administrative collaboration with the ACA committee, the site visit team received feedback that the effectiveness of that committee was heavily dependent upon the relationship between the committee chair and the senior administrator.

The Vice President for Academic Affairs and Student Affairs (VPASA) serves as the Chief Academic Officer, reports to the President, and has responsibility for the academic program. The

VPASA is assisted in academic administration by an Academic Affairs Leadership Team (AALT). AALT meeting minutes reflect how they provide a strong level of governance that both represents faculty interests as well as promotes effective administration of the academic program. AALT does not show evidence of a formal or periodic evaluation of the organizational structure or that the operation of internal governance procedures is regularly conducted.

The institution has a formal structure to provide primary responsibility for the content, quality, and effectiveness of the curriculum with its faculty. Faculty have a substantive voice in matters of educational programs, faculty personnel, and other aspects of institutional policy via the Academic Affairs Committee of the ACA. Annual reports indicate how the Academic Affairs Committee makes curriculum recommendations to the President regarding all proposals for changes, additions, and deletions in all curricula offered by all divisions of the College. The annual reports also show how this committee recommends changes in college-wide academic policy and standards. Staff are also included in the membership of the Academic Affairs Committee.

During the site visit, faculty expressed concern with faculty losses, so that the majority of ACA representation is now staff. While this has not impacted the primary responsibility of curriculum belonging to faculty, the loss of faculty and representation on ACA should be monitored in future reports. The implementation of curricular processes could benefit from a consistency in implementation. For example, feedback from forums indicated a lack of structural uniformity in the execution of curricular pathways.

Meeting minutes of the Student Government Association (SGA) show that members of administration and the ACA regularly meet with the SGA. Students do feel like members of the ACA and administration are responsive and available to them. The system of governance does show provisions for consideration of student views and judgments in those matters in which students have a direct and reasonable interest. For example, SGA did provide feedback of the challenges of asynchronous math courses during the pandemic. Faculty did take that feedback into consideration and added more synchronous math options moving forward. The current student representative on the BOT described his service on the BOT as one where his input on behalf of students was both solicited and considered as the BOT fulfilled its responsibilities

Northern Essex Community College's organizational structure and system of governance is reviewed only when positions become vacant—there is no evidence of a regular, systematic review. For one of the reviews, NECC hired a consultant when there was an upcoming retirement. Overall, the faculty, staff, and students expressed in the interviews and forums during the site visit that they have the ability to give advisory input into decision making at NECC and have access to administration.

Standard Four: The Academic Program

Introduction

To fulfill its mission of empowering a diverse community of learners to meet their individual goals, NECC offers a commendable slate of programs that meet the needs of the region: 36 associate degrees and 24 certificates in 14 areas of study and over 100 non-credit/short training programs in five areas of professional development and personal interest. Eleven programs are available at 80% online or greater with 2 programs (Business Transfer and Liberal Arts) offered 100% online. All programs are at least one year in length, have transferability to baccalaureate degrees, and include a General Education Distribution.

The College's and individual program websites provide links to degree and certificate program pathways that are easily accessed, comprehensive and include student learning outcomes, career paths and job market, course requirements, recommended sequencing of courses by semester, transfer options, and any special performance/technical and admission requirements (e.g., Nursing). The program student learning outcomes and requirements outlined in NECC's online catalog show that NECC's academic programs have a coherent design and are characterized by appropriate breadth, depth, continuity, sequential progression, and synthesis of learning.

All associate degree programs require students to develop six Core Academic Skills by completing courses designed to meet each of the Core Academic Skills in their program of study. The Academic Catalog lists all courses with one or more of the Core Academic Skills: Intensive designations and also indicates courses with these attributes in the program pathway sections. However, this information is not readily accessible in the same section of the program pages on the college website. When applicable, program pages include specialized accreditations (ten programs have specialized accreditations from professional agencies) and program effectiveness data: credentialing exam, job placement, and program completion rates.

Assuring Academic Quality

The VPASA in conjunction with academic division deans, department chairs, and program coordinators provide academic leadership. This leadership working with faculty on the Academic Affairs Committee (AAC) and participating in a meticulous academic program review process tied to relevant NECHE standards, oversee and assure the quality of NECC's academic programs wherever and however they are offered. The AAC, consisting of faculty, staff, and administrators, makes recommendations on course and program proposals (new and inactivation), course and program revisions, and policy proposal reviews to the VPASA who has final approval. Department Chairs review all courses within their departments regularly for outcomes related to grades, student surveys, and faculty feedback obtained through departmental meetings.

NECC requires each degree and certificate to undergo a formal Program Review every 5 years, using a process developed in 2005 and matured since then. The process includes evaluation by the department chair, one or more program faculty, a faculty member from outside the department, and an external individual from academia or industry to ensure the academic programs meet established standards and competencies. Administrative support is provided by the academic dean, the Office of Institutional Research, and the Director of Academic Policy, Curriculum, and Outcomes Assessment. Student success and program effectiveness factors analyzed in the program review include: Core Skills assessment, student demand, graduation and

transfer, student demographics, and connections to the NECC Mission Statement, Vision Statement, and Core Values. As part of NECC's overall planning and evaluation, faculty present their program review findings at the annual Program Review Summit, focusing on the program's mission statement, key findings, strengths, challenges, and resources requested. The program review template includes action plans to address challenges but a review of presentations of the past three summits shows an uneven quality or even presence of those plans. As noted above, the "Integrated Student Experience" goal of NECC 2020 now doubles as the Academic Master Plan.

Enrollment declines led to an academic program audit that resulted in the closure of ten programs using a defined process. The process examines the purpose/rationale for the closure, accreditation approval (when applicable), program demographics (i.e., applications, admissions, enrollments, and graduates), impact on other programs, and a communication/teach-out plan. The communication to the students provides a timeline of closure and the list of core programs that must be completed before a given date. The inactivation plan must be approved by the division dean, AAC, and the VPASA.

Northern Essex Community College partners with HC Media and numerous health care facilities to provide equipment and experiential learning opportunities for its students. In addition, NECC offers Early College and Dual Enrollment programs with participating high schools. These partnerships utilize an MOU which is initiated and monitored by the PK-12 Office. The MOU includes purpose, responsibilities of both parties, details and policies including liability and indemnification, and two attachments: A. Early College Program Pathways and Courses; B. Program Cost Overviews and Payment Terms. To ensure that Early College/Dual Enrollment courses meet NECC's expectations for student achievement, independent learning, information literacy, skills in inquiry, and critical judgment are appropriate to the subject matter and collegiate level, NECC takes the following steps: its faculty teach the courses; the academic dean evaluates the Early College/Dual Enrollment faculty using standard processes; the NECC department chairs review syllabi, course materials, sample work, and exams; the faculty regularly attend professional development, communicate regularly to monitor student progress, and submit grades on dates determined by NECC.

All NECC associate degrees require successful completion of College Comp I and Core Academic Skills courses in written communication and public presentation in which students learn to listen, speak, read, and write with increasing complexity and sophistication at the collegiate level. These Core Academic Skills courses along with those in global awareness, information literacy, quantitative reasoning, and science and technology ensure NECC graduates meet NECC's expectations for college-level independent learning, information literacy, skills in inquiry, and critical judgement.

Undergraduate Degree Programs

As described above, the College's and individual program websites publish the programs' rationale and clearly define the student learning outcomes and sequence of courses. The site visit team's analysis of NECC's Graduation Requirements and course and program descriptions in the Academic Catalog confirm that the NECC faculty have designed their associate degree programs to give students a substantial and coherent introduction to the broad areas of human knowledge,

their theories and methods of inquiry, plus in-depth mastery of at least one disciplinary or interdisciplinary area.

Each associate degree includes the general education requirement of courses in the six Core Academic Skills described above. Courses are designated as Core Academic Skills Intensive courses after a formal review/approval by the Core Academic Skills Committee. In most cases, a program's core required courses include these intensive courses. Students must complete a minimum of 20 semester credits of Core Academic Skills Intensive courses for the associate degree in compliance with NECHE standards and the Massachusetts Department of Education Undergraduate guidelines. In addition, students choose elective classes from the list under the Elective Classification tab of the online Academic Catalog. Electives are organized by course attributes and accompanying subject codes to help students choose the ones appropriate for their program pathway. The course offerings are broad, incorporate core attributes, and are generally transferrable to 4-year institutions (34 general education foundational credits are transferable to all public colleges and universities within Massachusetts).

General Education

The at least 20 semester credits in the Core Academic Skills Intensive courses required for all degree programs is distributed in a balanced way among the arts and humanities, the sciences including mathematics, and the social sciences. Approximately 175 courses representing 47 disciplines have been designated as Core Academic Skills Intensive. These courses must include specific student learning outcomes identified for each core skill. At least one of these Core Academic Skills is assessed each academic year at the institutional level utilizing the AAC&U's Value Rubrics (for Quantitative Reasoning and Written Communication) as well as other standardized rubrics (Global Awareness, Public Presentation, Science and Technology). An assessment rubric was not found for Information Literacy.

The Major or Concentration

Associate degree programs range in credit hours from 60 –78 credits (average 63 credits) for graduation with certificates ranging between 16-53 credits (average 29 credits). Each program has clearly articulated learning outcomes, required courses, and recommended course sequencing. Evaluation of outcomes occurs during the Program Review process.

Transfer Credit

Northern Essex Community College accepts up to 36 transfer credits from accredited institutions in courses where a student earned a grade of C or better. Articulation agreements are posted on the college website and Massachusetts Department of Higher Education's MassTransfer hosts a course equivalency database that allows students to search for equivalent courses among all pubic community colleges, state universities, and UMass campuses in the state. NECC faculty participation in the MassTransfer

> Twenty-four NECC programs have developed articulation agreements with UMass, Regis and Cambridge Colleges, sixteen private and out-of-state universities, and also four international universities.

Pathways ensures their courses and programs align with state universities and UMass campuses. Twenty-four NECC programs have developed articulation agreements with UMass, Regis and Cambridge Colleges, sixteen private and out-of-state universities, and also four international universities.

Integrity in the Award of Academic Credit

The College ensures integrity in the award of academic credit by following practices common to American institutions of higher education. NECC's credit hour definition is clearly articulated in the Academic Catalog and addresses class, lab, and internship/practica/field experience/co-op/externship/clinical: for lectures, one credit hour is 50 minutes/week in class with two hours out-of-class work and for all other courses, one credit hour requires a minimum of two hours of contact time/week. The award of credit is based on policies developed and overseen by faculty of the AAC and VPASA, comply with applicable accreditation standards, and are consistent with course content and student learning in other institutions of higher education. The site visit team's review of course schedules and syllabi for a wide variety of course disciplines, types and modalities confirmed that the AAC policies are equitably applied. Degree program lengths and credits are also consistent with common standards in American higher education.

Required and elective courses offered each semester are published on the college's website. Competency-based education (CBE) courses are included on a student's transcript in the same manner as other credit courses and do not include course modality. Course competencies are listed on the course syllabus or the course management system. Students must complete required assessments at an 80% level of mastery or higher. Assessment of CBE courses has been completed to ensure they are equivalent in breadth, depth and rigor to courses offered in other modalities.

The College's website shows that NECC is part of the Massachusetts Community College Prior Learning Assessment Consortium and the New England Regional Prior Learning Assessment Consortium. The policies and procedures for the award of credit for prior or experiential learning are clearly stated and available to affected students via the Academic Catalog. Eligibility and requirements for Advanced Placement exams, CLEP/DSST Testing, challenge exams, evaluation by credential, military evaluation, and evaluation by portfolio are clearly outlined on the College's Academic and Placement Testing webpage. Faculty assessors utilize standardized or faculty-created exams, and The American Council on Education guides to determine equivalencies.

The Academic Catalog states that an official transcript from an accredited institution is required to award transfer credit and a student can transfer up to 36 credits. The College requires at least 24 credits to be completed at NECC for a NECC associate degree and at least 12 credits for a NECC certificate. Although transfer credit is usually awarded only for college-level courses earned with a grade of C or better, a "D" grade may be accepted only as part of the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education Mass Transfer Block. However, if an academic program requires a grade higher than a "D" to graduate or a course requires a grade of C or better for prerequisite courses, then the student will be required to repeat the course.

The College publishes the requirements for continuation in, termination from, or re-admission to its academic programs in the Academic Catalog. Graduation requirements are clearly outlined in

the Academic Catalog. The Academic Catalog states NECC's definitions and policies on cheating and plagiarism and faculty are required to provide students with a clearly written definition of plagiarism applicable to their discipline as part of the course syllabus that they provide during the first two weeks of each course.

Processes described above ensure that Early College/Dual Enrollment courses are consistent with the educational objectives of NECC. The MOU between Haverhill High School and NECC's Early College program confirms that dual enrolled students have access to all resources that are available to NECC students including tutoring, learning accommodations, library resources, Banner Self-Service, course management system, etc. as well as campus events, activities, and athletic facilities.

The site visit team's review of a representative sample of course syllabi confirms that students have sufficient opportunities to interact with faculty regarding course content and related academic matters regardless of course delivery method. To ensure that the student who registers for an online learning course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the course or program and receives academic credit, each NECC student is assigned a unique student identification number and password to log in to the portal that allows access to Banner Self-Service, course management system, and email. Accounts are for individual use only and are not transferable or to be used by any other individual.

Substantive Change

Northern Essex Community College has submitted substantive change proposals to NECHE for approval prior to implementation. The following two substantive changes are currently under review during this accreditation visit:

Establishment of new instructional location for the Culinary Arts certificate at the Lupoli Family School of Hospitality and Culinary Arts at the Heights in Haverhill, MA.

Although the website is not up to date, NECC took possession of their space at The Heights in July 2020 to prepare for September 2020 launch of the Culinary Arts Certificate program. Fall 2020, two introductory Culinary courses (Intro. to Culinary with 23 students and Sanitation and Safety with 12 students), were delivered in 100% online format due to the ongoing pandemic utilizing additional resources provided by the National Restaurant Association (NRA) and Pearson which brought the concepts "to life". The Dean and Program Coordinator/Faculty reported that approximately 87% of the students completed the Intro. to Culinary course successfully. 70% of the students successfully completed the National Restaurant Association's certification exam which is a requirement of the Sanitation and Safety course. The Program Coordinator/Faculty initiated Incomplete Grade contracts to allow additional time for the remainder of the students to complete this requirement in line with the College's Incomplete Grade policy. Comp I and Nutrition were also offered in 100% online format. Spring 2021, the program offered in-person laboratory courses on site for a limited amount of 10 students due to state mandated social distancing requirements related to the pandemic. The Program Coordinator/faculty reported that students were able to successfully apply foundational concepts from fall to spring courses. An enhanced comprehensive summer schedule is in place to assure that students can continue

on program pathway without further disruption. The program's first student is on task to graduate on time in August. Despite the planned marketing campaign being interrupted during the pandemic, the program was able to attract 23 matriculated students. The program was highlighted in news releases and a video on community television. There is already a huge demand from industry for graduates of the program. Due to the Culinary program closure at North Shore Community College, NECC is beginning the approval process to expand program to include an associate degree program and the Baking and Pastry Certificate and to align our Culinary Certificate. According to the CFO, 2.2 million dollars has been set aside to support the initial startup and maintenance of the program until full enrollment has been achieved. The CFO reports that the College is in position to support an additional full-time Business/Culinary faculty that is scheduled to begin in the fall 2021 semester.

Six online Early Childhood Education courses and an English Composition II course in a competency-based education (CBE) format.

There is a CBE Implementation Team, composed of faculty and staff that leads the planning and implementation of the CBE initiative and supports CBE faculty with the development of policies, procedures, assessment, and training. In addition, ongoing individualized assistance to CBE faculty is supplemented by the Center for Instructional Technology staff. CBE faculty have the same hiring credentials that exist for all faculty regardless of course delivery format and must also undergo specialized CBE and online course delivery trainings in order to be qualified to teach a CBE course.

The Early Childhood Director certificate is offered mostly in CBE course delivery format. As depicted in the review of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Program Alignment with State and National Standards document, course outcomes within the ECE are aligned with Early Education & Care Core Competencies, NAEYC Standards, and the National Academies of Science. Additionally, these competencies were externally referenced by members of the ECE Advisory Board and faculty from other Massachusetts ECE programs. Established requirements for all courses regardless of delivery methods, expectations for student learning, course content, prerequisites, grading and credit hour policy are consistently applied to CBE sections of the six ECE and one ENG102 courses. As validated by review of competency maps and sample syllabi, the course-based CBE courses maintain the same learning outcomes and requirements as those delivered on campus, online or hybrid and are in alignment with professional industry standards. Learning outcomes emphasize performance and not simply knowledge acquisition. All courses adapted for CBE are delivered online in the traditional 15-week semester using Blackboard.

Learning outcomes emphasize performance and not simply knowledge acquisition.

Students receive CBE course training and a Smarter Measures assessment where results are reviewed by the CBE Learning Coach with the student. Grading of student work is held to a common definition of mastery of 80% or higher (higher than average) demonstration of course competencies. Faculty provide support, feedback and additional learning resources to students who do not master competencies at the level of 80% on their first attempt. A student must pass each competency at the level of 80% or higher in order to successfully pass and earn credit for the course. The existing Grading System and Academic Standing policies are followed in the

competency-based education program. Students will only be allowed to continue taking CBE courses if they complete with a grade of 80% or above. Students who are unable to earn an 80% in a course will be permitted to complete the course as if it were traditional online course but will not be eligible to continue with competency-based courses. Despite some initial concerns of CBE courses with ESL students, faculty reported that the flexibility and additional time have proved effective especially with referrals for academic tutoring for reading/writing skill enhancement when necessary.

Review of the CBE Course Review Checklist demonstrated the required components for CBE courses which included pace charts, syllabus, student support services access which include online advising, SMARTTHINKING, online tutoring, learning accommodations, and library and information resources. The best practice of universal course design has been implemented to ensure online format is adaptable to all learners. The Unit/Module Content section of the checklist, includes learning elements, activities, pre-assessment (opportunity to test out), instructional materials, self-checks/practice assignments, and major assignments (which require authentic demonstration of learning). Weekly Journal Check-ins are required and provide substantial and regular interaction between faculty and students. Students in CBE courses are supported by Learning Coaches who communicate weekly/bi-weekly with students via email, text, or Zoom depending upon the student's preference. The Learning Coaches also communicate weekly with faculty about the student's progress.

In the early phases, ECE faculty have mostly worked with community partners at early childhood and adult learning centers in Haverhill and Lawrence to recruit students for this program. There have only been three ECE courses taught in CBE format (ECE101, ECE203, ECE211) due to the pandemic which did have enrollments ranging from 7-15 students. ENG102 has been consistently offered in CBE format each semester with an enrollment of 19 students for spring 2021. Assessment of student learning in the ENG CBE classes is substantial using quantitative and qualitative data and indicate increased student success in CBE vs. non-CBE courses. Although the assessment of student learning within the ECE CBE courses has been completed, the data is limited due to each of the three courses only being offered once.

Standard Five: Students

Introduction

The mission of Northern Essex Community College is to "educate and inspire" students to succeed with a vision towards cultural inclusion that leads to initiative and excellence. The virtual site visit allowed the team to experience how the college fulfills this vision as it relates to the NECHE standards of accreditation.

The revitalization of the College's Strategic Plan NECC 2020, was a topic of excitement during the site visit. The first two pillars of NECC 2020 are squarely focused on student success and preparing them for high-quality jobs: *Integrated Student Experience (ISE)* and *Student Career Experiences*. Northern Essex will be in full partnership with all NECC stakeholders, including faculty and community members as it carries out this student-centered work. The plan was created to move the College forward in response to the current enrollment challenge and is intentional about creating systems and structures to help students from the point of acceptance to the point of completion.

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Admissions

Consistent with its mission of empowering a diverse community of learners, NECC's enrollment profile, published on its website, shows that a majority of the student body is from the state (89%), part-time (69%) and 25 years old or younger (70%). Additionally, female enrollment is higher than male enrollment and 62% of students receive financial aid. The college is a Hispanic serving institution with 42% of the students identifying as Hispanic. Overall, the enrollment for students who identify as other than white is 50%. More granular student data for the past ten years are posted in the Consumer Information - Student Success section of its website using the Tableau to easily visualize the data trends.

The consistently high percentage rate of accepted to applicant students, across all races/ethnicities, aligns well with the information provided on their website that states all that students need is a high school diploma or equivalent to get into their non-competitive programs. The rates for all groups are equitable and reflect the College's status as an open access institution.

Student enrollment at NECC has steadily declined since 2012, a trend shared by most other community colleges in New England. In Fall 2012, the total full-time equivalent student (FTE) was 4482 and by Fall 2019, it was just 2935 (some of Fall 2020's drop to 2716 can be attributed to COVID-19). The same decline in enrollments is also true for part-time students at NECC. The Standard 5 Data Forms show that retention rates of students at NECC have also decreased for returning students.

The enrollment goals are substantial given the current national outlook for community colleges and the institution's lack of systematic planning and evaluation for enrollment management. As evidenced in the Standard 5 data form, the college hopes to significantly increase overall enrollment in fiscal year 2021. Given this increase, the College simultaneously predicts a

continued drop in total number of applications to NECC and a drop in the total number of accepted students in the next fiscal year. Despite this, the College anticipates an increase in the number of accepted students enrolling in the College compared to last year's numbers.

Student Services and Co-curricular Experiences

Consistent with its mission, NECC describes the characteristics of the students it seeks to serve with an emphasis on meeting the diverse needs of the greater Merrimack Valley. In accordance with a state mandate, the College recently moved to multiple measures focused on high school GPA to assess college readiness and placement in first-year courses.

The NECC website states, and site visit team interviews of faculty, staff, and students confirm, that the Office of Student Life is there to "support and empower" students to engage themselves in and outside of the classroom. Student Life at NECC is also committed to "creating an inclusive and welcoming community that encourages all to join" with a vision of transforming and deepening the lives of all students to reach their personal goals. This vision of transformation, support, and empowerment is reflected and celebrated with voices we heard during the site visit as well as with their evolving photography project titled #facesofnecc. While these pieces are in place, there is an absence of systematic long-term planning and evaluation as it relates to NECC's Mission, the Equity Imperative and Student Affairs.

Northern Essex Community College's response to the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates one of the ways that the College identifies and responds to the needs of its students. The College developed *The Knight's Wellness Pledge* that describes the College's commitment to the health and safety of students and asked that students participate and agree to the terms of the pledge to help in these efforts. The pledge directs the College community to protect themselves, protect others and the community.

The College has robust student support services that include Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services, Learning Accommodation Services, ESL Services, PACE Trio Program, individualized Academic Coaching and peer student led Supplemental Instruction. The College is also a recognized Military Friendly Institution.

The philosophy of NECC's student services is clear, consistent with its mission, and published in several places on its website. This philosophy guided NECC in implementing its new *Integrated Student Experience (ISE)* strategy that was created to address the importance of retaining students and supporting them in their journey at NECC. Incoming students are oriented to the College and advised through career exploration to choose an academic pathway in the Student Success Hub which is the home for comprehensive support services. After choosing an academic pathway, students transition to one of the five Academic Centers that are organized by meta-majors. Each Academic Center is staffed by faculty who teach the subjects and student support staff, all working together to provide academic coaching and tutoring. The centers also provide a place for doing homework and attending major subject-specific programs and career events. The integration of academic and student support services into the centers makes support services "unavoidable" for students that need them and has the goal of increasing a student's sense of belonging, increasing academic structures, and increasing the ease with which a student navigates their experience.

The implementation of the ZogoTech analytics system and Tableau visualization on the Student Success dashboard enables NECC to evaluate the effectiveness of its efforts (such as the ISE) to achieve an equitable educational experience for all of its students and the appropriateness and effectiveness of its student services to advance institutional purposes. The dashboard enables NECC to track and monitor enrollment patterns, persistence, retention and completion rates of their students, disaggregated by cohort groups and student type. Efforts are being made to expand the use of data to include *EAB Navigate Analytics* and a new *Faculty Equity Dashboard* feature.

Student enrollment in Developmental Courses has remained fairly steady since 2013 with approximately 40% of students taking a developmental Math course and approximately 36% of students taking a developmental English course. The 2020-21 Academic Catalog lists five Developmental Math courses and three non-ESL Developmental Reading and/or Writing courses. The new multiple measures onboarding process has decreased the number of students required to enroll in developmental courses and increased the number who directly enroll in college-level courses. The College has led developmental level curriculum reform efforts to now include co-requisite courses and accelerated developmental education courses.

First-generation students who meet federal financial aid guidelines receive extra help from the TRIO-SSS program Pathways to Academic & Career Excellent (PACE). A Care and Concern Outreach Team chaired by the Dean of Students focuses on assessing and responding to students of concern. The College uses a combination of professional and peer tutors to provide individualized help. In response to the extra stress in going fully online during the pandemic, NECC used CARES Act funding to create the Student Ambassadors service for peer-to-peer help with navigating the online environment and connecting students with the student support services at NECC. During the Student Forum with the site visit team, there was much excitement around the Student Ambassador service.

In response to the extra stress in going fully online during the pandemic, NECC used CARES Act funding to create the Student Ambassadors service for peer-to-peer help with navigating the online environment and connecting students with the student support services at NECC.

Title IX and FERPA regulations are accessible on the NECC website. The financial aid website contains information in Spanish and there are onsite FAFSA Workshops conducted at local high schools where financial aid staff work with students and counselors through the entire application process. The Title IX information on the website is clear and guides students to resources and contact information related to Title IX. These policies are also clearly presented and explained during the required virtual New Student Orientation series.

The College provides an extensive set of co-curricular activities. A robust athletics website shows that the College is dedicated to the athletics with 12 men's and women's teams, including an Esports team for women. All students may use the Wellness and Fitness Center for free. There are several avenues to develop student leadership including: Student Government Association, the college newspaper (*NECC Observer)*, 12 student clubs, civic engagement opportunities, and the yearly *Parnassus* literary magazine that is a student-run publication consisting of short fiction, poems, creative nonfiction, and all types of printable art and photography.

The college website describes NECC's opportunities for student leadership in the Student Government Association with student leadership on both campuses. The roles of leadership include Marketing & Communication Chair, Secretary, Program Chair, Vice President and President.

Current and past Academic Catalogs dating back to 2016-17 are easily available on the NECC website. The student code of conduct and grievance procedures are published in the Academic Catalog with the most recent revision of the conduct code in February 2020. The Student Rights and Responsibilities statement clearly articulates the expectation of students and that any formal complaints or violations of these rights are detailed in the online Academic Catalog.

Standard Six: Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship

Northern Essex Community College supports teaching and learning through a well-qualified faculty and academic staff.

Faculty and Academic Staff

> The faculty and academic staff are extremely dedicated to their students and doing whatever it takes so that NECC can continue unlocking the potential within each student and empowering a diverse community of learners to meet their individual goals.

For a student body of 2935 FTE in Fall 2019 (6818 unduplicated head count for the 2019-20 year), NECC employed 92 full-time and approximately 289 part-time faculty. The College employs an effective number of librarians, academic advisors and career advisors. The program offerings are extensive with approximately 60 programs in 14 areas of study. Among full-time faculty, at least 96% hold at least a master's degree. The faculty and academic staff are extremely dedicated to their students and doing whatever it takes so that NECC can continue unlocking the potential within each student and empowering a diverse community of learners to meet their individual goals. However, given NECC's numerous references to "faculty overload", "understaffed and underpaid", and faculty fatigue, as well as, significantly lower-than-average salaries (more than $11,000 below the national average), the site visit team is concerned about NECC's continued ability to attract and retain appropriately qualified faculty whose profiles are consistent with NECC's mission and purposes.

One union, the MCCC, represents full-time faculty members, continuing education faculty, and professional staff. The MCCC collective bargaining agreement includes faculty evaluation procedures, tenure and promotion guidelines, workloads, wage and benefit packages, course assignments, and grievance procedures. The site visit team confirmed that faculty evaluations are done in accordance with the bargaining agreement. The support staff are represented by AFSCME and its collective bargaining agreement includes the wage and benefit package.

When management makes hiring decisions, the wages and employment position of the candidates are determined by credentials and experience. A typical full-time faculty member is contracted to work 37.5 hour/week. The workload for the faculty includes course prep time, course instruction, advising and college service. Staff are scheduled to work 37.5 hour/week as well.

With lower salaries and numerous comments from faculty and staff about fatigue and being "spread thin", the site visit team asked the Administrative Council about workload increases leading to significant burnout. The council said that workload has increased because funding has decreased with a 35% decrease in enrollment and a 20% loss in faculty. Although faculty and staff are not required to work beyond the hours in the bargaining agreements, many do. Faculty, staff, and administration all raised the concern about offering potential employees with master's and doctoral degrees such low salaries, does not make NECC competitive in the job market. The reduced number of full-time faculty hires is beginning to affect other functions, such as staffing academic centers and college service which could impact the educational quality and services for students.

Professional development opportunities are provided in a very effective manner through the Center for Professional Development (CPD). Example professional development opportunities provided by the CPD include: leadership training, new faculty orientation, the Teaching and Learning Academy, and an annual Professional Day. The CPD also offers funds to attend conferences. The CPD offers new full-time faculty extensive orientation during their first semester at NECC. A course release is provided to the new faculty for attendance at the new faculty orientation. The "lunch and learn" series provides opportunities for faculty and staff to present their own scholarship to their colleagues. The Center for Instructional Technology provides further professional development related to teaching hybrid, online, and competency-based education courses, instructional technology and differing media technology and support.

In the site visit team interviews, faculty and staff noted that one benefit of the COVID-19 pivot to online learning and operations were the increased number of free or low cost online professional development opportunities available to them through NECC. In one example, a specific employee was commended for his willingness to assist others in the college in helping with "program coordination and even helping management establish assessment and evaluation models". The faculty and staff are very supportive of both the formal and informal work in professional development among their colleagues and peers.

The collective bargaining agreements have specific language regarding evaluation, courses of action for improvement and termination due to unsatisfactory evaluation. The evaluation process includes the supervisor's review of the faculty member's student evaluations, faculty advising data, and faculty course materials and an in-class observation. New faculty are evaluated every fall semester before earning tenure and then every third year after earning tenure. Struggling faculty are mentored by their supervisor and often a successful senior faculty member. Faculty, staff and Human Resources (HR) stated in the site visit team interviews that the evaluation procedure was effective and administered in a timely fashion

Recruitment and hiring procedures are described in the *NECC Hiring Procedure Manual*. This document adheres to State and Federal laws regarding equal opportunity and affirmative action. The College uses the "Interview Exchange" software for the electronic management of many of the areas related to employment searches. Faculty and staff stated that they believed the "Interview Exchange streamlined the interview process and made it more effective". The College's faculty trained by HR participate in faculty search committees.

Because of the NECC faculty demographics of 86% white teaching a majority non-white student body, the site visit team concurs with the NECC Self-Study's conclusion that NECC's hiring procedures are not sufficient for diversifying the faculty and that "the College needs to implement a system to improve equity and inclusion in our academic faculty and staff and develop processes to measure and evaluate those efforts." While significant progress is being made, particularly over the last two years, more attention must still be paid to diversifying the faculty and staff to better reflect the students and communities the College serves. Many employees stated the belief that NECC's low salary structure is hindering a diverse pool of applicants.

Teaching and Learning

Northern Essex Community College's mission is rooted in effective teaching and learning. The MCCC collective bargaining agreement states that academic freedom is essential to the fulfillment of the purposes of the institutional system, and they acknowledge the fundamental need to protect faculty members from any censorship, threat or restraint which might interfere with their obligation to pursue truth in the performance of their teaching functions. The Self-Study's statements about the respect for academic freedom are corroborated by interviews of faculty during the virtual site visit.

The College has been effective in engaging faculty in creating new learning and support opportunities for students by having faculty work with student support staff to provide academic coaching and tutoring in the five Academic Centers as part of the Integrated Student Experience (ISE) described above in Standard 5. Indeed, the creation of the ISE has provided a framework that became the catalyst for a whole-college transformation. The ISE with the Academic Centers broke down the silos between the instructional and student support sides of the College, enabling more of the faculty and staff to get a bigger picture view of the College as well as opening avenues for greater collaboration and support of one another. Academic Centers are an integral part of the success and enthusiasm that the faculty and staff share toward their students and their profession. This enthusiasm is tempered, though, with the realization that the reduced number of full-time faculty available to staff the Academic Centers and fulfill other college services could impact the educational quality and services to students.

The ISE with the Academic Centers broke down the silos between the instructional and student support sides of the College, enabling more of the faculty and staff to get a bigger picture view of the College as well as opening avenues for greater collaboration and support of one another.

Standard Seven: Institutional Resources

Human Resources

Employment levels (365 full-time and 403 part-time employees) appear to be sufficient to meet the needs of students but have declined in recent years consistent with the College's enrollment decline. Minimum qualifications are clearly stated for all positions and each new full-time employee receives a letter outlining the terms and conditions of the appointment verify. All new employees also participate in an in-person orientation.

Compensation for all MCCC and AFSCME employees is collectively bargained to be competitive and adequate, however, as noted above, faculty salaries are over $11,000 below the national average. Non-Unit Professional compensation is applied under guidelines from the Board of Higher Education. Employees across all sectors are evaluated in accordance with their respective collective bargaining agreement or handbook, which occurs annually in most cases.

The Human Resources (HR) policies and procedures are posted and readily accessible on the NECC's website, and in printed form in HR offices. Policies are periodically reviewed, and updated in accordance with state regulations, and an HR representative conducts regular training and information sessions. Conditions of employment such as probationary periods and grievance procedures are in accordance with collective bargaining agreements. Conditions of employment for non-represented employees are in accordance with the Non-Unit Professionals Policy Handbook. All positions include clear and complete descriptions on file in the office of Human Resources, showing the duties and expectations of the role, as well as the qualifications and/or credentials necessary to hold such positions. Prior to hiring, required educational or professional credentials are verified by HR for every employee.

The site visit team found from the interviews that NECC is working to increase the diversity of faculty and staff to improve the educational experience of all students, though the institution acknowledges that more improvement is necessary. As shown in the Data Table 6.5, just 18.5% of the full-time faculty and 12.4% are minority. The College has a robust and systematic professional development process in place through its Center for Professional Development.

Financial Resources

Consistent with both regional and national trends, NECC has experienced enrollment declines due, in part, to low unemployment rates as well as a declining number of high school graduates in the region. The College has experienced a 24.7% decline in FTE enrollment between Fall 2016 and Fall 2020. The FY 2021 budget is based upon a projected 10% enrollment decline from the previous year.

Northern Essex Community College's operating revenue decreased from $37.1 million in fiscal year (FY) 2018 to $32.7 million in FY 2019 but increased to $35.5 million in FY 2020. This growth was due primarily to an increase in government grants and contracts, while tuition and fee revenue remained flat. Appropriations from the state increased over the same time period from $26.3 million in FY 2018 to $27.7 million in FY 2019 and to $29.5 million in FY 2020.

The College has operated within its revenue sources and without compromising its level of service by maintaining expense allocations where needed and putting efficiencies in place. The College's financials illustrate that the majority of the NECC's resources are devoted to the direct support of its academic purposes and programs, with 51.5% of total operating expenses for instruction and academic support, and 21.1% for scholarships and student services in FY 2019.

The College has operated within its revenue sources and without compromising its level of service by maintaining expense allocations where needed and putting efficiencies in place.

Despite declining enrollment and approximately 40% of its revenue coming from tuition and fees, NECC's financial position is stable. The site visit team reviewed NECC's audited financial statements for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2019, which were prepared by an independent certified public accounting firm and reviewed and approved by the College's Board of Trustees. These statements document improvements in financial position, including cash on hand and net position, providing the necessary reserves to continue funding educational and student services at appropriate and consistent levels with the ability to offset potential financial emergencies.

The auditors indicated that total assets on June 30, 2019 were $89.9 million, an increase of $6.8 million or 8.1% from the prior year. The value of current assets on June 30 was $11.2 million, an increase of $2.7 million compared to the prior year. Total cash and equivalents totaled $8.3 million, $2.2 million higher than last year primarily due to management of cash disbursements and well as a conscious effort in expense savings. However, the lack of a multi-year financial forecast hampers the College's ability to quickly pivot during times of significant enrollment challenges as well as potential changes to funding models. While State budgeting processes and various other uncertainties make multi-year forecasting difficult, NECC needs to create long-term financial plans based on the most realistic assumptions possible, so that it can better weather drops in tuition.

The Northern Essex Community College Board of Trustees operates under Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 15A, Section 22, as well as through a formal set of By-Laws. Together, these outline the authority, fiduciary responsibilities, relationships, and legal mandates of the Board. The College's Board of Trustees sets fees, approves the hiring of full-time personnel, approves budgets, accepts grants, gifts, and trusts, and has the ultimate authority to award certificates and degrees, among other things. It has a standing Audit and Finance Committee that meets at least quarterly and provides regular reports to the full Board. This committee is responsible for assuring risk assessment by receiving and reviewing audit and compliance reports from external auditors, as well as budget and compliance reports from internal staff and committees. The Board of Trustees is kept informed of the College's fiscal affairs and is involved in the budget development and approval process. The Board analyzes any proposed increases in student fees and the resulting impact on students with and without financial aid on an annual basis. Although the College described its efforts to avoid increases in fees in the Self-Study, the FY 2020 budget was approved with increases of $6 in all course fees.

The Department of Administration and Finance creates an annual Budget Schedule that is widely distributed. The planning and budget process begins with the department's staff, who report to the Director of Financial Services/Comptroller. Chairs, deans, and directors develop their goals and budgets for the following fiscal year, based on the parameters specified by the appropriate vice president. Final budgets are reviewed/approved by the President and the Vice President of

Administration and Finance (VPAF) before they are forwarded to the President's Cabinet for review and to the College's Board of Trustees for final discussion and approval. Once approved, the budgeted amounts are posted in the Banner administrative software system.

The annual budget development practices are inclusive, involving the solicitation of input from several constituency groups. Budget planning is led by the President and the VPAF and overseen by the Board of Trustees and its Audit & Finance Subcommittee. Acting on the recommendation of the subcommittee, the full Board of Trustees considers a budget for approval in May of each year for the fiscal year commencing July 1st. Final approval of the annual budget is by the Board of Trustees.

Information, Physical, and Technological Resources

Northern Essex Community College has sufficient and appropriate physical resources necessary to fulfill its mission of creating a welcoming environment that inspires its students to succeed and enhancing the cultural and economic life of the greater Merrimack Valley. The College continues to make significant progress on reducing an extensive backlog of deferred maintenance though a determined outreach for external funding, including the Massachusetts Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance that provided some funding for high priority needs. The VPAF's facilities team has prioritized critical maintenance and safety projects. The Colleges does not have a facilities master plan but instead uses both the Building Portfolio Summary Report (a formal assessment documenting both cost and urgency of deferred maintenance projects) and the Capital Spending Plan FY2019 - FY2023 to guide its prioritization of investments in facilities.

The College is effectively managing its technological resources through extensive policies and procedures that govern the use and reliability of the technology systems, the integrity and security of data, and the privacy of individuals. The work of the Information Technology (IT) department is driven by a plan developed by a cross-functional team, including input from students. The college hired the Huron Consulting Group in 2018 to analyze the IT strategic plan and its infrastructure, staffing, and services. Their report confirmed staffing counts within the IT area were appropriate and the strategic plan aligned with the College's goals. The report also assisted the division in adjusting priorities focused more heavily on strategic initiatives. The resulting IT Master Plan is reviewed and updated regularly by the Information Technology Committee of the All College Assembly.

The IT department has personnel to provide day-to-day support through a helpdesk ticketing system, email, phone, and in-person support. The IT department works with end users to resolve technology problems and track potential external security threats, most commonly "phishing" emails, while educating the college community about these types of threats as soon as they are recognized. Spam filters have been implemented to quarantine any suspicious email prior to arriving in an employee's inbox.

The Center for Instructional Technology (CIT) administers and maintains the College's course management system (currently Blackboard). During the virtual site visit, faculty and staff went out

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The NECC Library supports the academic needs of the college by providing information resources, services, and instruction. The library spaces on both campuses include walk-in computing labs, managed and staffed by academic technology professionals providing technological support for students. The NECC library provides information literacy sessions at both locations; including individualized content based on the students' needs. Information on library services and database tutorials are easy to find through a dedicated link on the college's main website. The Self-Study acknowledges and site visit interviews confirm that inequity exists between the facilities and access provided in Lawrence as compared to the Haverhill campus. Plans to make the necessary improvements have been developed but have yet to be implemented, primarily due to budget constraints.

Standard Eight: Educational Effectiveness

Northern Essex Community College is dedicated to accomplishing its well-defined student achievement outcomes within the context of its mission, and despite financial constraints. In the last decade, successful efforts in this area include strategic collaborations between academic affairs, student services, and data system (institutional research and learning assessment), and the targeted shift towards serving more non-traditional students (including high school students) as well as the growing Hispanic population in the Merrimack Valley. Specific measures of this success include stable retention and graduation rates. A more comprehensive and systematic approach to educational effectiveness at both the institutional and program levels will further bolster these efforts.

Standard of Achievement

As described above in Standard 4, the Academic Catalog provides a variety of comprehensive, specific, and easily navigable information for the students about degree/certificate program requirements, course sequences, and learning outcomes. The site visit team's review of a representative sample of course syllabi confirms that the courses have sufficient rigor expected of college-level courses. These syllabi included the student learning outcomes or course objectives, grading policies (including performance expectations), and Core Academic Skill designation if applicable, and course assignments were laid out succinctly.

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Northern Essex Community College maintains a meticulous process of academic program review which includes a comprehensive program review template that ties to the relevant NECHE's standards. The College's focus on program review is clearly demonstrated by the thoroughness of the completed reviews that were provided to the team, and interviews with faculty and program chairs confirm that the review process is considered to be central to the ongoing improvement of the College's academic programs. The transfer and articulation agreements described above in Standard 4 confirm that NECC upholds its academic standards appropriate to the degrees it confer.

Assessment

The College has established organizational structures and processes that foster its growing culture of assessment. The VPASA meets with the program chairs/coordinators twice a semester regarding resource allocations needed for assessment. The Assessment of Student Learning Committee, composed of the appropriate college personnel, manages various institutional-level assessment projects, and all faculty and related staff meet annually at the Program Review Summit to report and discuss a range of assessment projects. The College is also an active participant of the state Board of Higher Education's Advancing a Massachusetts Culture of Assessment (AMCOA). Technologically, NECC leverages the TK-20 system to manage assessment artifacts and its scoring process, and Tableau is used to share institutional data to the college community and beyond.

Of the six Core Academic Skills, only two core outcome assessments included data: Quantitative Reasoning and Science & Technology. Both assessment results were impressive: none of the rubric categories had more than 7% at the lowest benchmark level (Level 1). However, this data did not include information related to the courses in question, the student sample size, or the appropriate competence level of students NECC assessed, all of which would impact the significance of these outcomes. It was also unclear if and how the data were used for the improvement of student learning, as there was no follow-up study. Data for the programs accredited by professional agencies were not listed in the Self-Study but were provided to the site visit team at the virtual site visit. All except Dental Assisting and Healthcare Technician include the licensure examination passage rates, ranging from 78.6% to 96%.

Seventy-one percent of NECC's programs have student learning outcomes. The number of student learning outcomes per program ranges between 3 and 33, with an average of 8. The measurable and definitional quality of the learning outcomes for effective assessment varies from program to program. A large majority (86%) of the programs have course student learning outcomes mapped to program learning outcomes. Some of the programs with missing program learning outcomes were new (e.g., Children's Behavioral Health Specialist and Peer Recovery Specialist) but others were not (Technology & Business, Business Management Health Care Practice, and Law Enforcement).

While program assessment and action planning are not fully consistent across the College, a culture of assessment culture is developing at NECC. As the six Core Academic Skills were developed, their implementation was directed by AAC&U's Value Institute and AMCOA. This centralized system of collecting and reporting student learning outcomes and assessment data has evolved toward a more decentralized, department-owned approach to assessment designed to promote faculty ownership of these processes. However, there is also recognition by the faculty that they need to bring back certain centralized structures to support this decentralized work, in order to more systematically improve curricula and learning opportunities for students.

Although NECC's business strategy is moving toward more online education, the College does not take a comprehensive and systematic approach to assessing online student success. The data provided in the Self-Study for online course assessment is just elementary. As described above in the Substantive Change section of Standard 4 above, the Self-Study does offer extensive details related to NECC's CBE project. When comparing the academic performance of the English Composition II (ENG102) sections, the percentage of students with a grade C or better in the CBE section was trailing behind the non-CBE section.

While NECC has implemented the CCSSE, the College has not used the CCSSE data for any action planning. NECC has not adopted a data-guided approach to continuous improvement for its Student Affairs or Co-curricular learning areas. Furthermore, while NECC has relied on various external auditing firms to conduct program audits, design operational performance enhancements, and help direct institutional advancement, there was no mention of IPEDS peers for comparison, nor has NECC compared its CCSSE data with national or regional benchmarks.

There are numerous anecdotal examples with and without data support in the Self-Study, yet there is an absence of action planning and follow-up studies for the improvement of the College's goals and objectives. Therefore, formal assessment does not appear to be systematic and that

NECC's efforts related to closing the feedback loop in assessment and student success are still very much in the developmental phase.

Retention and Graduation Rates

The 150% graduation rate of first-time, full-time degree/certificate seeking student cohort has remained flat for the last four years but the graduation rates are better than they were ten years ago. However, the trend of the fall-to-fall retention rate is the opposite. The full-time retention rate average of the most recent four cohorts (Cohorts 2015 to 2018) declines by 3.75 percentage points as it compared to that of Cohorts 2009 to 2012. Likewise, the part-time retention rate average declines by 2 percentage points.

The outcomes measure data from Data Table 8.1 yield an inconsistent pattern as well. The six-year graduation rate of the first-time full-time students remains unchanged, whereas the same rate for the first-time part-time students climbs 2 percentage points. This pattern is similar for the eight-year graduation rate: the first-time full-time student cohort has the same rate, but the first-time part-time student cohort improves by four percentage points. Likewise, the full-time and part-time transfer student cohorts have their six-year and eight-year graduation rates improved by 1% with the exception of the eight-year graduation rate of the full-time transfer students (3 percentage point improvement). The College does provide additional transfer information. Of the 4277 degree/certificate-seeking students in Fall 2019, 495 transferred to a four-year institution between December 31, 2019 and April 12, 2021. Of these 495 students, 266 (54%) were awarded NECC degrees. University of Massachusetts at Lowell and Southern New Hampshire are the two most popular transfer institutions for NECC students.

Other Measures of Success

The three-year cohort default rate is stable and low, averaging 14% of the most recent cohorts. The three-year loan repayment is stable and normal, averaging 49%. Although NECC relies heavily on its follow-up graduation survey to demonstrate its educational value through gainful employment, the response rates are only between 20% and 40% and there are methodological problems with the survey design.

Standard Nine: Integrity, Transparency and Public Disclosure

Integrity

Northern Essex Community College adheres to a clear set of ethical standards that align with its stated mission and values, and that guides its academic, operational and community decisions and activities. The College has established effective processes to comply with all externally mandated reporting obligations and to communicate to all relevant internal and external constituencies, its policies, values, operational, and academic information as well as its expectations of its students, staff, and faculty. The College also has in place an established process to regularly assess and revise its existing policies and procedures.

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The College clearly expresses, through its policies, guidelines, and mission and core values, that student conduct appropriate to a collegiate environment is vital to a high-quality education. Standards of student conduct, including a statement on cheating and plagiarism, are communicated through the online Academic Catalog and College publications, particularly the Student Handbook and Student Code of Conduct, described above in Standard 5.

The Student Handbook and other NECC policies and statements are reviewed and updated regularly by the College's Institutional Compliance Committee, chaired by the College's Director of Compliance. The work of this committee in areas ranging from data security, to state and federal reporting mandates strengthens the College's ability to respond to these emergent and ongoing demands. The creation of the Director of Compliance reflects NECC's commitment to sustaining its compliance efforts.

Academic freedom, employment conditions and corresponding responsibilities as well as grievance procedures and policies are articulated in the collective bargaining agreements for faculty and professional staff. Academic policies are also established and reviewed on a regular basis by standing committees as part of NECC's system of shared governance. The College also mandates online trainings on topics such as discrimination, harassment, and conflict of interest.

The College has established and adheres to non-discriminatory policies and practices within all of its recruitment, employment, admissions, employee evaluation and promotion activities in order to provide equal access to employment opportunities and create a welcoming and diverse educational and workplace environment.

Transparency & Public Disclosure

Northern Essex Community College effectively employs an integrated mix of print, digitized, and web-based resources to articulate information that is timely, accurate, and accessible. The College also leverages social media to broaden its communication reach, elevate awareness, and promote transparency and public disclosure. The website has published information regarding mission, vision, values, student demographics, graduation rates, retention, class size averages, and accreditation.

The NECC online Academic Catalog is a comprehensive source of accurate, detailed, and easily navigable information about the College relevant to the student including: the College's mission/vision/values, academic program and course descriptions, student support services, the admissions process, costs, financial aid processes and timelines, refund policies, transfer opportunities, accreditation statements for the College and for individual programs, co-curricular opportunities, directory of boards, councils, faculty and staff, College policies and procedures, and the student code of conduct and responsibility statement. Some policies and the code of conduct are duplicated in the Student Handbook. Because of its broad, encompassing nature, the Academic Catalog is created with input from departments across the College, with support from the Marketing Department. Beginning in 2016, the Academic Catalog is solely available online through the NECC website.

The current website platform was launched in 2017 as both a marketing tool and public information portal. It is clearly laid out, easy to navigate, and focused on the prospective and current student. The NECC website also includes data about the size and characteristics of the student body, cost of attendance, gainful employment, and Clery Act statistics. All required legal information, institutional policies and procedures, financial information, contracts, and other financial data are published on the website in the "About" and "Discover" section and are maintained in accordance with applicable Massachusetts laws. Interested candidates for open positions at NECC can also access employment and benefits information on the NECC Human Resources section of the NECC website.

Affirmation of Compliance

To document the institution's compliance with Federal regulations relating to Title IV, the team reviewed Northern Essex Community College's Affirmation of Compliance form signed by the CEO. As noted in this report, Northern Essex Community College publicly discloses on its website and other relevant publications its policy on transfer of credit along with a list of institutions with which it has articulation agreements. Public notification of the evaluation visit and of the opportunity for public comment was made by the College three months prior to the visit in *The Eagle-Tribune*, other local media outlets, and on the College's website. Copies of the College's grievance procedures for faculty, staff and students are available online and accessible through the current Academic Catalog. For its online programs and courses, Northern Essex Community College uses a system of secure logins through a unique student identification number and pedagogical approaches to verify students' identities to ensure the integrity of the programs. As discussed in Standard 4: *The Academic Program*, the team's review of course schedules and syllabi for a cross-section of Northern Essex's course offerings, both classroom and online, as well as courses offered in a condensed weekend or intersession/summer format, found the assignment of credit reflective of the College's policy and consistent with the Commission's standards.

Conclusion:

Strengths

Strength #1: Academic Program Review

NECC maintains a meticulous process of academic program review, which includes a comprehensive program review template that ties to the relevant NECHE's standards. NECC's focus on program review is clearly demonstrated by the thoroughness of the completed reviews that were provided to the team, and interviews with faculty and program chairs confirm that the review process is considered to be central to the ongoing improvement of the College's academic programs.

Strength #2: A culture that values Community

Faculty and staff, are dedicated and have a passion for the college and for doing whatever it takes so that NECC can continue to transform lives of students. Employees have great pride in the college and its community. It was abundantly clear that NECC is more than just an institution; at its heart are people committed to each other, so that the college can (paraphrasing your mission statement) unlock the potential within each student and empower the diverse community of learners to meet their individual goals. A college that makes real its practice of supporting each other, that lives this support, ingrains it as a habit. It is also clear that the students feel this support from NECC faculty, staff, and administration.

Strength #3: A culture of Professional Development

NECC's mission is rooted in effective teaching and learning. Faculty noted that the Center for Professional Development gave them the tools to innovate in disciplinary and interdisciplinary curriculum models and instructional strategies. That innovation included the pivot to online education last spring. There is a commitment throughout the college to emphasize leadership development. For example, students have opportunities as a Student Ambassador, faculty and staff can attend the President's Leadership Academy, and administrators have been supported in national executive leadership programs.

Strength #4: A culture of Leadership

The college has intentionally developed a culture of leadership at every level of the college by creating minimal structures that allow for maximum flexibility, and by encouraging innovation and decision making at the local level. This leadership culture can be felt across the campus - students participating in the student ambassador program; the President who supports leadership, engagement, and innovation; faculty and staff who are intrinsically motivated to make bold ambitious strides to advance student success and equity.

Strength #5: Innovation and Resilience

NECC serves mostly students of color who are largely low-income, and often the first in their families to experience higher education, with decreasing state support and declining enrollments. Faced with this combination of scarce resources and vulnerable students, faculty and staff at the college have, over time, developed a culture of innovation and resiliency and have been recognized regionally as higher education leaders. This innovative and resilient spirit has led to the Integrated Student Experience and the Academic Centers that are catalysts for a whole-college transformation.

Concerns

Concern #1: Planning and Evaluation

It was clear to the visiting team that the College recognizes and responds to the community it serves, by creating flexible structures for planning and evaluation to harness creativity of its employees to achieve its mission with limited resources and staffing. The Site Visit Team was impressed with the many ways the College identified its priorities to enhance the community it serves. Examples of this included the innovative and comprehensive redesign of its student services through the *Integrated Student Experience*, the creation of the *Center for Equity and Social Justice*, the development of a new committee for the Board of Trustees to address the new *Equity Imperative* and the use of *Student Navigators* and *Student Ambassadors* to help students feel connected from the point of acceptance to completion.

While commending the flexible and decentralized approach to planning and evaluation, the evaluation team sees value in strengthening this flexible planning structure by defining its strategic activities alongside its strategic goals, to ensure its planning extends beyond the short-term horizon [2.3], to ensure that the college can evenly and systematically collect and use data to document, evaluate, and enhance institutional effectiveness, and also to ensure that institutional memory persists despite changes in personnel.

Concern #2: Diversification

The evaluators recognize the commitment of the 11-member board, appointed by the Massachusetts Governor, in its efforts to diversify the composition to represent the student body. Similar efforts are seen at the college to diversify faculty and staff.
While significant progress has been made, particularly over the last two years, more attention must still be paid to diversifying the board, faculty, and staff to better reflect the students and communities the college serves.

Concern #3: Number of Full-time Faculty

While sufficient to meet current instructional needs, especially after recent enrollment declines, the reduced number of full-time faculty is beginning to affect other functions, such as staffing academic centers and college services, which could impact the educational quality and services for students.