



Commonwealth of Massachusetts  
Office of the State Auditor  
Suzanne M. Bump

*Making government work better*

Official Audit Report – Issued January 7, 2021

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## North Shore Community College

For the period July 1, 2017 through June 30, 2019





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*Making government work better*

January 7, 2021

Nate Bryant, EdD, Interim President  
North Shore Community College  
1 Ferncroft Road  
Danvers, MA 01923

Dear Dr. Bryant:

I am pleased to provide this performance audit of North Shore Community College. This report details the audit objectives, scope, methodology, findings, and recommendations for the audit period, July 1, 2017 through June 30, 2019. My audit staff discussed the contents of this report with management of the college, whose comments are reflected in this report.

I would also like to express my appreciation to North Shore Community College for the cooperation and assistance provided to my staff during the audit.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "SMB", written over a light blue circular watermark.

Suzanne M. Bump  
Auditor of the Commonwealth

cc: J.D. LaRock, JD, EdD, Chair of the Board of Trustees, North Shore Community College

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	1
OVERVIEW OF AUDITED ENTITY .....	2
AUDIT OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY.....	4
OTHER MATTERS.....	7

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DHE	Department of Higher Education
GPA	grade point average
NSSC	North Shore Community College
UMass	University of Massachusetts

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In accordance with Section 12 of Chapter 11 of the Massachusetts General Laws, the Office of the State Auditor has conducted a performance audit of North Shore Community College (NSCC) for the period July 1, 2017 through June 30, 2019. In this performance audit, we examined NSCC's administration of the Commonwealth's MassTransfer Program.

Our audit revealed no significant instances of noncompliance by NSCC that must be reported under generally accepted government auditing standards. However, in the "Other Matters" section of this report, we provide some recommendations to improve internal controls over the administration of the MassTransfer Program.

## OVERVIEW OF AUDITED ENTITY

North Shore Community College (NSCC) is authorized by Section 5 of Chapter 15A of the Massachusetts General Laws and operates under the direction of a board of trustees, whose members are appointed by the Governor. The board is responsible for operating under the regulations promulgated by the Commonwealth's Board of Higher Education; this includes setting policies, approving annual budgets, monitoring quarterly performance, and participating in the approval of internal audits. The president of NSCC is the administrative head of the college and reports to the board of trustees. The vice president of administration and finance, vice president of academic affairs, vice president of student affairs, vice president of human resource development, and executive director of external and public relations support the president.

NSCC is a member of the Massachusetts public higher-education system, which consists of 15 community colleges, nine state universities, and five University of Massachusetts (UMass) campuses. It is located at 1 Ferncroft Road in Danvers and has an additional location in Lynn.

NSCC had 8,487 students in fiscal year 2018 and 7,979 in fiscal year 2019. The college employs 121 full-time faculty members and 362 credit-adjunct and non-credit instructors.

NSCC received appropriations from the Commonwealth in the amounts of \$21,618,575 and \$22,327,516 for fiscal years 2018 and 2019, respectively.

### MassTransfer Program

The Commonwealth's public institutions of higher education have partnered with the Department of Higher Education (DHE) to develop the MassTransfer Program, which includes the MassTransfer Block, the A2B Degree Program, and the Commonwealth Commitment Program. The A2B Degree Program and the Commonwealth Commitment Program have course pathways for different degrees.

DHE's "MassTransfer Policy Guidelines" describe the MassTransfer Program as follows:

*MassTransfer seeks to provide a broad population of students with straightforward and understandable options toward the completion of associate and baccalaureate degrees, clearing the way for student access and student success in Massachusetts' public higher education system.*

*MassTransfer has two main purposes:*

- *to provide community college students who complete approved **associate degrees under MassTransfer** with the benefits of the full transfer and applicability of credit, guaranteed admission, and a tuition waiver (each benefit based on the student's final grade point average) to linked baccalaureate programs; and*
- *to provide any student in the Massachusetts public higher education system the intermediate goal of completing a portable transfer block ("**MassTransfer Block**") which satisfies general education/distribution/core requirements across institutions (with the receiving institution able to add no more than six additional credits/two courses).*

## **A2B Degree Program**

Students who complete their associate's degrees at one of the Commonwealth's 15 community colleges, and transfer to a state university or UMass campus within one year of graduation from community college, receive guaranteed admission (space permitting in the major and college) and transfer of credits. In addition, they are not required to pay application fees or submit application essays and are eligible to receive tuition waivers.

## **Commonwealth Commitment Program**

To provide students of the Commonwealth's public higher education institutions with additional financial incentives to complete their bachelor's degrees in a timely manner, DHE, in partnership with those institutions, has implemented the Commonwealth Commitment Program. In this program, students commit to completing their associate's degrees within two and a half years, transferring to a state university or UMass campus, and completing their bachelor's degrees within two more years. They must also maintain full-time continuous enrollment and earn a cumulative 3.0 grade point average. In return, they receive a tuition freeze while enrolled and a 10% rebate of tuition and mandatory fees in addition to the benefits of the A2B Degree Program.

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## AUDIT OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

In accordance with Section 12 of Chapter 11 of the Massachusetts General Laws, the Office of the State Auditor has conducted a performance audit of certain activities of North Shore Community College (NSCC) for the period July 1, 2017 through June 30, 2019.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Below is a list of our audit objectives, indicating each question we intended our audit to answer and the conclusion we reached regarding each objective.

Objective	Conclusion
1. Did NSCC ensure that students transferring to the college were granted eligible earned credits upon transfer in accordance with the Department of Higher Education's (DHE's) "MassTransfer Policy Guidelines," DHE's "Community College Transfer Principles," and NSCC policy?	Yes
2. Did NSCC certify the completion of the MassTransfer Block on students' transcripts in accordance with DHE's "MassTransfer Policy Guidelines"?	Yes
3. Did NSCC administer eligibility requirements within the Commonwealth Commitment Program in accordance with DHE's "Commonwealth Commitment Implementation Guidelines"?	Yes

To achieve our objective, we gained an understanding of NSCC's internal control environment related to our audit objectives by reviewing agency policies and procedures, as well as conducting inquiries with NSCC's staff members and management.

We performed the following procedures to obtain sufficient, appropriate audit evidence to address the audit objectives.

### MassTransfer Program

- To determine whether students who transferred to NSCC received all credits they were entitled to receive, we selected a nonstatistical random sample of 50 of the 528 students who



transferred to NSCC from other Commonwealth colleges and universities during the audit period. We reviewed the students' submitted transfer credit evaluation forms listing requested course credits and compared them to the transfer credits received according to the student transcripts to determine whether students received credit for eligible courses or alternate sources, such as Advanced Placement tests or College Level Examination Program tests. We also verified that course credits that were not received did not meet NSCC course transfer requirements.

- To determine whether NSCC tracked students to ensure successful completion of the MassTransfer Block, we selected a nonstatistical random sample of 50 of the 565 NSCC students who were eligible for the MassTransfer Block during the audit period. We reviewed whether the Registrar's Office properly certified transcripts with the designation of MassTransfer Block Completion by verifying that the courses completed according to the student transcripts met the requirements of the "MassTransfer Policy Guidelines." We also verified that student transcripts that NSCC did not certify did not meet the MassTransfer Block course requirements.

## Commonwealth Commitment Program

- To determine whether NSCC properly processed Commonwealth Commitment Program applications, we selected a nonstatistical random sample of 20 of the 207 students enrolled in the Commonwealth Commitment Program during the audit period. We determined whether the applications were on file and reviewed for completion, including student and reviewer signatures and review dates. To assess whether application data were properly entered in the student files in Banner,<sup>1</sup> we verified the accuracy of the application information entered, including intended MassTransfer pathway, graduation date, and transfer colleges, in the students' Banner files. To determine whether students were notified promptly of acceptance or denial for the program, we requested for review the letter or email notifications sent to students.
- To determine whether NSCC provided students with information, advice, and other assistance to maximize opportunities for degree completion under the Commonwealth Commitment Program, we selected a nonstatistical judgmental sample of 25 of the 395 students who were on the end-of-semester eligibility lists during the audit period. We verified the accuracy of the eligibility review determination by evaluating eligibility requirements, including a minimum 3.0 grade point average (GPA), a minimum 12 credits earned, full-time continuous enrollment, and Commonwealth Commitment Program course pathway enrollment, on student transcripts. We also verified that the Student Support and Advising Office notified the Student Accounts Office of students' eligibility for the program. For students on program probation (e.g., for falling below a 3.0 GPA or not maintaining full-time enrollment), we reviewed the student transcripts for compliance with Commonwealth Commitment Program reentry requirements.
- To determine whether student rebate checks were sent to eligible students, we selected a nonstatistical judgmental sample of 25 of the 301 student rebate checks issued during the audit period. We determined whether students met program eligibility requirements, including a minimum cumulative GPA of 3.0, a minimum of 12 credits earned, and full-time continuous

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1. Banner is the database system of record for NSCC's administrative activities and student files. It is designed to link various integrated modules, including modules for registration, student billing, and financial aid, to the college's finance system.

enrollment, by reviewing their student transcripts. We determined the accuracy of the check amounts by recalculating them according to the student account records and confirmed that fee and tuition rates were based on NSCC fee and tuition rates as of the students' program enrollment dates.

Whenever sampling was used, we applied a nonstatistical approach, and as a result, we will not project our results to the entire populations.

## **Data Reliability**

To gain an understanding of the NSCC Banner system and controls, we interviewed information technology personnel responsible for oversight of the system. To assess the system's reliability, we tested the following general information technology controls: security management, access controls, configuration management, contingency planning, and segregation of duties. To assess the accuracy of the Banner data, we traced 10 randomly selected students from the scanned Commonwealth Commitment Program applications in Banner to student names, course pathways, and intended transfer colleges in Banner, as well as tracing 10 additional students' information from Banner to scanned Commonwealth Commitment Program applications. To determine the reliability of Banner data lists obtained for testing, we used electronic spreadsheet functionality to examine for duplicate records. Commonwealth Commitment Program applications for students who were not admitted to the program were not scanned into Banner or retained by NSCC personnel; therefore, we could not assess the completeness of the Commonwealth Commitment Program data. We deemed the Banner data sufficiently reliable for our audit purposes.

## OTHER MATTERS

### **For students in the Commonwealth Commitment Program, North Shore Community College did not have strong controls over program documentation.**

Although our audit uncovered no significant deficiencies with program administration, we did note a few deficiencies that North Shore Community College (NSCC) should address. Our sample of 20 Commonwealth Commitment Program applications revealed one missing NSCC authorizing signature and two missing “intended four-year college” designations. In addition, NSCC did not retain copies of acceptance or denial notices sent to students or the applications of students who applied to the Commonwealth Commitment Program and were not accepted.

NSCC should ensure that Commonwealth Commitment Program applications are properly processed with signatures and dates and that all relevant information is entered in students’ files. We also recommend that NSCC retain all submitted Commonwealth Commitment Program applications, as well as notifications of students’ acceptance or denial, for three years as recommended by Section H03-01 of the Massachusetts Statewide Records Retention Schedule.

### **NSCC did not designate MassTransfer Students in its student system.**

During our review of NSCC’s administration of the Commonwealth’s MassTransfer Program, we noted that the college did not designate MassTransfer students in its student system, Banner. This designation is not required by Department of Higher Education guidance. However, it was difficult for us to analyze the performance of the MassTransfer Program because the college could not isolate populations of students participating in the program. We suggest that NSCC incorporate a field in its student system that will allow it to easily identify students who are participating in the MassTransfer Program.

### **Auditee’s Response**

The vice president of administration and finance provided the following response to the report:

*As discussed during the audit, the College reiterates that choosing to transfer and receive benefits as a MassTransfer student is something that a student does as they leave us, not while they are here. We can track that students are in a program that has MassTransfer opportunities and have been made aware of those MassTransfer benefits.*

*Nevertheless, the College agrees with the recommendation of the State Auditors to keep all applications for Commonwealth Commitment for three years, whether accepted or denied; we will also investigate options with our new educational planning software to address the suggestion to more easily identify and track Mass Transfer students.*