

# **REPORT OF THE WSCUC VISITING TEAM**

## **SEEKING ACCREDITATION VISIT 2**

To Monterey College of Law

April 9-11, 2025

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The team evaluated the institution under the 2013 WSCUC Standards of Accreditation and prepared this report containing its collective judgment for consideration and action by the institution and by the WASC Senior College and University Commission. The formal action concerning the institution's status is taken by the Commission and is described in a letter from the Commission to the institution. Once an institution achieves either candidacy or initial accreditation, the team report and Commission Action Letter associated with the review that resulted in the granting of either candidacy or initial accreditation and the team reports and Commission Action Letters of any subsequent reviews will be made available to the public by publication on the WSCUC website.

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## Section I. Overview and Context

### A. Description of Institution, Accreditation History, and Visit

Monterey College of Law (MCL) is a nonprofit law school with a strategy of being an “opportunity school” that offers legal education and a pathway to becoming a licensed attorney to adult students where they live and work. Starting with a campus founded by area lawyers and judges in the Monterey Bay area in 1971, MCL has grown to include five campuses in northern California, with the Monterey campus as the main administrative hub. The campuses are the Monterey College of Law (MCL Main), San Luis Obispo College of Law (SLOCL), Kern County College of Law (KCCL), Empire College of Law (ECL), and the MCL Hybrid Online JD enrollment option (Hybrid Online). While MCL Main handles most administrative matters for the overall institution, each campus strives to retain its local identity, has a part time dean, and employs local attorneys as adjunct faculty. At the same time, the campuses are able to share instructors and realize benefits of being part of a larger institution.

Accredited by the State Bar of California since 1981, MCL offers three degrees: Doctor of Jurisprudence (JD), Master of Legal Studies (MLS), and the postgraduate Master of Laws (LLM). Operating on a trimester calendar, MCL offers and requires all courses covered by the California Bar Exam (CBX). Besides the CBX subjects, MCL offers numerous electives in doctrinal subjects and practical skills necessary for the practice of law. MCL reports that each JD candidate completes 12 doctrinal courses, 6 skills course, and 2 clinical units. Eight units of legal research and writing are required.

According to the MCL report, approximately 30 students graduate each year across all campuses. The report states “the MCL’s 10 -administration cumulative-bar-exam pass rates reported to the state bar each year for the past five years are 2024=52.3 %, 2023=55.8%, 2022=55.43%, 2021=53.8%, 2020=53.7 %, and reflects its success in preparing a highly diverse student population for this important exam.”

MCL reports that its total student population is 265 served by 144 adjunct faculty members and 22 staff and administrators. Since most students are working adults – many with families – MCL online and onsite instruction occurs Monday to Thursday in the evening. Each of MCL’s physical campuses includes 6,000-7,500 square feet of building space with a minimum of four classrooms, a student lounge, administrative areas and faculty offices.

Offering its first classes in 2019, the Hybrid Online was one of the first two accredited hybrid online JD programs approved by the California State Bar. A synchronous/asynchronous online model provides 85-90 percent of the curriculum. Additionally, students enrolled in the three-and-one-half year online program attend several onsite weekend symposia at one of the MCL physical campuses.

MCL is experiencing a leadership transition as its President/CEO for the past 20 years retires in July 2025. The Board of Trustees has named a new president/CEO who resides in San Luis Obispo, one of the MCL campus sites. All indications are that most of the current and long-serving leadership team will remain.

In September 2023, MCL began the process towards initial accreditation with the Seeking Accreditation Visit 1 (“SAV1”). On February 16, 2024, the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) determined that MCL demonstrated evidence of compliance in all four standards sufficient for Candidacy for a period of five years. WSCUC directed a Seeking Accreditation Visit 2 (“SAV2”) for the spring of 2025.

## **B. The Institution’s Seeking Accreditation Visit Report: Quality and Rigor of the Review and Report**

During the ten months of preparation, a committee of over forty members of the MCL community participated in the preparation of the Institution’s 91-page report. The working committee included many senior members of the administration across the campuses. The final version of the report was reviewed by the President/CEO and the Board of Trustees.

Generally the report was organized around nine areas, incorporating thirteen CFRs, and provided a description of the steps taken since the last visit.

The report provided evidence in most cases of actions taken as a direct result of the SAV1. While lengthy with accompanying citations and links, the report sometimes provided a list of activities that did not always directly connect with the desired action. However, the meetings during the SAV2 provided the necessary information to complement the report and recognize the extensive work that had been done across the institution to address the concerns expressed by WSCUC.

The team reviewed MCL's institutional report and extensive supporting materials, the institutional accreditation history, and the 2024 team report and Commission action letter. The team met by Zoom several weeks before the visit and again the day before to discuss the submissions and proposed schedule. The team requested several changes in the full two-day meeting schedule to focus on key areas of interest. Prior to the onsite visit, the team chair met via Zoom with the MCL president. Two of the SAV2 team, including the chair, had served on the SAV1 Team visit. The Team Chair also conducted an exit meeting with the president/CEO to summarize the visiting team's commendations and recommendations.

Gathering on the MCL Main campus in Seaside, CA, the team conducted 18 meetings. Since the MCL campus houses the central administration for the multi-campus institution, the team was able to meet in-person with all senior leadership. Other meetings were conducted in a hybrid virtual format in the school library with administrators, faculty, and students on all campuses. The team conducted hybrid meetings with the Board of Trustees, multi-campus faculty, and students. The Team monitored the confidential email comment site established by WSCUC. Some members of the team also toured the adjacent Mandell Gisset Center for Conflict Management which provides clinical experiences for MCL students.

The team found the MCL staff to be very responsive to requests for additional information and met requests promptly. MCL was also helpful and flexible in requested schedule changes. The meetings and logistical

arrangements were well organized. All MCL participants were well-prepared and spoke openly. The review process, especially the team visit and numerous meetings, provided sufficient information to present recommendations on each of the issues.

### **C. Response to Issues Raised in Past Commission Letters**

The SAV2 team visited the Monterey College of Law campus in Seaside, California from April 9-11, 2025 using the 2013 Standards of Accreditation. WSCUC specified nine areas for MCL to develop and for the SAV2 Team to review for demonstrated compliance at a level sufficient for Initial Accreditation. These are:

- Defining distinct learning objectives for each degree program.
- Assessing and expanding initiatives for recruiting board members, faculty, and all levels of staff.
- Implementing systematic assessment at the program level.
- Coordinating and increasing efforts to systematically assess campus climate and student support services. (This also included further analyzing bar passage rates to determine what programs have led to improvements and what more is needed.)
- Refining a multi-scenario financial sustainability plan that incorporated the MCL enrollment management plan, ensured institutional growth, and provided flexibility for changing economic and competitive conditions.
- Adjusting board policies and practices to properly balance board oversight and evaluation with appropriate autonomy for senior administrators to manage personnel and routine operations.
- Increasing the effectiveness of shared governance.

- Strengthening institutional research capacity to inform decision-making, enhance coordination, leadership, and oversight of institutional research activities and periodically review the usefulness of the data generated.
- Monitoring and adjusting financial resources and facilities, especially if growth does not meet projections.

Four main issues that emerged from these requirements focused on the extent of shared governance, distinguishing the program learning outcomes for each of the three degrees, developing assessment tools and formalizing data collection to improve student support, and developing a data-informed financial model for better financial scenario planning. The Institutional Report coupled with the focused team meetings with numerous faculty, administrators, trustees and students confirmed that MCL had understood and addressed these main concerns.

## Section II. Evaluation Of Institutional Compliance With WSCUC Standards

### A. Standard 1

#### **Define distinct learning objectives for each degree program (CFR 1.2)**

MCL offers three academic degree programs: the Juris Doctor (JD), Master of Legal Studies (MLS), and Master of Laws (LLM). In direct response to the recommendations provided by the SAV1 team, the institution initiated a comprehensive and transparent process to develop distinctive and clearly articulated program-specific learning outcomes (PLOs) for each of its degree offerings, alongside a revision of its Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILOs).

The development process was inclusive and collaborative, incorporating systematic review, input, and formal approval from the Academic Standards Committee, the Faculty Senate, and the Board of Trustees. Each newly developed PLO was mapped to existing course-level outcomes (CLOs) to ensure alignment and continuity within the curriculum.

Subsequent to the approval of the revised PLO's, MCL undertook a comprehensive update of its ILOs to align with the core competencies of each academic program. The revised ILOs also reflect key institutional values and graduate attributes, including self-reflection, leadership, collaboration, and commitment to lifelong learning. This structured approach has resulted in a clearly defined framework of educational objectives and associated achievement benchmarks at the institutional, program, and course levels. These outcomes are published in all course syllabi to ensure transparency and accessibility.

Faculty play an active role in the ongoing alignment of course content with institutional and programmatic outcomes. Regular discussions focus on the integration of CLOs with PLOs and ILOs, as well as the development of appropriate assessment methodologies to evaluate student achievement.

As further detailed in Standard 2, in 2024 MCL implemented a formal assessment process for CLOs mapped to PLOs. This assessment employs both direct and indirect methods, including structured student self-reflections and evaluations of student performance in required clinical courses. This process has since been extended to encompass elective and required doctrinal courses, thereby institutionalizing a culture of continuous improvement and assessment across the curriculum.

The institution's clearly articulated outcomes, systematic assessment processes, and evidence-based approach to curricular alignment demonstrate compliance with the expectations and standards articulated in CFR 1.2.

## **B. Standard 2**

In March 2024, the Commission found that MCL demonstrated evidence of compliance with Standard 2 at a level sufficient for Candidacy. In order to demonstrate compliance at a level sufficient for Initial Accreditation, the Commission stated that the following CFRs required additional attention and development:

- CFRs 2.3, 2.7: Implement systematic assessment at the program level.
- CFRs 2.10, 2.11, 2.13: Coordinate and increase efforts to systematically assess campus climate, co-curricular programs, and student support services to identify opportunities for improvement. Continue efforts to improve student success including bar passage rates by, for example, disaggregating data and identifying what programs or services led to recent improvements and identifying areas of need that would benefit from additional support.

For Standard 2, the team focused on CFRs related to student learning outcomes (CFR 2.3), program review (CFR 2.7), analysis of student outcomes data (CFR 2.10), co-curricular programming (CFR 2.11), and student services (CFR 2.13).

The SAV1 team observed MCL as measuring its student achievement primarily through end-of-term grades, overall GPA, and California bar exam passage rates. MCL was still in a developmental stage toward disaggregating the data by student population, either for tracking progress towards graduation or bar exam passage. The SAV2 team subsequently observed that MCL has expanded and enhanced student learning objectives to align better with WSCUC expectations in addition to more fully articulating the extensive work MCL does to address bar passage rates and to utilize data to inform decision-making in academic and student-support programming. Faculty shared developments in curriculum design and teaching methods that monitor and support student learning during courses, as well as via final exams, course assessment, and bar exam achievement.

To illustrate utilization of data to inform decision-making: upon reflection of the program reviews for the LLM and MLS programs, MCL added expanded concentrations, faster tracks, and more electives. Bar passage reflection has also spurred MCL to enhance bar exam preparation resources for students, in part by offering new programs for students through a third-party service. (CFR 2.3, 2.10, 2.11)

### **Implement systematic assessment at the program level (CFRs 2.3, 2.7)**

MCL collects a robust amount of data that it utilizes to identify goals, inform decision-making, and evaluate outcomes. In response to the SAV1, MCL incorporated the feedback that the law school had ILOs and CLOs, and created unique PLOs for each degree. MCL was able to demonstrate that it has an established culture of assessment with student learning outcomes defined at each level and for each program. Multiple constituencies are involved in data collection at the course, program and institutional levels for academic, co-curricular, and student support programs (CFRs 2.11), showing that the institution places a high value on the information that assessment practices provide. MCL leaders are intentional about trying to involve representatives from all constituencies, the process of embedding assessment and data collection in as many places as possible, and making the process user friendly to the wider community. Some examples of this

are: creating terminology that faculty understand (i.e., nongraded assessment is a term used at MCL to mean ungraded, direct, formative assessment) and utilizing Populi (the learning management system) for all data collection across all programs and campuses in order to streamline and centralize the process for all involved. (CFR 2.10)

MCL completed program reviews with external reviewers for the LLM and MLS programs, and annual reports for the JD program. The college has plans to utilize reviewers other than the State Bar for JD program review in the future, but has not done so yet. The team would recommend that MCL continue the progress it has made in assessment and program review by utilizing the State Bar or another external reviewer to conduct a JD program review. (CFR 2.7)

Conversations with multiple departments and constituencies reflect an embedded culture of assessment that utilizes data to evaluate programs and to effectuate change. (CFR 2.3) The college should continue working to make sure that institutional systems are in place to collect and analyze data so that assessment is not reliant on specific individuals.

### **Student Learning and Success (CFRs 2.10, 2.11, 2.13)**

The primary recommendation from the SAV1 regarding student learning and success was to coordinate and increase efforts to systematically assess campus climate, co-curricular programs, and student support services to identify opportunities for improvement and continue efforts to improve student success including bar passage rates by, for example, disaggregating data and identifying what programs or services led to recent improvements and identifying areas of need that would benefit from additional support.

Since the SAV1, MCL implemented a student climate (Pulse) survey, enhanced its academic advising program and resources, and increased focus on bar passage efforts for alumni (specifically those who are not passing).

The institution engages in systematic efforts to assess campus climate, co-curricular programs, and student support services and this has increased since the last visit. Over the past five years, the institution reviews institutional research, engages in data collection, bar passage collection and analysis, and other assessment efforts, and continues to do so today. MCL has been utilizing systemic assessment efforts in various ways that come so naturally and are seen as so beneficial for the college that they may not even see these efforts as systemic assessment. MCL is able to clearly express how the assessment efforts are part of their teaching and learning and how the results aid in decision-making. MCL collects specific statistics regarding its students, including those that attrit, which guides decisions regarding necessary changes to support. (CFR 2.10 and 2.13). MCL appears to have the appropriate level of student support services needed to support its students (CFR 2.13) and is continuing to evaluate those needs. In meeting with staff, faculty, and students, all groups said that they felt they were able to offer or received appropriate support services, including students at the other campuses, hybrid, and online. The use of the Pulse student survey shows MCL's commitment to continued review of co-curricular and student support services (CFR 2.10, 2.11, 2.13).

In 2024, MCL surveyed academic advisors asking for feedback, meeting data, suggestions for improvement, and help identifying student trends. Based on the responses, MCL updated the Academic Advisor Handbook, implemented a digital resource and communication space for advisors, refined and enhanced graduation checklists, and created additional Populi Degree Audit instruction handouts for students. MCL also piloted a skills-based advising program for students on academic probation. To address the Council's concerns about using aggregated and disaggregated data, MCL collected enrollment and participation data to evaluate the program's effectiveness.

MCL has expended tremendous amounts of time and resources utilizing assessment to inform and improve upon first-time bar passage rates. Given this information, it is a natural progression for MCL's recent shift in efforts to also address bar passage repeaters. This is important information that aligns with MCL's goals and they should continue to put attention to this type of co-curricular assessment.

In addition to this work, MCL has made the information available by publishing the student achievement metrics on its website, which included information on student satisfaction, enrollment, retention and graduation rates, bar passage, and other key data. During the SAV2, the school covered two large bulletin boards with charts on student achievement metrics to make the information publicly available to the team. Going forward, MCL would benefit by continuing to make this information readily available to members of its community. Having these school created charts in such a public hallway can create interesting points of conversation for students or faculty who are on campus and the school might consider an alternative for online community members.

### **C. Standard 3**

Standard 3: Developing and Applying Resources and Organizational Structures to Ensure Quality and Sustainability

#### **Fiscal, Physical, and Information Resources (3.4, 3.5)**

The Commission Action Letter stated the following: “Continue to develop and implement a multi-scenario financial sustainability plan that is carefully calibrated with enrollment management; ensure appropriate resourcing for institutional growth and development; achieves long-term equilibrium between resources and costs; and provides flexibility for changing economic and competitive conditions.” MCL has developed multi-scenario financial plans that are predicated on enrollment-based tuition revenue and cost containment to align resources and costs. The multi-scenario financial plans included estimations for minimal growth, limited growth, and moderate institutional growth. Following evaluation for the multi-scenario financial plans, MCL’s board directed management to execute the limited growth model: growth in enrollment limited to the Hybrid campus and the ECL campus and no growth at the other campuses. This conservative approach to enrollment growth along with cost containment strategies and non-operating revenue sources support financial sustainability.

As part of its cost containment strategies, MCL has implemented a plan to reduce administrative salaries and related benefits by lowering the time-base of most administrative employees by 2 hours per week; some employees did not receive a time base reduction and the savings per employee varied based on an employee's salary and original time base which ranged from 20 to 40 hours per week. This cost containment strategy, included in MCL's multi-scenario financial plans, will need to be monitored closely to ensure less employee work hours does not result in lower levels of services to students and necessary operations that prevent MCL from achieving its mission. MCL's board and management should closely assess this strategy to ensure its appropriateness.

### **Governance (CFR 3.9)**

The Commission Letter stated the following: "Adjust board policies and practices to properly balance board oversight and evaluation with appropriate autonomy for senior administrators to manage personnel and routine operations" and "prioritize assessing and expanding initiatives for recruiting participants in campus – including board members..." to strengthen MCL's governance structures and define roles and responsibilities between the board and management. MCL's board is composed of local, regional, and national leaders and community members with experience as judges, higher education administrators, practicing attorneys, and business and organizational leaders. There are five faculty members on the board and a student representative. Eight new members have been added to the board with five of them adding experience from varied backgrounds.

MCL clarified that hiring staff, below the executive level, is management's responsibility subject to the board's approval of MCL's budget, which includes allocations for new positions. This clarification was determined after a review of hiring decisions and finding of no situations where a hiring decision was "delayed or changed by board action or inaction." With the retirement announcement of President Winick, MCL's board formed a Presidential Search Committee (PSC) composed of board members, a faculty

representative, and a student representative. The PSC is assisted by an external consultant who had led executive-level searches across the spectrum of higher education institutions. With the hiring decision now completed, MCL's board and management should ensure that the incoming president is afforded sufficient time with current leadership to facilitate a seamless transition.

### **Faculty's Role in Governance (CFR 3.10)**

The Commission's Letter stated the following: "Increase the effectiveness and extent of shared governance by fully, formally, and regularly engaging the faculty senate in planning and decision-making." MCL's faculty are part-time and have responsibilities outside of their employment with MCL. While this is an understandable limitation on their participation in shared governance, faculty leadership in institutional governance, decision-making, and instructional design must be prioritized. MCL has demonstrated significant progress to the priority: (1) The Faculty Senate president has been added to the board's Strategic Planning Committee and a faculty member from each campus serves on MCL's board, (2) Faculty Senate meetings and agendas have been formalized and made more consistent, and (3) the Faculty Senate has taken definitive action on several governance and instructional initiatives, revisions, and additions to the curriculum. The increased level of engagement demonstrates responsiveness to the Commission's Letter recommendation.

The minutes from the 2024 meetings of the Faculty Senate indicate several challenges with engaging the faculty and formalizing the work of the Faculty Senate and its committees. Minutes were provided for five Faculty Senate meetings held during 2024. For three of the five meetings, either a quorum was not noted in the minutes, or a quorum was not achieved to conduct business. Even after the quorum was lowered from 1/3 of faculty to 1/5 of faculty, a quorum was not achieved for one meeting. For most meetings, reports for the Faculty Senate's committees were not reflected in the minutes – one committee had no report for the entire year. A reasonable balance between achieving inclusive governance and acknowledging MCL's part-

time faculty composition should remain a priority for MCL's board and management. Moreover, MCL should consider additional measures to promote faculty participation in governance. The Faculty Senate should consider its committee composition and structure to ensure their relevance and viability.

#### **D. Standard 4**

The SAV1 report noted that the institution needed to strengthen institutional research capacity and infrastructure to support data-driven decision making. The SAV1 noted deficiencies with CFR 4.2 "Sufficient institutional research (IR) capacity; data dissemination and incorporated in planning and decision-making; IR effectiveness assessed" and CFR 4.7 "Anticipating and responding to a changing higher education environment." In response, MCL implemented several measures to ensure appropriate collection and use of instructional research, dissemination of that research, and policy improvements stemming from the research. The institution has instituted a significant number of changes to ensure that previously collected qualitative data is supplemented by quantitative evidence of student learning and satisfaction.

Specifically, using shared governance procedures, MCL created a student satisfaction survey (PULSE) that provides indications of student needs. The survey results are disaggregated and MCL leaders have detailed information for improvement. For instance, during the visit, MCL staff noted that the survey indicated female students were slightly more dissatisfied with the learning environment than male students. While the delta between the two groups was not large, staff and faculty were reviewing ideas to reduce the gap between male and female satisfaction. The data from the PULSE survey has been publicly released and broadly shared so the MCL community can participate in the improvement process. MCL notes that it intends on continuing to administer the PULSE survey and they are strongly encouraged to do so.

Similarly, MCL uses its learning management system to engage in significant data collection specific to courses and student performance. This information dovetails MCL's detailed information on bar passage

rates that – because of data from its learning management system – can be cross referenced with student GPA, completion of assignments, and demographics. Bar passage rates triangulated with student performance allows MCL to engage in targeted student success measures. MCL widely publicizes that information so that all students are aware of the amount of work needed to support bar passage. The information is displayed on websites, communications to students, available to board members, etc. Overall, it is another example of use of IR that is widely disseminated so that the entire MCL community can contribute to improving the rates and support student success. MCL should continue to refine data collection through its learning management system and to better support the success of all students.

Further, the institution has demonstrated that it understands the need for data driven decision making and has initiated a cultural shift that centers programmatic decisions on more nuanced analysis of student outcomes. MCL staff noted that prior to the use of quantitative data, the staff and faculty were aware of different learning outcomes for subsets of students. The use of quantitative data, however, has allowed them to engage in more formal analysis of student success as well as engage in shared governance and initiate buy-in for faculty on the need for change. This shift has already been beneficial - the new marketing campaign is data driven and targeted to support enrollment growth - and will continue to be beneficial as faculty come together to engage in curriculum review and analysis based on student needs. MCL also reported that they have expanded infrastructure to support IR by restructuring job duties so that more support for IR can be realized within the college's fiscal constraints. With the additional staff support, MCL intends on expanding data collection to events like orientation to ensure continuous improvement. Finally, within the changing environment of higher education, the SAV2 team found MCL able to respond to those changes because the institution diffuses information to all involved so that collective decision making is possible. Overall, the SAV2 team is satisfied that MCL has improved IR capabilities and thus can collect, and review aggregated and disaggregated data to then use for continuous improvement and to support shifts in higher education.

### Section III. Commendations and Recommendations

Monterey College of Law is to be commended for:

1. Its dedication to the advancement of the mission embraced by the entire MCL community.
2. Defining and distinguishing program learning outcomes for each of the three degrees offered and the involvement of faculty in the development of, and training in, these outcomes.
3. Developing and refining assessment tools and formalizing data collection processes to support the needs of students using aggregated and disaggregated data in both the academic and student support services.
4. Developing a data-informed financial model that allows the board and administration to analyze financial scenarios to evaluate, plan, and implement strategies to advance MCL's financial sustainability.

It is recommended that Monterey College of Law:

1. Continue to strengthen the Board of Trustees to advance the strategic plan, development, and support of new leadership. (CFR 3.9)
2. Refine the plan for fundraising and advancement to reflect the current funding landscape and ongoing MCL priorities. (CFR 3.4, 4.7)

## Section IV. Reflections and Conclusions

Since the previous team's visit, it is immediately apparent that MCL committed itself to addressing the issues raised in the initial Commission action. All points were addressed in the report, and even more effectively in the SAV2 team's interactions with MCL leadership and staff. There was a marked increase in the number of leadership, staff, and faculty involved in preparing the report and participating in meetings. All campuses were well represented in discussions.

There is a legitimate question about whether the current demographic trends and possible changes in federal student assistance will support a growth trajectory for any law school. However, MCL believes its target audience of 25-55 year old working adults who will study law in the community in which they reside is a growth scenario.

MCL has built a largely successful network of small law schools in communities that are distant from existing law schools. While maintaining a local identity for each school, MCL is becoming more sophisticated in combining the assets of each to support the overall institution. The Hybrid Online initiative is growing and will provide additional students and access to legal training in California. While a transition will take place as the long serving president retires, every indication is that the new president, who is an experienced law, tax, and business faculty member at Cal Poly, and the long-time director of the school's Low Income Tax Clinic and resides in one of the MCL branch communities, will be supported by an experienced staff committed to the mission of improving offerings and access as "an opportunity school."