

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

January 27, 2005

The Process

Formal preparation of this Institutional Self-Study began in the spring of 2002, when President Graham B. Spanier and Executive Vice President and Provost Rodney E. Erickson asked Robert Secor, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, to oversee the University's self-study process in preparation for Penn State's 2004-2005 decennial re-accreditation. He would be supported in the process by Louise E. Sandmeyer, Executive Director of the Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment. In designing the Self-Study and preparing for the evaluation teams and their visits, Dr. Secor and Ms. Sandmeyer would work closely with Elizabeth Sibolski, Associate Executive Director of the Middle States Commission. In an August, 2002 visit with Ms. Sibolski and in subsequent discussions, it was agreed that each of the six undergraduate campus colleges would be visited by an evaluation team, with the Commonwealth College receiving visits at two of its twelve-campus locations. In addition, the associate chair of the Evaluation Team would visit the Dickinson School of Law and the College of Medicine, but only to tour their facilities and review their disciplinary accreditation documents.

In November 2002, Ms. Sandmeyer and Dr. Secor met with Provost Erickson to agree on a focus for the Self-Study, which would be on teaching and learning in undergraduate education. That focus would relate to President Spanier's challenge to the University earlier that fall to become "a student-centered University" and give us the opportunity to measure our progress towards that goal. The meeting also included a discussion of the creation of a steering committee to prepare the Self-Study. That committee, consisting of sixteen members and chaired by Dr. Secor, was formed and charged in spring 2003. The Steering Committee in turn developed six working groups or subcommittees, dealing with the seven standards that Middle States sets forward under Educational Effectiveness in its *Designs for Excellence: A Handbook for Institutional Self-Study*. Each subcommittee was chaired by a member of the Steering Committee, and consisted of four to eight members. Subcommittee membership was diverse and included faculty and administrators from several campus locations. Overall, 40 members of the Steering Committee and the subcommittees contributed to the writing of the Self-Study report. The outline for the Self-Study and the material from the various committees were discussed and reviewed by the Steering Committee in several meetings from spring 2003 through fall 2004, when a preliminary draft of the Self-Study was prepared for the Committee's review by its Chair.

After its review by the Committee, the Preliminary Self-Study was then sent for further review and comment to a number of constituencies—administrators, trustees, faculty, and students. Further revisions were made as a result of these reviews, and a penultimate draft was distributed to the Committee at the end of January 2005, for last comment and updating before final copies would be made for the Evaluation Team.

The Self Study

In designing our report, we compressed and at times retitled the seven Commission Standards for Educational Effectiveness (8 to 14) in ways that we feel address the essentials of those standards while at the same time placing focus where it is most useful for our Self-Study. We close each

section with a list of Challenges and Strategies or Future Directions, and conclude with reflections on what we learned from our Self-Study and some global recommendations. Our six sections are summarized as follows:

I. Undergraduate Student Admissions, Enrollment, and Educational Progress (Standard 8)

This section introduces the complexity of a single University geographically dispersed as it seeks to accommodate student needs and expectations for a Penn State education at the appropriate locations. Penn State uses a single undergraduate admission application, processed centrally in the Undergraduate Admissions Office (12,620 new freshmen at 20 locations in fall 2003). That process, as well as most other operations that fall under Enrollment Management and Administration (EMA), has been greatly advanced by technological efficiencies—both to facilitate student enrollment and to help students through the registration process, including degree auditing, monitoring of progress, and advising. The main challenge faced by EMA is in the area of enrollment and access, with higher tuition driven by decreased state funding, greater unmet need accompanied by lessening student aid from government sources, and an unfavorable demographic picture in Pennsylvania. The University's strategies to meet these challenges include greater fund raising for student scholarships (including the matching Trustee Scholarships), better marketing, and identifying further efficiencies to keep tuition under control. At the same time, the University needs to continue to look into such new markets as international undergraduates and non-traditional learners.

II. Services that Support Teaching and Learning (Standard 9)

This section describes the many ways in which Penn State supports a student-centered learning community within and outside of the traditional classroom. This support includes Penn State's learning centers; programs to support civility and citizenship, such as our educationally based disciplinary system and the Penn State initiative for a newspaper readership program; support for student involvement, as in our e-portfolio program; our creation of living and learning environments, both at University Park and at some of our campus locations; and our programs to prepare campus students, particularly from special populations, to transition to University Park. Recommendations for improving student services included the following: strengthening communication and collaboration between/among service units and locations; enhancing assessment activities with a particular emphasis on outcomes; developing a more thorough, seamless orientation process for new students that is integrated, spans the entire first year, and provides a consistent core of messages regardless of location; reassessing organizational alignments to determine if synergy would be gained by closer association between offices offering student services; increasing efforts to encourage and recognize faculty involvement and contributions to the out-of-class learning environment; and expanding living-learning opportunities at all residential campuses.

III. Institutional Support and Expectations for the Faculty in Teaching and Student Learning (Standard 10)

This section addresses University expectations for faculty regarding the scholarship of teaching and learning, current practices to enhance faculty development in the teaching and

learning enterprise, and challenges and strategies for continued improvement. The expectations for faculty are reviewed in relation to Penn State's policies for tenure and promotion, annual and extended reviews, and sabbatical leave. We then review the various practices in place that are designed to support faculty in teaching and learning, at University, college, campus, and department/division levels. These practices are grouped into five areas: (1) University initiatives to support teaching excellence; (2) teaching awards that bring visibility to outstanding instructors; (3) teaching support units (often programs or positions at the department level) to help instructors develop basic skills, become involved in the scholarship of practice, and create and/or utilize educational resources and technologies; (4) grants designed to improve learning environments and promote the scholarship of teaching; and (5) evaluations of faculty performance in instruction. The main challenges that are posited for faculty include the growing impact of a more diverse student body, and the need for sensitivity to assess what may be different learning needs of students with varying backgrounds. At the same time, there is the need to assess support and recognition for a growing group of faculty who are part-time or simply not part of the tenure system. The demands placed on faculty in balancing their participation in a student-centered environment with the expectations placed on them for research and creative activity are also seen as a challenge, one that the UNISCOPE report addresses only in part. Finally, communicating the various opportunities for support for teaching and learning, as well as assessing the impact of various programs designed to enhance teaching and learning, are seen as challenges, which we address in our global recommendations in our concluding chapter.

IV. Educational Offerings and General Education (Standards 11 and 12)

This section combines two overlapping standards to deal with both educational offerings and general education. After an overview of our degree programs and the first-year experience, we provide descriptions and examples of the design and implementation of General Education, a discussion of some examples and initiatives in disciplinary education, and an overview of our numerous academic enhancement programs. This is followed by a description of the ways in which we provide support for maintaining quality and innovation in the curriculum, including our efforts to support a dynamic learning environment; a climate of integrity and student responsibility; and opportunities to integrate classroom and experiential learning. We close with observations about future directions for general education and discipline-based education at Penn State. These observations note some clear challenges and make some specific recommendations in response to them.

The first challenge is to assess and evaluate information on which to make decisions about recent curricular changes. The following University-wide programs need systematic evaluation of both implementation and student outcomes at both unit and University levels: pedagogical techniques specified by the General Education program, first year seminars, the newly revised International Cultures and U.S. Cultures requirement, and student learning in General Education across courses. The second challenge is to maintain curricular coherence and diminish "curricular drift," best described as subtle changes in curricula that may occur due to geographic dispersion and potential lack of communication between University Park and campus colleges. Recommendations for addressing this issue include developing an electronic system for the dissemination and consultation of proposed curricular changes; reducing the problem of competitive duplication of academic programs by asking all proposals for new academic programs at all locations to demonstrate that they are providing a net benefit to the University; creating an on-line system for the archiving of University

course outlines and recent course syllabi; increasing curricular cooperation and providing encouragement and support for discipline-based University-wide curricular cooperation among faculty; and charging the Senate Committee on Intra-University Relations to work with other appropriate Senate committees and interested parties to develop specific implementation strategies for meeting these challenges. (The Chair of the Faculty Senate plans to make this a priority issue for 2004-2005.) A third challenge is to increase opportunities for students to apply knowledge gained and skills achieved outside of the classroom, by doing better at integrating internships and externships within the curriculum, coordinating information about available experiences, extending research experiences to a larger number of students, meeting the obligation to integrate academic goals with those of citizenship, and integrating international experiences into the undergraduate curriculum.

V. Educational Activities and Structural Changes to Improve Access (Standard 13)

We here describe various kinds of educational and structural changes to improve access that have occurred since the last review. The major structural change was the conversion of what was the Commonwealth Education System into new campus colleges, thereby allowing location bound students to complete selected degrees near home. There have also been major restructuring initiatives to improve education and access under the Vice President for Outreach in continuing education, cooperative extension, and distance education. The section then goes on to describe educational activities and other initiatives that have extended access of Penn State programs to students and the public. A number of these depend upon technological advances: our World Campus, a major online virtual campus; our new School for Information Sciences and Technology, with a presence on virtually every campus; the Campus Course Exchange, a multi-college online delivery program; the LionShare digital objects management tool, which facilitates file sharing; and Penn State Public Broadcasting, as it transitions to a digital broadcasting environment. We also review programs to ensure access for special populations: service members, law enforcement professionals, teachers, youth, and members of minority populations.

Recommendations made to meet the seven challenges that close this section include suggested strategies to address the changing demographics of the Commonwealth, especially the growing importance of adult learners. Noting that the need for continuing education in Pennsylvania's small cities and rural communities has increased, reflecting changes in the Commonwealth's economy, we recommend that the University take a fresh view of the identification, development, and delivery of continuing education services to ensure that we are properly positioned to respond to local, regional, and statewide needs. In order to insure access through Penn State's many digital resources, we recommend the development of a content management system that could be easily integrated with other services provided by Information Technology Services and the Libraries. We also recommend a planning initiative among the academic units in support of the e-Learning Cooperative. Finally, for the digital conversion to deliver on its promises, we encourage new ways of thinking about the creation of digital content and new partnerships with other University units.

VI. Student Learning Outcomes (Standard 14)

This section notes the many ways Penn State assesses student learning. All initiatives from the Office of Undergraduate Education and International Affairs and the Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence mandate assessment, and the Faculty Senate routinely builds an

assessment component into its legislative initiatives involving undergraduate education. The section focuses on the University's articulation of expected student learning outcomes—including the seven active learning expectations in our General Education program—and the practices that are currently employed to measure them, including examples of how they are used to assist decision-making. In the preparation for this section of the Self-Study, we conducted a survey to benchmark with a similar one taken eleven years ago the degree to which programs articulate student learning outcomes. Over that period there was an increase from 24% to 68% of respondents who reported that they had explicitly defined expectations for learning outcomes. Our survey also allowed us to track what outcomes measures were being used by our various programs and to discuss models of assessment used in the University and their relationship to academic decisions.

After reviewing the many ways in which student learning is assessed at Penn State, we conclude that, nonetheless, there is at this time no systematic, institutional approach to outcomes assessment. We therefore recommend that the University explore opportunities for expanding the role of formative and summative assessment plans with targets for general education and academic programs. The leadership for developing and implementing an outcomes assessment plan would be taken by the Office of Undergraduate Education and International Programs. It would partner with other stakeholders—such as the colleges, the Graduate School, the University Faculty Senate, Student Affairs, and the Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment—to approach assessment from a collaborative and integrated organizational perspective.

Conclusion

Our conclusion reflects on what we learned from the self-study process. Among our observations are that we learned how committed we are at every level to helping our students become active participants in their learning and to take responsibility for their intellectual, civic and moral growth. We were also struck by the degree to which Penn State has embraced the opportunities offered by technology in the delivery of education and student services and the increased efficiencies that have resulted. We also express our appreciation for the efforts to improve teaching and learning made by our various colleges and departments, and we find in them models to be widely emulated. We also note the strong involvement by the Faculty Senate in initiatives identified in every section of the Self-Study.

After organizing what we see as recurring themes in the challenges presented in each section, under the rubrics of assessment, integration, and application, we close with five global recommendations: 1) that the assessment needs of various units and a University-wide assessment plan be developed and implemented under the leadership of the appropriate offices; 2) that there be a plan to integrate information for faculty and students; 3) that the issue of achieving curricular coherence and avoiding curricular drift be addressed by the appropriate offices and the Faculty Senate; that the appropriate offices develop a program for greater involvement of adult learners at Penn State; and that all units review carefully the Self-Study and develop specific action plans to meet the challenges (and recommendations noted earlier in this Executive Summary) specific to their areas.