

ASSURANCE SECTION

REPORT OF A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION VISIT

TO

Southwest Minnesota State University
Marshall, Minnesota

2-4 February 2004

FOR

The Higher Learning Commission
A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

EVALUATION TEAM

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ASSURANCE SECTION

I. CONTEXT AND NATURE OF VISIT

A. Institutional Context:

Southwest Minnesota State University opened to students in the Fall of 1967 following several years of planning. A new baccalaureate degree granting institution serving southwestern Minnesota, the campus was located in Marshall and developed for 2000 students. From the beginning the mission has remained consistent: a liberal arts base complements programs in professional and technical studies including business and teacher education. The first graduate programs were introduced in 1996.

The Board of Trustees of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) is the governing body for the institution. MnSCU was created by the state legislature in 1995. The system includes 33 universities, technical colleges, and community colleges including all seven of the state's universities with the exception of the University of Minnesota.

Southwest Minnesota State University is organized into two colleges and served 3181 FYE students in 2003. It has no off-campus sites.

The present visit is to conduct a comprehensive evaluation for continued accreditation at the master's level.

B. Unique Aspects of Visit:

None

C. Sites or Branch Campuses Visited:

Yellow Medicine East High School – Granite Falls, MN, to visit a *Challenge* program classroom

D. Distance Education Reviewed:

The University currently offers no degree programs through Distance Education. Faculty are beginning to offer Minnesota Interactive Television network (ITV) and web-enhanced courses.

E. Interactions with Institutional Constituencies**Executive Management**

1. President of SMSU
2. Chancellor of MnSCU
3. Provost/Vice President for Academic Affairs
4. Vice President for Financial Administration
5. Vice President for Advancement
6. Dean of Students and Vice President for Student Success
7. Dean, College of Arts, Letters, and Sciences
8. Dean, College of Business, Education, and Professional Studies
9. Dean, Distance Learning and Director of Library
10. Athletic Director
11. MnSCU Liaison

Faculty

12. Chair of the University Faculty Association
13. Faculty – Open Meeting
14. Faculty Coordinator for the Off-Campus Education Development and Leadership (EDL) program
15. Coordinator of the Self-Study
16. Special Education Coordinator/
Director of On-Campus Graduate Education
17. Accreditation Coordinator/
Professional Development Schools
18. Coordinator of Challenge Program
19. Teaching Assistant for Professional School
20. Faculty – Graduate Committee
21. Chairperson, Science Department
22. Faculty – Environmental Sciences, Geology, Chemistry, Geography

23. Chair – Graduate Committee

Management & Staff

24. Controller
25. Director of Physical Plant
26. Director of Facilities Management
27. Director, Student Life
28. Assistant Director, Student Center
29. Director, Research and Institutional Grants
30. Director, Career Services
31. Director of Health Services
32. Coordinator of Distance Learning
33. Members of Staff – Open Meeting
34. Director of Cultural Diversity
35. Assistant Director of Student/Resident Life
36. Personnel Officer/Affirmative Action Officer
37. Director of Computer Services
38. Executive Director of SHOT

Students

39. Student Government President
40. Students – Open Meeting
41. Students individually

Community Support

42. Representatives of volunteer boards, community organizations, business and industry

F. Principal Documents, Materials, and Web Pages Reviewed:**SMSU Self-Study Documents**

1. SMSU Self-Study Report(2 volumes) November 2002
2. Student Planner/Handbook,2003-2004
3. University Catalog, 2002-2004 MnSCU System Annual
4. Financial Reports for 2002 and 2003
5. Office of the Legislative Auditor, Financial Audit for the period July1,1995 through June 30,1998
6. MSUAASF Master Agreement, 2001-2003
7. IFO-MnSCU Master Agreement, 2001-2003
8. Minnesota State Employees Union, AFSCME Master Agreement, 2001-2003
9. Self-Study Report: Institutional Data Forms

SMSU Administrative Documents

10. Campus Directory,2003-2004
11. Strategic Planning documents, including December, 2003 Progress Report and Plan for 2010
12. Designing the Future, MnSCU Strategic Plan, 2002-2005
13. Commitment to Diversity, SMSU Plan for Excellence
14. Faculty Constitution and Bylaws
15. Articulation agreements
16. SMSU Budget Information FY 03
17. Budget Planning MnSCU
18. Campus Climate Report
19. Campus News including Focus on Food Service East fire
20. Cooperative Program

21. Faculty Load Reports
22. Faculty resumes
23. Residence Hall plan for 15 years
24. Program Reviews
25. Graduate Faculty Policy
26. Grant contracts and agreements
27. SMSU Library Renovations brochure
28. Institutional Data Forms (updated)
29. State of Minnesota Transfer Curriculum
30. MnSCU Policies and Reports
31. Minnesota Statutes
32. Organizational Chart
33. *U.S. News and World Report* survey
34. Staff resumes
35. SMSU Foundation annual reports
36. Student Association-Constitution and By-laws
37. Admission publications
38. Third party comments

SMSU Internal Academic Review/Assessment Documents

39. Program Reviews and policy
40. Assessment Reports and Policy
41. Institutional Review Board Actions

SMSU Websites

42. Web pages especially for faculty governance and faculty policies and procedures
43. Website and subsites for Student Services and enrollment services

II. COMMITMENT TO PEER REVIEW

A. Comprehensiveness of the Self-Study Process:

The self-study process was initiated in the Fall of 2000 with the appointment of a steering committee which provided leadership for the development of the report. It was evident to the Visiting Team that Southwest Minnesota State University had focused considerable energy on 1) assessing the major changes which have affected SMSU over the past ten years and 2) anticipating the future in light of the present condition of the university. Most of the participants in the self-study process were active members of the committees and the self-study report is particularly well-informed and honest in its discussion of the important issues.

From comments at the open meetings and interviews with administrators, faculty, staff, and students, the Team concludes that all major sectors of the campus participated in the self-study process and that the comprehensiveness of the process appeared to be quite acceptable.

Integrity of the Self-Study Report:

The Self-Study Report is clearly organized and presents a self-critical account of the University's mission, current operations and structure, and potential for continuing success. A major strength is the careful review of the history of SMSU in Chapter I including the responses of the campus to both the 1993 NCA visit and the 1996 Focus Visit Team report. It is evident that the most recent concerns have been carefully addressed including those related to collegiality, planning, and assessment of student learning outcomes at the program level. Included in a second volume of the Self-Study Report is an exemplary appendix responding to 16 suggestions from the 1993 and 1996 teams. The Resource Room made available to the team during its visit was exceptionally well-organized and contained an array of supporting material. The Team found the Report to be informative, clearly presented, and self-critical. No evidence was found which would diminish the integrity of the Report.

B. Capacity to Address Previously Identified Challenges

1. Institutional Capacity to Address and Resolve Previously Identified Challenges:

Based on the institution's response to previously identified challenges, the Team confirms the institution's capacity to identify, address, and resolve issues. Challenges that warrant continuing attention are addressed in the following section.

2. Inadequately Resolved Challenges:

The 1993 team identified eleven areas of concern and three additional challenges were presented by the 1996 focus visit team. Despite the good progress made over the past eleven years, continued attention must be given to financial concerns, particularly as they relate to declining state support and increasing reliance on student fees and tuition. While this situation is not unique to Minnesota, it seems particularly troubling in view of the state's proud tradition of access, opportunity, and quality.

The creation of MnSCU in 1995 provides a governance structure for addressing many previous issues including long range planning, diversity, program approval, program review, and assessment. The 2004 Team finds that the university needs to monitor carefully its use of faculty and staff resources. New additions to the physical plant will require additional staffing, laboratory equipment needs to be kept current, and a technology plan needs to be developed. While the institution and the system are committed to diversity goals, progress has been very limited. Good progress has been made in stabilizing the administration and attention has been given to the number of programs and monitoring new program development. Increased attention must be given to program quality in light of a bleak budget picture for the foreseeable future. Specific areas needing attention include teacher education, graduate education, and general education. A progress report on general education is included in the Team's recommendation.

C. Notification of Evaluation Visit and Solicitation of Third-Party Comment:

Requirements were fulfilled.

Comments: Two third party comments were received. One letter discussed the teacher education program and the need for improvement. In the Advancement Section, the Visiting Team has suggested a number of strategies to strengthen this important component of the University curriculum. The other letter reiterated personal concerns regarding previous administrators at the University.

III. COMPLIANCE WITH FEDERAL REQUIREMENTS

The Team reviewed the required Title IV compliance areas and the student complaint information.

Comments: The procedures for handling complaints have not been centralized, but the university does maintain the individual complaint records in several

locations. The institution intends to immediately address this issue with all complaints recorded in log format with detailed documentation of each complaint and its disposition in the Office of the Provost and Vice-President for Academic Affairs.

IV. AFFIRMATION OF THE GENERAL INSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENTS

Based on the self-study review and other documentation, the Team confirms that the institution continues to meet each of the twenty-four General Institutional Requirements.

V. FULFILLMENT OF THE CRITERIA

A. CRITERION ONE

The institution demonstrates that it has clear and publicly stated purposes consistent with its mission and appropriate to an institution of higher education.

Salient Evidence of Fulfillment of Criterion

1. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion is met:

- a. Consistent with its authority, the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities' System (The System) approved the following mission statement:

“The mission of Southwest Minnesota State University is to provide high quality liberal arts, professional, and technical programs at the undergraduate and graduate level. Southwest Minnesota State University is dedicated to excellence in teaching and to preparing students to be life-long learners in a changing global, social, and natural environment. The University has a special commitment to the educational needs of people in its service region. This commitment is reflected in the curricula, cultural enrichment programs, cooperative relationships with other regional institutions, and in service and research contributions to both the public and private sectors of the region.”

Nine goals round out the mission statement which include: providing a range of undergraduate liberal arts, technical, and professional and pre-professional programs with a liberal arts core; graduate-level instruction to southwestern Minnesota, inter-institutional cooperative agreements; educational service and support to the Region; programs which enable persons with physical disabilities to achieve their educational goals; programs with emphasis on the gifted and talented; emphasis on

coursework, service, and research in rural studies, rural education, and agribusiness; enhancement of the intellectual, social, and physical development of each of its students; and a leadership role in the development of projects and initiatives which will assist in developing the economic base of southwestern Minnesota.

- b. The Self-Study Report provides evidence that the faculty, staff, students, and administrators understand the mission and the strategic plan which is based upon it.
 - c. Public comments and discussions with constituents of the University reflect a knowledge of and appreciation for the mission and role of SMSU.
 - d. The University's primary goal of teaching and learning excellence is well-known to students and supported by student groups.
 - e. The change in name from Southwest State University to Southwest Minnesota State University has been received positively by the campus and community and promises to better define SMSU's relationship to its southwestern Minnesota service area.
2. **Evidence that demonstrates the criterion needs institutional attention:** None noted.
3. **Evidence that demonstrates the criterion requires institutional attention and Commission follow-up:**
- None noted.

Recommendation of the Team

Pattern of evidence sufficiently demonstrated; no Commission follow-up recommended.

B. CRITERION TWO

The institution demonstrates that it has effectively organized the human, financial, and physical resources necessary to accomplish its purposes.

Salient Evidence of Fulfillment of Criterion

- 1. **Evidence that demonstrates the criterion is met:**
 - a. The administrative/governing structure is traditional with a state-level

Board of Trustees of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities providing overall control for the institution and the other 33 institutions of the system as well. An institutional president, three vice presidents, and several assistant/associate vice presidents provide campus leadership along with deans, directors, and department chairs. The governance structure seems to be serving the campus well.

- b. Consistent with policies of the MnSCU System, the Faculty Assembly serves as the major faculty organization in the governance structure and seems to be working under the present administration.
- c. The administrative and governance structure at SMSU is traditional for a regional university that is a member of a statewide public higher education system in a collective bargaining environment.
- d. The library is undergoing a \$9.2 million renovation which is designed to further its responsive services to students and the community.
- e. With less than 15% of the courses taught by part-time faculty, the Team finds that SMSU is not overly reliant on part-time faculty.
- f. With the change in presidential leadership two and one half years ago, communications across the campus have improved significantly. Initiatives including the all university conversations, the strategic planning process and budget reduction deliberations have engaged the campus and contributed an unprecedented level of information exchange and collaboration.
- g. The provost's initiative to support and encourage the interaction of the department chairs has created an environment that encourages collaboration and visioning, thereby elevating and strengthening the chairs institutional leadership role.
- h. The Minnesota State College and University System chancellor and board of trustees are very supportive of SMSU. This support was especially evident in the speed with which capital resources were made available to the campus following the recent fire which destroyed the student center.
- i. The faculty are deeply committed to the learning of their students.
- j. The campus serves the community in myriad ways. Notable successful programs include the Senior College that provides opportunities for lifelong learning for adults ages 50 and over, the masters of educational leadership program that reaches teachers throughout the region, and GIS services and training for communities and area professionals. The athletic

program hosts over 50 school-based events annually. Musical and theatrical performances provide important cultural venues accessible to members of the community.

- k. The campus has made major strides in the incorporation of information technologies into instructional and institutional operations over the last decade. The campus IT backbone is largely gigabyte and much of the campus including the dormitories has 10/100 megabyte connectivity. Smart classrooms are being installed and the campus is positioned through its collaboration with the Southwest/West Central Higher Education Organization for Telecommunications and Technology (SHOT) to provide support for the newly adopted Desire to Learn software for web-based instruction. A technology plan is in the first phase of development to support the progress being made.
- l. The campus has made good progress in recruiting and retaining women faculty with 34 % of the tenure and tenure-track faculty women as opposed to 25 % a decade ago. Importantly, women are being promoted to the upper faculty ranks.
- m. The campus is very supportive of students with disabilities and is fully ADA compliant.

2. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion needs institutional attention:

- a. The University's financial records reflect sound principles of budgeting and financial management. Regular audits are conducted and results made available to interested parties. Declining state revenues have forced the University to reduce budgets and reallocate its limited resources. In addition, student tuition is being increased yearly at a rate of 15 %. State funding has fallen to 44% from a statutory requirement of 63% of the overall institutional budget and is projected to continue to decline. A major challenge for the University is to determine how high the cost of tuition can go before it adversely affects enrollment and the institution's commitment to access and opportunity.
- b. The budget allocated to maintain the Physical Plant is extremely small for a campus this size. As the campus adds new facilities, consideration will need to be given to an already stressed physical plant budget.
- c. Budget reductions have added to the limited staffing pattern. Faculty members are often asked to teach overload to insure that essential courses are offered. It appears that large numbers of faculty regularly carry overload assignments which may diminish their effectiveness in the

classroom and their ability to provide service to the students, the university, and to the community.

- d. The campus collects extensive data on its students, programs and operations, but it is unclear how effectively this data is incorporated into the decision-making process.
- e. Recruitment and retention of a diverse faculty and administration continues to be a concern for the campus, exacerbated by the lack of a community of color both on and off campus.

3. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion requires institutional attention and Commission follow-up:

None noted.

Recommendation of the Team

Pattern of evidence sufficiently demonstrated; no Commission follow-up recommended.

C. CRITERION THREE

The institution is accomplishing its educational and other purposes.

Salient Evidence of Fulfillment of Criterion

1. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion is met:

- a. SMSU has created a functioning academic program review process intended to be integrated with both outcomes assessment and the strategic planning process. Program data is collected annually. A system of hiring external consultants to conduct academic program review has been implemented and a schedule created and followed. Every five years a self-study document (prepared according to standardized specifications) is submitted by each program, and, along with departmentally-generated and student input (assessment) data, submitted to the external reviewer. Review schedule adjustments, to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort, are made for programs with external accrediting bodies. At the conclusion of the review, the chair and faculty propose a plan to the college dean and the provost for inclusion in the University strategic planning process.
- b. SMSU is well along the path towards its goal of having in place a comprehensive, multi-level outcomes assessment process. The outcomes assessment process is intended to be fully connected to academic program

review and the strategic planning process. Especially at the department and course level, a structure and a set of processes have been brought into existence that assure that assessment data is collected, disseminated, and used. An impressively detailed set of departmental assessment plans, prepared in 2003, identify assessment practices and measures. The campus is working towards the goal of effective use of the institutional data it collects

- c. The Master of Science in Special Education program began in the Spring 2001 with MnSCU approval but without the approval of the Higher Learning Commission. This seems to have been an honest oversight on the part of the faculty but should have monitored more closely by the administration. With the addition of a special education faculty in Fall 2004, there is adequate faculty to support the program. The Team supports the request of SMSU to add the Master of Science in Special Education to its list of approved graduate level programs.
- d. SMSU has accomplished the goal of developing and implementing a functioning strategic planning process. This development and implementation are well documented. In 1993 a mission statement was approved, and in 1994, a vision statement. Planning events were held beginning in 1995, and continuing in 1997, 1999, 2002, and 2003. The results of the latest of these, dated November 5, 2003, is posted on the University's website. After the planning day in fall 2002, a biennial strategic plan was developed. The University's planning occurs in the context of its being a part of the Minnesota State College and University (MnSCU) system.
- e. The institutional commitment to student success is evident throughout the campus community and demonstrated in many areas including the library, the athletic program, and student support services.

2. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion needs institutional attention:

- a. Graduate programs have grown significantly in the past three years. As a consequence, the traditional administrative structure is not yet in place, and the Dean of Education, Business, and Professional Studies is the Graduate Dean by default. Curriculum matters are being handled by the undergraduate curriculum committee, some of whom are not on the graduate faculty. There is a graduate committee that approves appointments to graduate faculty; however, this committee does not approve curriculum changes. Although the current graduate programs have no capstone course or comprehensive exams, students complete an impressive graduate project that, from all appearances, is a graduate thesis. These projects are bound and housed in the library just like thesis or

dissertations.

- b. Within the broad parameters established by the IFO Master MnSCU agreement, the campus is encouraged to work toward more effective and standardized practices for tenure and promotion.
- c. From individual interviews with faculty and administrators and from the Self Study, it seems clear that the Teacher Education Program has a number of organizational and management issues in need of attention. Administrative duties are done by faculty as an add-on to their load, and consistency is lacking due to faculty turn over. Approval of applications for the Teacher Education Program is done by the department as a whole or those who are available, not by a standing committee. There is no input from practitioners in the field.
- d. The campus has leveraged grant funds for acquisition of equipment; institutional budgets do not adequately provide for acquisition of or replacement of major laboratory equipment, including microscopes.

3. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion requires institutional attention and Commission follow-up:

- a. SMSU has a 44-semester hour general education program, the Liberal Arts Core (LAC). Approved by the faculty in 1996, this program is the successor to the old General Studies program. The required and elective courses that compose it must address the seven goals of the program, be consistent with Minnesota Transfer Curriculum, and meet the goals of the major programs offered by SMSU. Assessment of the LAC has been overseen by the Committee for Institutional Assessment (CIA). Starting in 2001 with the communication and developmental education goal, the CIA began assessing the LAC in terms of its effectiveness in carrying out its goals. This assessment process is currently on hold pending a comprehensive review of the LAC initiated by the Provost.
- b. The University is aware of the limited attention it has given to assessing student academic achievement in General Education. The Team recommends that this deficiency be addressed in its progress report.

A progress report on General Education is due to the Commission Office by June 2007.

Recommendation of the Team

Pattern of evidence sufficiently demonstrated; no Commission follow-up recommended.

D. CRITERION FOUR

The institution can continue to accomplish its purposes and strengthen its educational effectiveness.

Salient Evidence of Fulfillment of Criterion**1. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion is met:**

- a. The Southwest Minnesota State University Foundation has been reorganized by the Vice President for Advancement. Newly appointed Board members who are personally and professionally committed to fundraising are in place, and plans are underway for a substantial comprehensive campaign. Goals and priorities for the campaign have been set and an RFP has been issued for a consultant.
- b. The recently developed 2010 strategic plan resulting from a collaborative campus-wide process sets a clear direction for the campus over the next six years consistent with the goals of the Minnesota State College and University System. Importantly, the plan sets institutional priorities, links the campus to regional priorities and should further distinguish SMSU from its sister institutions in the state.

2. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion needs institutional attention:

- a. The decline in state support has necessitated significant increases in tuition, jeopardizing SMSU's ability to meet the System goal of student access and opportunity.
- b. The campus lacks a comprehensive strategic plan for the deployment and use of emerging information technologies in support of learning and student success.

3. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion requires institutional attention and Commission follow-up:

None noted.

Recommendation of the Team

Pattern of evidence sufficiently demonstrated; no Commission follow-up

recommended.

E. CRITERION FIVE

The institution demonstrates integrity in its practices and relationships.

Salient Evidence of Fulfillment of Criterion

1. **Evidence that demonstrates the criterion is met:**
 - a. SMSU catalogs, handbooks, and publications are current, clear, and accurate. The Higher Learning Commission standards and expectations regarding institutional operations and relationships are met.
 - b. The University's website <http://www.southwestmsu.edu> appears to be user-friendly, but needs continual development and maintenance.
2. **Evidence that demonstrates the criterion needs institutional attention:**
 - a. SMSU's catalog fails to include the address and phone number of the Higher Learning Commission. The institution will remedy this deficiency in the next version of the catalog which will be published for the Fall 2004.
3. **Evidence that demonstrates the criterion requires institutional attention and Commission follow-up:**

None noted.

Recommendation of the Team

Pattern of evidence sufficiently demonstrated; no Commission follow-up recommended

VI. TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

ACCREDITATION RELATIONSHIP

A progress report on General Education, including articulation of an overarching institutional philosophy of general education, a curriculum aligned with the philosophy and goals, and a plan for assessing student learning outcomes in General Education is due to the Commission Office by June 2007.

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The University has not given sufficient attention to assessing General Education and is intending to give significant attention to assessing student academic achievement in General Education as it works on the reform and feedback loop for this program. The Team recommends that this deficiency be addressed in its progress report.

CONTINUED ACCREDITATION

Next Comprehensive Visit: 2013-2014

Rationale: In the past ten years, Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU) has made significant progress in maintaining its mission, improving student enrollment, and managing resources in times of fiscal restraint. From reviewing the Self-Study Report and other supporting documents and from extensive interviews on campus, the Team concludes that SMSU is not only meeting all 24 of the General Institutional Requirements but also fulfilling all five of the Criteria for Accreditation. The weight of evidence in leadership, governance, resource allocation, and planning indicates that SMSU has the institutional processes in place to warrant another ten-year accreditation cycle.

DEFINERS OF RELATIONSHIP

1. **Degree Level:** Master's
2. **Ownership:** Public
Retain original wording
3. **Stipulations:** None
Accreditation at the Master's level is limited to Master of Science degrees in Education, Management, and Special Education, and the Master of Business Administration.
4. **New Degree Sites:** Prior Commission approval required.
Retain original wording

ADVANCEMENT SECTION

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Dr. Robert L. Reid, Professor of History
University of Southern Indiana, (Chairperson)

ADVANCEMENT SECTION

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- II. CONSULTATIONS OF THE TEAM**
 - A. Concerns of the Previous 1993 NCA Visiting Team and the 1996 Focus Visit Team**
 - B. Academic Program Review**
 - C. Coping with Budget Realities**
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ADVANCEMENT SECTION

I. OVERALL OBSERVATION ABOUT THE INSTITUTION

A. History and Environment

Southwest Minnesota State University is located in southwestern Minnesota in Marshall and serves a nineteen-county region. The university opened to its first class of students in 1967. In 1995 the state of Minnesota merged its institutions of higher education under a new governance system. Currently 33 universities, technical colleges, and community colleges are under the authority of the Board of Trustees of the Minnesota State Colleges and University System. The University of Minnesota is under its own governing body and not a part of MnSCU; seven baccalaureate and graduate degree granting universities are included in MnSCU. SMSU received initial NCA accreditation at the baccalaureate level in 1972.

The campus is situated on approximately 216 acres in the city of Marshall. The community is building a new high school complex across a county highway from the University. This will enable further collaboration between these educational and community service partners. The buildings are attractive and the entire campus is connected with an underground tunnel system which enhances accessibility. Planned for an enrollment of 2,000 students, the campus is undergoing two major projects which will positively impact its educational mission and its service to the community. The first is a \$9.2 million renovation of the library; the second is the construction of a new student center complex following a major fire in October 2001. Strong support from MnSCU and the state government were essential for enabling these capital projects to move forward. Other notable developments over the past decade include completion of a new Recreation/Athletic building serving the campus and the community.

On July 1 2003 the university became Southwest Minnesota State University. This change adding the state to the name is intended to reduce confusion about the location of the university. It also underlines its role as one Minnesota's seven public colleges. All indications are that the transition to the new name has gone well.

The Team concludes that SMSU has a dedicated faculty and an effective, capable administration dedicated to student success. It was evident to the Visiting Team that the administrative team has the confidence of the faculty, students, and the community. Despite the budget difficulties facing public higher education in Minnesota, the institution is in good health and can be expected to stay this way in the years ahead.

II. CONSULTATIONS OF THE TEAM

A. Concerns of the Previous 1993 NCA Visiting Team and the 1996 Focus Visit Team

Eleven concerns were identified by the 1993 NCA Visiting Team. Three additions were made by the Focus Team which came to the campus in 1996. Southwest Minnesota State University has addressed each of the concerns. The Self-Study Report describes the institution's responses to each challenge and the Team finds that significant progress has been made with respect to them. It is evident that leadership for much of this progress can be attributed to the current President and his administration.

The 1996 Focus Visit Team addressed the issue of collegiality (Concern 10) and reported that the tension "no longer exists." It was evident to the 2004 Team that the current administration has fostered a spirit of openness which is admirable in these difficult financial times.

The creation of a new governance system in 1995 has contributed to the progress made on several issues. These include planning (Concern 4), assessment (Concern 5), program review (Concern 6), program discontinuation (Concern 7), a database for assessing progress in meeting diversity goals (Concern 2), and awareness of state level programs and resources (Concern 3). The Board of Trustees of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System has focused attention on each of these issues and SMSU has responded appropriately to state policies and requests. It is evident that the 1993 Team was aware of the impending merger of the higher education system and that these issues as well as others would get attention. Further discussion on program review, assessment, and planning follows.

The President has addressed questions about administrative vacancies and interim appointments (Concern 9 and also noted by Focus Visit Team). It is expected that searches underway for permanent deans will be successful. This will resolve the 1993 and 1996 concerns regarding interim positions and unfilled administrative posts. Unlike the earlier visit, the Team found no evidence that the faculty is 'frustrated' and feeling "a lack of direction and leadership".

Other concerns relate to library support, faculty evaluation, and support for programs, particularly at the graduate level. The University is addressing the library issue (Concern 1) and reports significant supplemental appropriations of approximately \$100,000 annually for three years. The state is supporting a major renovation of the library currently in progress. Electronic means and participation in statewide library systems are being used to maintain and strengthen library service. SMSU reports that faculty evaluation (Concern 8)

is defined by the collective bargaining agreement. There is evidence that the current administration understands the importance of applying promotion and tenure standards in an even manner that conforms to the agreement. Faculty express support for standards consistent with those expected of the teaching profession at the university level. The Team strongly encourages continued attention to this critical feature of institutional life. Graduate programs are important to the service region of SMSU (Concern 11). Based on the review by the 1996 Focus Visit Team, the University implemented graduate programs in Education and Business. The addition of a master's program in special education addresses a demonstrated regional need and has the positive recommendation of the 2004 Team. Fiscal realities (Concern 2 of Focus Visit Team) make it imperative that no new graduate programs be started prior to approval by MnSCU and the Higher Learning Commission. Graduate education and programs in teacher education are discussed further in this section of the Team Report.

B. Academic Program Review Process

According to the report of the 1993 NCA Team, Southwest Minnesota State University had an academic program review (APR) process but it was applied inconsistently across campus. The team recommended that SMSU develop and sustain a more effective APR process that balanced faculty and administrative concerns. The 2003 Self Study documents that SMSU has created a functioning APR process. SMSU has done well in this endeavor.

Properly understood and employed, APR is a tremendously effective and comprehensive tool for planning in academic affairs. To fulfill APR's potential in utilizing the strategic planning process SMSU should consider the following suggestions:

- a. As currently set out, the process allows the steps leading to a program's discontinuance to originate either through the APR process or via administrative initiative in the scheduled cycle. For maximum effectiveness, APR needs to be seen as the principal means by which programs can be enhanced, continued, or deleted. Including a provision allowing administration to initiate an out-of-cycle review would allow flexibility in the event of an unforeseen eventuality.
- b. The useful information already collected for APR reviews can be supplemented with additional kinds of data: (1) a survey of employers of program graduates, (2) a survey of program alumni, and (3) the development of advisory boards for all academic programs.

C. Coping with Budget Realities

Minnesota Universities are experiencing and foresee continuing budget reductions and state appropriations. For FY 2004-2005, the university will be using fund balances, unfilled positions, and increased tuition to meet this fiscal crisis. Eventually the university anticipates some relief from the SMSU Foundation which is in the silent phase of a comprehensive campaign.

D. Student Outcomes Assessment

According to the report of the 1993 NCA Team, SMSU had the mandate to develop an outcomes assessment plan but had not done so fully. The Student Learning Committee developed a plan to plan for assessment. At that time, the plan was still in its early stages with a poor understanding of the multitudinous variety of assessment measures. A number of needs were noted: linking assessment to planning, strong and consistent administrative support, faculty support, and a conceptual framework. The 2003 Self Study documents that SMSU is well along the path towards its goal of having in place a comprehensive, multi-level outcomes assessment process. Most academic departments report that they are at Level Two in their use of assessment data. The outcomes assessment process is intended to be fully connected to academic program review and the strategic planning process. Largely ignored has been assessment of general education as noted by the 1993 NCA Team. With this exception, SMSU has done well in this endeavor.

E. Academic Restructure

Administration and governance of graduate programs are loosely defined and managed. The Graduate Committee consists of coordinators from each graduate program, and it develops policy and oversees the appointment of graduate faculty. The graduate program should separate itself from the undergraduate program in governance, curriculum matters, catalog development, and policy decisions. Due to the complexity of the education program, some consideration should be given to a third school, a School of Education, with a dean who has a background in teacher education.

There has been a conscientious effort to serve the education community by developing a Master of Science in Special Education to fill a need for special education teachers in this area. The person responsible for this program has put a lot of effort into developing the program and securing a new faculty member who will begin Summer 2004. Students are enrolling in growing numbers and the projection indicates the program will be very successful. Nevertheless, the University should not have begun the program before approval by the Higher Learning Commission. The University is strongly cautioned to refrain from offering any graduate programs in the future until it has received such approval.

F. Teacher Education

The Teacher Education Program would benefit from input from teachers in the field and from students on a regular basis. This can be done by including a teacher, an administrator, and an undergraduate student on the Teacher Education Council (or Committee) so that they can participate in decisions regarding such things as curriculum matters, student teaching policy, placement of student teachers, and admission to the Teacher Education Program.

An office of teacher education services staffed with knowledgeable nonfaculty personnel can relieve the faculty of responsibilities such as certification issues, placement of student teachers, coordination of field experiences, identification of secondary education majors, and accreditation assistance.

If the establishment of a separate school of education is not possible at this time due to budgetary concerns, consideration should be given to appointing an Assistant Dean whose assignment would be that of director of education. This person with a background in education would coordinate the Teacher Education Program and oversee accreditation efforts.

G. General Education

In 1993, SMSU's general education program, then called General Studies (68 quarter hours), had been recently enhanced with the addition of two courses in the humanities. It was noted at that time that it lacked a plan for its assessment. SMSU's current 44-semester hour Liberal Arts Core (LAC), approved in 1996, is grounded in an educational philosophy developed at that time by the SMSU faculty. Assessment of the LAC has been overseen by the Committee for Institutional Assessment (CIA). Assessment data is now reviewed with reference to national norms. Starting in 2001 with the communication and developmental education goal, the CIA began assessing the LAC in terms of its effectiveness in carrying out its goals. This assessment process is currently on hold pending a comprehensive review of the LAC initiated by the Provost.

With the start that this effort provides, SMSU faculty need to address the general education needs of its students comprehensively, as general education is central to the University's mission. A philosophy of general education unique to SMSU needs to be created and articulated. A set of courses needs to be identified to carry out the goals of that philosophy. Finally, assessment is needed to measure student academic achievement in general education. One valuable nationally-normed assessment measure not currently used for general education is Educational Testing Service's Academic Profile.

Even if a new LAC were to look only somewhat different from the current program, this review of general education from the ground up would give SMSU faculty an opportunity to look beyond the goals of course and discipline and see general education as an integrated enterprise with an overarching philosophical

core. Ultimately, the LAC ought to be a program grounded in a distinctive philosophy that reflects an interdisciplinary approach and a high level of student engagement.

H. Student Services

The Student Services area is responsible for managing the majority of the non-academic services that contribute to student welfare and well-being ensuring that students receive the support they need to obtain their educational goals. In spring 2003, Student Services renewed an emphasis on student retention as the University began promoting the idea that "retention is everyone's responsibility". Efforts to improve retention are encouraged by the University and directly support the objectives of MnSCU.

Student Services will require freshmen students to live in residence halls beginning with the fall semester, 2004. The decision was made after much discussion on campus and after contacting other institutions that already have the residential requirement in place. Requiring freshmen to live on campus is based on good student development philosophy and a significant quantity of published research has documented the positive effects of residence hall living on retention and graduation rates. However, since the last few years have seen significant budget cuts and a reallocation of resources from the student services area, it is important that consideration be given to the effect the requirement may have on staffing needs in the areas of Student Services. If a greater number of students are living in residence halls, it will directly impact the residence life staff. The increase will indirectly affect other areas of student services, particularly those responsible for the student center, programming, and the provision of other student support services.

Currently the services offered to international students are divided between two different functional areas; Student Services and Academic Affairs. The individual responsible for reporting through SEVIS, the government database used to track international students, is assigned to the Office of Enrollment Services on a half-time basis; that individual is also responsible for working with transfer students. The individual who provides services to international students is employed in the Student Services area and devotes only one half-time to the international student aspect of the position. The current approach the government takes to tracking, reporting, and assigning visas to international students is very unforgiving. Many circumstances can cause an international student to become "out of status" and be subject to deportation. Since the University has such a large and growing population of international students (166 in fall 2003), it is important that any changes of status be reported in a timely manner and that international students thoroughly understand their responsibilities if they are to avoid very serious consequences. If the current level of international students is to be maintained, or if it is expected to grow, the University will need to reconsider the staffing level

or weigh the consequences of an increasing opportunity for error in the reporting of international student status.

I. Institutional Research

The University is currently experiencing an increasing emphasis on assessment, retention, and data-driven decision making as the new administration works to redefine the institution. Although the Research and Institutional Grants Office is currently providing various publications to the University community, the quantity, quality, and speed of data collection and analysis will become increasingly important for the successful design, implementation and assessment of new programs and services.

J. Enhancing the Service Mission

Southwest Minnesota State University's is poised to extend its service mission to the citizens of southwestern Minnesota through its Geographic Information Systems Center and by developing capacity in environmental science. Currently faculty and staff are engaged in a number of important regional initiatives including environmental education, stream water quality studies and the provision of GIS services and continuing education for local and regional governmental agencies. With judicious planning and resource allocation, SMSU has the potential to make an even more significant contribution to the solution of regional environmental problems that are at the interface of business, agriculture and the environment.

The Geographic Information Systems Center at SMSU is already a community resource and promises to be even stronger in the future. If the campus is strategic in assembling complementary expertise across several disciplines ranging from business to planning and policy analysis, the resources of the Center can be more effectively integrated into the curriculum, while contributing a wider range of services to business and government. Equally important, continued development of the Center's long-term capacity is dependent on development of a funding strategy to insure replacement of hardware and software on a regular basis, thereby insuring the latest tools for instruction and research.

The Science Department currently has two ecologists, a geologist and an analytical chemist, but its capacity would be greatly enhanced with the addition of a soil scientist, environmental chemist and an agronomist. Such an assembled group could offer a well-rounded undergraduate program in environmental science, position the campus to eventually offer the Master of Science in environmental science and undertake team-based collaborative research focused on regional environmental problems. Importantly, such a broad-based group should generate resources through grants and contracts, providing support for faculty, students, the program and the campus more generally. Facilities are generally adequate for the program, but attention to equipment needs is essential.

At the most basic level, the compound microscopes available for the biology and environmental science laboratories are at the end of their life cycle and should be replaced. At the advanced level, the Department lacks several analytical instruments [inductively coupled plasma spectrometer (ICP), gas chromatograph-mass spectrometer (GC-MS), and high pressure liquid chromatography (HPLC) that would greatly facilitate for advanced laboratory instruction in chemistry and environmental science and provide the faculty the tools to work on a wide range of environmental problems ranging from water quality analysis to soil and groundwater contamination.

III. RECOGNITION OF SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS, SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS, AND/OR EXEMPLARY AND INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

As the public comprehensive university serving southwestern Minnesota, Southwest Minnesota State University has made many documented accomplishments in the past ten years. The NCA Team recognizes and commends Southwest Minnesota State University on the following partial listing of achievements, including:

1. A faculty which has demonstrated its care for student success.
2. A leadership team that has won the confidence and trust of faculty, staff, students, and the community.
3. The campus is strongly supportive of students with disabilities and accommodates these students very well.
4. Strong support was evidenced in the tragedy of the student center fire on the part of MnSCU and the State of Minnesota.
5. There is strong evidence of the growing recognition of the multiple responsibilities the campus has in serving a community, the 19-county service region, and the state.