

Southwest Minnesota State University

HLC ID 1408

STANDARD PATHWAY: Reaffirmation Review

Review Date: 10/28/2024

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Context and Nature of Review

Review Date

10/28/2024

Review Type:

Reaffirmation Review

Scope of Review

- Reaffirmation Review
- Federal Compliance (if applicable)
- On-site Visit
- Multi-campus Visit (if applicable)

There are no forms assigned.

Institutional Context

Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU) is a four-year public university which opened in 1967 and is located in Marshall, MN. It is a member of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System comprised of 37 colleges and universities, including 30 two-year colleges and seven state universities on 54 campuses in 47 communities in Minnesota. It is governed by a 15-member Board of Trustees appointed by the Governor.

SMSU Fall 2024 total headcount was 6,910, which included 2,045 degree-seeking undergraduate, 440 degree-seeking graduate, and 5,491 non-degree seeking dual credit students. SMSU offers 5 Associates degrees and 61 baccalaureate degrees at the undergraduate level, in addition to 6 Master's and 1 Specialist degrees at the graduate level. SMSU is approved for 17 in-state and one out-of-state additional locations in South Dakota.

SMSU was initially accredited by HLC in 1972 and is currently in the Standard Pathway. They had their Mid-Cycle Comprehensive Evaluation visit in 2019. This report is for the Year 9 Reaffirmation review and Federal Compliance review.

Interactions with Constituencies

Academic Coordinator, Upward Bound

Accountant

Administrative Assistant, School of Education

Assistant Director, Athletics

Assistant Director, Athletics - Marketing & Engagement

Assistant Director, Center for International Education

Assistant Director, Financial Aid

Assistant Director, Residence Life

Assistant Director, Student Success

Assistant Vice President for Equity & Inclusion

Associate Director, Access Opportunity Success

Associate Director, Mustang Pathways Program

Associate Director, Upward Bound

Associate Vice President for Advancement

Associate Vice President for Enrollment

Board Member, Minnesota State System Board (2)

Business Partner, HR (3)

Buyer

Campus Human Resources Officer

Chair, Agriculture, Culinary, & Hospitality Management

Chair, School of Education

Chair, English, Philosophy, Spanish, & Humanities

Chair, Faculty Association Budget Committee

Chair, Faculty Association Physical Plant Committee

Chair, Faculty Association Liberal Education Committee

Chair, Faculty Association Professional Improvement Committee

Chair, Fine Arts & Communication

Chair, Math & Computer Sciences

Chair, McFarland Library

Chair, NorthStar School of Business

Chair, Nursing

Chair, Sciences

Chair, Social Sciences

Chief Information Officer

Coordinator, Accreditation & Assessment

Coordinator, Accessibility Services

Credential Evaluator

Dean, College of Arts, Letters, & Sciences

Dean, College of Business, Education, & Professional Studies

Dean of Students

Director of Accreditation and Assessment, Minnesota State System

Director, Admissions

Director, Alumni Relations & Outreach

Director of Athletics

Director, Career Services & Civic Engagement

Director, Financial Aid

Director, Graduate Studies

Director, Institutional Research

Director, Marshall Economic Development Authority

Director, MBA Program

Director, Residence Life

Director, Recruitment & Outreach for Ag & Business

Director, Student Success

Director, TRIO Upward Bound

Executive Director, Online Learning

Faculty (7)

Faculty, Library

Faculty, Chemistry

Faculty, Communication Studies

Faculty, English (4)

Faculty, Environmental Science

Faculty, Exercise Science (2)

Faculty, Justice Administration

Faculty, Management

Faculty, Mathematics (4)

Faculty, Nursing

Faculty, Philosophy

Faculty, Psychology (2)

Faculty, Special Education (2)

Faculty, School of Education (2)

Faculty, Theatre

Mayor, City of Marshall

Member, Ag. Advisory Board

President

President, Faculty Association

President, Marshall Area Chamber of Commerce

Principal, Marshall Public Schools

Program Director, Social Work

Program Director, Communication Studies

Program Director, Culinary & Hospitality Management

Provost, Vice President for Academic & Student Affairs

Provost, Minnesota West Community College

Psychologist 2 (2)

RN, SMSU Health Service

Registrar

Senior Director, Communications & Marketing

Senior Vice Chancellor for Academics, Minnesota State System

Senior Vice President-HR, NorthStar Mutual Insurance

Specialist, Housing

Specialist, Information Technology

Specialist, Registration & Transfer

Student, Graduate (2)

Student, Undergraduate (29)

Success Coach

Superintendent, Marshall Public Schools

Systems Administrator, Information Technology

Vice President, Faculty Association

Vice President, Finance & Administration

Web Designer

Additional Documents

Ag Bowl: https://www.smsu.edu/today/articles/2022/09-06-2022_16thannual-agbowl.html

IRB Checklist: <https://www.smsu.edu/administration/committees/irb/forms.html>

Mindful Meals: https://www.smsu.edu/today/articles/2023/04-11-2023_enactus-to-compete-at-nationals.html

SMSU Calendars: <https://calendar.smsu.edu/>

SMSU Disclosures: <https://www.smsu.edu/about/disclosures.html>

SMSU Employment Statistics: <https://www.smsu.edu/campuslife/careerservices/employment-statistics.html>

Assessment reports from CIA Teams folder (internal to SMSU)

1 - Mission

The institution's mission is clear and articulated publicly; it guides the institution's operations.

1.A - Core Component 1.A

The institution's mission is articulated publicly and operationalized throughout the institution.

1. The mission was developed through a process suited to the context of the institution.
2. The mission and related statements are current and reference the institution's emphasis on the various aspects of its mission, such as instruction, scholarship, research, application of research, creative works, clinical service, public service, economic development and religious or cultural purpose.
3. The mission and related statements identify the nature, scope and intended constituents of the higher education offerings and services the institution provides.
4. The institution's academic offerings, student support services and enrollment profile are consistent with its stated mission.
5. The institution clearly articulates its mission through public information, such as statements of purpose, vision, values, goals, plans or institutional priorities.

Rating

Met

Rationale

The Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU) mission is articulated publicly, and is operationalized throughout the institution.

Southwest Minnesota State University prepares students to meet the complex challenges of this century as engaged citizens in their local and global communities. Our comprehensive degree programs, taught in the liberal arts tradition, are dedicated to connecting students' academic and practical professional development experiences in southwestern Minnesota to the wider world.

As described in the argument, the current mission was developed and approved in 2007 using a Brown and Gold Task Force that included broad campus representation. While this mission statement is now 17 years old, it was recently reconsidered. While on campus, the President's Executive Team described that the same 2019 process that revised the vision and values statements also revisited the mission statement. Based on feedback from campus and community partners, the current mission statement from 2007 was determined to still be relevant to and descriptive of SMSU. This was confirmed by faculty and staff in the Criteria 1 and 2 Open Forum session.

The process used to reconsider the mission statement and to revise the vision and value statements

was broadly inclusive of the campus community. Town halls were used to gather input and share drafts of these statements, and the bargaining units were involved through the usual Meet and Confer process. During the site visit, faculty unit leadership confirmed their inclusion in this process. Finalized vision and values statements were sent to the Minnesota State system Chancellor as information items, as described in the argument.

The mission, vision and values statements clearly describe the current actions and emphases of SMSU. The argument describes numerous instances of how SMSU students and departments engage with the local community. In addition to community interactions described in the argument, university and community participants in the Criteria 1 & 2 Open Forum confirmed the significant engagement between SMSU and the community. Community members described their participation on SMSU advisory boards. Other community members described the work of SMSU students as interns, and noted that many SMSU interns go on to become employees of these same companies. Faculty from the Agriculture program described their Ag Camp three-day workshop for middle school students, with a goal of introducing students to opportunities for careers in agriculture. Representatives from the Chamber of Commerce described interactions with faculty and students from the NorthStar Mutual School of Business.

As described in the SMSU argument, the mission focus of an education in the liberal arts tradition is operationalized through the SMSU Liberal Education Program (LEP). The importance of the LEP was confirmed during the visit by faculty in the discussion with the Executive Team, in the Criteria 3 & 4 Open Forum, and in the Department Chairs session. These discussions focused on the importance of the first year LEP seminar, and the possibility of a one-credit version to support transfer students in their exposure to the LEP goals.

During the visit, SMSU administration, faculty and staff described a campus culture that puts student success, as described in the vision, at the center of SMSU decisions and operations. They described how the focus on student success attracted them to campus and keeps them engaged in their daily work. They described how SMSU regularly seeks input from SMSU students to ensure student voices inform student success efforts. Students confirmed they are consulted on many different campus issues. This included a student survey used to inform the development of space for students. The Executive Team also described a data-based approach to cover a funding gap for Pell-eligible students. The site visit team found a focus on student success was a continuing theme throughout the visit.

SMSU goes beyond simply displaying the mission, vision, and values statements, as described in the argument. SMSU incorporates these statements into marketing materials and even the staff evaluation forms, as described in the argument. While on campus the team noted that faculty and staff across campus easily described not only the mission, vision and values statements, but also how these statements are operationalized in their areas and across SMSU. These comments included the importance of LEP goals; community service including free tax preparation by accounting students; the Ag Bowl which is an annual event celebrating agriculture and hosting events and activities for all ages; and the Mindful Meals program put on by Enactus, and addressing food insecurity in the Marshall Public Schools.

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

1.B - Core Component 1.B

The institution's mission demonstrates commitment to the public good.

1. The institution's actions and decisions demonstrate that its educational role is to serve the public, not solely the institution or any superordinate entity.
2. The institution's educational responsibilities take primacy over other purposes, such as generating financial returns for investors, contributing to a related or parent organization, or supporting external interests.
3. The institution engages with its external constituencies and responds to their needs as its mission and capacity allow.

Rating

Met

Rationale

The way SMSU lives their mission, vision and values demonstrates their commitment to the public good. These statements call for SMSU to serve the region and provide students with opportunities for civic engagement. As described in the argument for both Core Component 1.A and 1.B, SMSU has significant partnerships with community organizations and businesses. These partnerships provide opportunities for students to apply their learning in real world situations, while also providing area organizations with additional support.

The Marshall Learning Center is housed in the SMSU Social Sciences building. Through analysis of space needs, SMSU determined they could move faculty from the Social Sciences building to other spaces on campus, freeing the space for alternative uses. This space is leased for use by Marshall Public Schools (MPS) as the Marshall Learning Center. As described by SMSU leadership during the visit, the lease revenue from this partnership is being used to support student success needs in other areas of campus. This additionally demonstrates educational responsibilities take primacy over other purposes. The benefit of this partnership was reinforced by a representative of MPS during the Criteria 1 & 2 Open Forum.

The Small Business Development Center (SBDC) was also presented in the argument as evidence that SMSU engages with its external constituencies. The benefits of this partnership were confirmed by a community member involved with SBDC during the Criterion 1 & 2 Open Forum. Additional examples of engaging with community partners were described in the argument, and throughout the visit SMS faculty and staff spoke extensively about the importance they place on these partnerships, both as a benefit for the community, and for SMSU students. During the campus visit with students, students shared that they considered the close interactions between SMSU and the local region as an attraction to attending SMSU.

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

1.C - Core Component 1.C

The institution provides opportunities for civic engagement in a diverse, multicultural society and globally connected world, as appropriate within its mission and for the constituencies it serves.

1. The institution encourages curricular or cocurricular activities that prepare students for informed citizenship and workplace success.
2. The institution's processes and activities demonstrate inclusive and equitable treatment of diverse populations.
3. The institution fosters a climate of respect among all students, faculty, staff and administrators from a range of diverse backgrounds, ideas and perspectives.

Rating

Met

Rationale

SMSU provides opportunities for civic engagement in a diverse, multicultural society and globally connected world. Two examples, the AG Bowl and Mindful Meals programs, have been described previously in Core Component 1.B. As described in the argument, SMSU uses the Handshake employer connection platform to connect students to volunteer opportunities and track course-based service learning activities.

The vision statement calls for SMSU to be recognized as an inclusive university. This vision statement is in alignment with Minnesota State System Equity 2030 goals. The argument describes the process used to ensure equity and inclusion are key descriptors of the SMSU community. Most notably, the Equity 2030 Steering Committee has led efforts to revise SMSU policies and practices to ensure SMSU meets the Equity 2030 goals. The SMSU Equity Teaching Fellows program provides resources to help instructors address issues of equity and inclusion in their classrooms. This program, described in the argument, requires faculty to learn, change and reflect through engagement in specific activities over the course of the Fellows program. In addition, SMSU made the Campus Diversity Officer a full-time, cabinet level position that reports directly to the SMSU President. During the campus meeting with the Executive Team, multiple members of the team discussed the importance of this position and the continued work of SMSU to be recognized as an inclusive university. The argument describes plans to administer a faculty and staff campus climate survey to gauge SMSU progress towards being an inclusive and accessible campus. The Executive Team confirmed these plans, and expressed interest in learning from the survey and using it to make appropriate changes. During the meeting with students, a few students commented that they chose to attend SMSU due to its continued efforts to have an accessible campus.

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

1.S - Criterion 1 - Summary

The institution's mission is clear and articulated publicly; it guides the institution's operations.

Rationale

SMSU has mission, vision, and values statements that are articulated publicly. Throughout the institution's argument, as well as during the visit, the review team found evidence that SMSU lives its mission and vision, and that these guide the decisions of the institution and its members at all levels. In addition, members of the Marshall and southwest Minnesota community affirmed the important role SMSU plays in the life of the area, which is in alignment with the mission and vision.

2 - Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct

The institution acts with integrity; its conduct is ethical and responsible.

2.A - Core Component 2.A

The institution establishes and follows policies and processes to ensure fair and ethical behavior on the part of its governing board, administration, faculty and staff.

1. The institution develops and the governing board adopts the mission.
2. The institution operates with integrity in its financial, academic, human resources and auxiliary functions.

Rating

Met

Rationale

As described in the argument under core component 1A.1, SMSU operates under a mission that was developed through a collaborative process in 2007. This mission was then approved by the Minnesota State Board of Trustees. Based on conversations with SMSU leadership, this mission statement was revisited in 2019 at the beginning of the strategic planning process, and at that time it was determined the mission developed in 2007 was still relevant to the current work of SMSU. During the site visit, team members met with Board and Minnesota State System officials. They discussed the role of the Board in adopting the mission, and they affirmed that the SMSU mission, vision and values are in alignment with the Minnesota State System core values.

SMSU provides ample evidence that it has a robust set of policies in place to ensure ethical behavior among its board, administration, faculty, and staff. These policies derive from state statute, board policies at the university system level, and guidelines for employee contracts and collective bargaining organizations. In the meeting with Board members, they affirmed that they have conflict of interest policies in place, and they receive regular training to ensure they are following ethical practices.

SMSU provides significant evidence that it adheres to ethical and responsible conduct in its campus functions. Staff commentary in the open forum for Criteria 1 and 2 clarified ethical guidelines and available training opportunities for procurement practices. Additionally, faculty commentary in the Criteria 1 and 2 open forum noted a transparent, contractually-stipulated, and rigorously-followed process for program revision, discontinuance, and initiation. The argument also describes how SMSU acts with integrity in personnel functions. During the site visit with faculty leadership, they affirmed that SMSU adheres to ethical practices with respect to faculty hiring, promotion, and review.

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

2.B - Core Component 2.B

The institution presents itself clearly and completely to its students and to the public.

1. The institution ensures the accuracy of any representations it makes regarding academic offerings, requirements, faculty and staff, costs to students, governance structure and accreditation relationships.
2. The institution ensures evidence is available to support any claims it makes regarding its contributions to the educational experience through research, community engagement, experiential learning, religious or spiritual purpose and economic development.

Rating

Met

Rationale

SMSU demonstrates that it has processes in place to ensure the accuracy of the information it presents to the public. In their argument, they detail how they track use of their website to provide accessible and optimized information. They also have a detailed review process for their academic catalog, policies and procedures, and student handbook. SMSU monitors the Financial Aid page, which is the primary source of information about cost of attendance, financial aid, and on-campus employment. The public can learn about faculty through either the SMSU online directory, or through links to the departments in the online academic catalog. SMSU lists its accreditation relationship with HLC through a link from the 'About' page on the SMSU landing page. The HLC mark of affiliation is found within three clicks of the SMSU landing page. However, public disclosure of current licensure and certification pass rates for programs requiring licensure/certification for entry into the profession was not evident at the start of the visit. However, by the time this report was finalized, SMSU has addressed this issue. SMSU is encouraged to continuously track student achievement data and licensure pass rates, and update this information in publicly available locations.

SMSU provides evidence of its contributions to their students' educational experiences. As described in the argument, SMSU fosters a spirit of discovery through student participation in the Undergraduate Research Conference, Celebrate Science Week, and their journal of undergraduate research. They also foster students' engagement in the community through many of the activities described in Criterion 1 in their argument. The impact of this aspect of the SMSU student experience is affirmed both in the Graduate Follow-up Survey and through comments from community members in the Criteria 1 and 2 open forum. In particular, the Graduate Follow-up Survey has a consistently high response rate and this information is publicly available.

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

2.C - Core Component 2.C

The governing board of the institution is autonomous to make decisions in the best interest of the institution in compliance with board policies and to ensure the institution's integrity.

1. The governing board is trained and knowledgeable so that it makes informed decisions with respect to the institution's financial and academic policies and practices; the board meets its legal and fiduciary responsibilities.
2. The governing board's deliberations reflect priorities to preserve and enhance the institution.
3. The governing board reviews the reasonable and relevant interests of the institution's internal and external constituencies during its decision-making deliberations.
4. The governing board preserves its independence from undue influence on the part of donors, elected officials, ownership interests or other external parties.
5. The governing board delegates day-to-day management of the institution to the institution's administration and expects the institution's faculty to oversee academic matters.

Rating

Met

Rationale

As described in the argument, the Minnesota State System is governed by a 15-member Board of Trustees (BoT), with the members appointed by the Minnesota governor. The operations and finances of the Minnesota State System are overseen by the Minnesota Senate and House of Representatives. The argument describes the on-boarding process for new Board members, and during the visit Board members confirmed they receive regular training even after their initial on-boarding. This training includes regular learning sessions from System Vice Chancellors regarding particular topics such as the processes for finance and facilities. They also go through trainings with the Association of Community College Trustees and the Association of Governing Boards.

The BoT make decisions that support and enhance SMSU. A review of BoT meeting minutes demonstrates that the BoT make decisions regarding financial and academic policies and processes that support the work of SMSU. During the visit with BoT members, they affirmed that they have close interactions with SMSU leadership. The BoT members also demonstrated they are knowledgeable about many of the issues SMSU leadership mentioned during other parts of the site visit, including issues of student success and financial issues.

BoT members are required to adhere to ethical practices. Trustees are required to disclose conflicts of interest; and on a regular basis agree/recertify not to use their position for personal gain. In addition, BoT meetings must adhere to Minnesota Open Meetings laws. This helps ensure the Board acts independently of outside influence.

Minnesota statutes and Board policy describe the appropriate roles for Trustees, the System Chancellor, and institution Presidents. During the site visit, Trustees described these different roles, including how they differ. SMSU leadership also discussed the significant support they get from the

System leadership and BoT, while also noting their freedom to represent the interests of SMSU.

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

2.D - Core Component 2.D

The institution is committed to academic freedom and freedom of expression in the pursuit of truth in teaching and learning.

Rating

Met

Rationale

Through Board Policy and policies in the SMSU Student Handbook, SMSU demonstrates the existence of policies related to academic freedom and freedom of expression. Staff commentary in the Criteria 1 and 2 open forum included examples of messages from executive leadership and programming that served to reinforce the institution's commitment to academic freedom and freedom of expression. In the meeting with department chairs, performing arts leadership noted that they are free to select programming for the campus and community. A second department chair noted that, by nature of their discipline, they engage in challenging conversations related to DEI and feel they are able to do so freely and with the support of the administration and campus community. Faculty leadership also confirmed that SMSU values and respects academic freedom and freedom of expression in the classroom and in scholarly pursuits.

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

2.E - Core Component 2.E

The institution's policies and procedures call for responsible acquisition, discovery and application of knowledge by its faculty, staff and students.

1. Institutions supporting basic and applied research maintain professional standards and provide oversight ensuring regulatory compliance, ethical behavior and fiscal accountability.
2. The institution provides effective support services to ensure the integrity of research and scholarly practice conducted by its faculty, staff and students.
3. The institution provides students guidance in the ethics of research and use of information resources.
4. The institution enforces policies on academic honesty and integrity.

Rating

Met

Rationale

SMSU demonstrates in its argument that it values responsible acquisition, discovery and application of knowledge by faculty, staff and students. SMSU has a standing Institutional Review Board comprised of SMSU faculty, staff and an administrator. The SMSU IRB periodically reviews their processes to ensure ethical standards are maintained. IRB members receive CITI training, as do all faculty, staff and students submitting IRB applications. In their argument, SMSU describes the various state statutes and policies they must adhere to for sharing of information resources and fiscal accountability. In the criteria 1 and 2 open forum, faculty affirmed that the IRB process is active and is carried out as described in the argument.

The SMSU McFarland Library collaborates with faculty in guiding students in responsible acquisition and dissemination of information. The Library staff have developed student learning outcomes related to these topics for select courses, including the first-year experience course. Library staff also provide helpful tools and guides to support student research skills. During the site visit, students commented positively on the extensive support they receive from library staff for research support.

SMSU has policies in place related to academic dishonesty. In their argument, they describe policies A-032 and A-045 related to student and graduate student academic integrity. The argument includes a discussion of the appeals process for students accused of academic honesty violations. SMSU has a procedure to track enforcement of these violations and sanctions.

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

2.S - Criterion 2 - Summary

The institution acts with integrity; its conduct is ethical and responsible.

Rationale

Through its argument and throughout the site visit, SMSU demonstrates that it acts with integrity and that its conduct is ethical and responsible. They have an extensive framework of statutes, Board policies, and institutional policies that ensure faculty, staff and students perform their roles in an ethical way. Board members have clear conflict of interest guidelines. SMSU has an active IRB process in place to ensure responsible conduct of research involving people. The institution also benefits from an active library staff that actively engages with faculty and students in the responsible acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. SMSU also has academic dishonesty policies and processes to track violations of these policies.

3 - Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources and Support

The institution provides quality education, wherever and however its offerings are delivered.

3.A - Core Component 3.A

The rigor of the institution's academic offerings is appropriate to higher education.

1. Courses and programs are current and require levels of student performance appropriate to the credential awarded.
2. The institution articulates and differentiates learning goals for its undergraduate, graduate, post-baccalaureate, post-graduate and certificate programs.
3. The institution's program quality and learning goals are consistent across all modes of delivery and all locations (on the main campus, at additional locations, by distance delivery, as dual credit, through contractual or consortial arrangements, or any other modality).

Rating

Met

Rationale

Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU) offers over 50 majors, supporting associate degrees (5), baccalaureate degrees (59) and certificates (13), and master's programs (6) and certificates (16), and one specialist degree program. Many programs can be completed on-campus, at locations maintained by SMSU, and/or hybrid or online combinations. Proposals for courses or programs are subject to regular, consistent processes under policies (e.g. A-001, A-049) that apply to all programs at whatever level offered. Program development and assessment begin with a Faculty Association proposal that is then reviewed through undergraduate or graduate curriculum committees, involvement of relevant stake-holders at each level of review, Advisory Councils, and discipline associations if externally accredited. Evidence of the process "in action" are available in evidence in Criterion 3 related to course development and in Criterion 4 related to regular program review and show that the process is uniform in its application for all program degrees and certifications.

Examples of completed periodic 5-year program reviews, evidenced in Criterion 4, adhere to SMSU Policy A-004.1. Programs define and demonstrate relevance for expected program outcomes, specific student learning objectives for individual courses, and currency of offerings within each program.

Included in the evaluation package for review is a self-study report, using institutional data and assessment measures, in key areas: students' engagement, faculty qualification and preparation, distance learning, service opportunities, resource management, and future directions for focus.

Faculty training plays an important part in ensuring program quality and consistent learning across all modes of delivery. As part of their contractual requirements, SMSU's faculty annually address specific steps taken to ensure professional currency within their fields of expertise, as a required

component of an annual review of five areas of evaluation. “Fixed term” and tenure-track faculty are subject to this annual process.

SMSU articulates its student learning outcomes (SLO) as part of their Plan for the Assessment of Student Learning (PASL). Courses in Minnesota’s transfer curriculum (MnTC) are evaluated for their SLO as part of its Liberal Education Program that governs general education. There are 10 goals set by the MnTC requirement, organized by content areas and/or distribution areas. Those include communication, natural sciences, quantitative reasoning, social/behavioral sciences, humanities and fine arts. Skills-based application of critical thinking, attention to human diversity, ethical and civic responsibility, and environmental challenges are goals dispersed in the distribution area coursework. SMSU shares program learning outcomes for programs on its website information pages for each program and its courses in syllabus materials, in compliance with policy A-030.

SMSU reviews curriculum through two parallel committees, one for graduate and the other for undergraduate programs. The institution asserts that this division reinforces its commitment to articulating goals between levels of instruction. Courses distinguish undergraduate or graduate-level expectations commensurate with the degree sought.

SMSU offers its programs in online, hybrid, and/or fully face-to-face modes of delivery. Because its programs and student expectations are uniform, no matter what the format or location of delivery, all courses and programs are evaluated by the procedures described in policy previously discussed in this report and in SMSU’s assurance argument itself. Web-based or distance courses are taught by faculty teaching at the main campus location, and thus all instructors are reviewed for currency in their disciplines and expertise annually according to consistent standards. SMSU’s Committee for Online Learning (COOL) coordinates professional development for instructional support and works to ensure that services to support students are accessible to all learners, regardless of residency type. The University’s contract with Risepoint to develop student support services for all learners attests to SMSU’s commitment to develop campus support networks designed for the specific needs of off-campus students. In 2023, an HLC Multi-Location Visit Report and Review revealed no concerns with three programs delivered off-site. An in-service teacher cohort for M.S. degrees is available, and a B.A. in Theatre, and a B.S. in Exercise Science are offered in partnership with some other Minnesota 2-year institutions as completion degrees.

“College Now” concurrent enrollment partnerships with Minnesota high schools is well-established, and pairs SMSU faculty with highly-qualified secondary education teachers to offer college-level credit through local high school campuses. Special training and mentorship ensure that rigor and expectations for these students is maintained for participants in the initiative. As is the case for SMSU college coursework, high school students are held to identical standards for content and performance as degree-seeking students at SMSU.

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

3.B - Core Component 3.B

The institution offers programs that engage students in collecting, analyzing and communicating information; in mastering modes of intellectual inquiry or creative work; and in developing skills adaptable to changing environments.

1. The general education program is appropriate to the mission, educational offerings and degree levels of the institution. The institution articulates the purposes, content and intended learning outcomes of its undergraduate general education requirements.
2. The program of general education is grounded in a philosophy or framework developed by the institution or adopted from an established framework. It imparts broad knowledge and intellectual concepts to students and develops skills and attitudes that the institution believes every college-educated person should possess.
3. The education offered by the institution recognizes the human and cultural diversity and provides students with growth opportunities and lifelong skills to live and work in a multicultural world.
4. The faculty and students contribute to scholarship, creative work and the discovery of knowledge to the extent appropriate to their offerings and the institution's mission.

Rating

Met

Rationale

SMSU's Liberal Education Program (LEP) incorporates 42 credit hours that meet Minnesota's transfer curriculum (MnTC), whose 10 goals are aligned in SMSU's offerings, along with an additional course in History and Social Behavioral Sciences *or* in the Humanities/Fine Arts. One "core skills" course focused on developing information literacy and critical thinking skills is also required at SMSU, as is a LEP freshman orientation course and a capstone experience. All are evaluated for their SLO as part of the LEP by regular processes shared with discipline-specific review policies. SMSU's mission and adherence to state standards for all Minnesota institutions, is evidenced in sample course syllabus materials offered in support of its assurance evidence.

The LEP curriculum reflects a liberal arts approach to general education expected of a college-level experience, stressing the philosophy that "lifelong learning" and practice of skills beyond discipline or career-based expertise is supported by pedagogical design and focused alignment of expectations. Publication of learning goals for programs and courses on the SMSU website and in syllabus materials make clear to students and other stake-holders the mission and values of the institution. Of special note, specific coursework to focus on information literacy and development of critical thinking skills are discussed at greater length in the assurance argument for Criterion 4.

Diversity and global issues are addressed in SMSU's mission (Criterion 1 discusses that focus in detail) and its strategic plan also highlights the institutional commitment to infusing greater understanding of global issues through its courses offered to meet the MnTC and institutional requirements. Courses in that core offered at SMSU include 26 that specifically address development

of diverse perspectives, and 31 meet a MnTC goal focusing on Global citizenship. The institution's Office of Diversity and Inclusion (ODI) offers development and training opportunities for student and academic personnel, and campus and community programs such as the "It Begins with Us" conference and commemorations of important events tied to national and Minnesota history. Clubs and organizations on campus also provide students, faculty, and community participation in learning and service opportunities. The Center for International Education (CIE) promotes study-abroad experiences through exchange programs for students under guidance from its Study Abroad & Global Engagement (SAGE) committee to offer faculty-led credit-bearing courses and experiences. SMSU hosts international students seeking U.S. degrees as residential students. According to its assurance argument, over 170 international students reside in Marshall in a typical academic year, hailing from over 30 countries. Regular events, such as its International Coffee Hours, International Education Week events, a World Fest and galas create opportunities for international students to engage with the Marshall community as well as on campus in academic settings.

Faculty, as part of their annual contractual obligation, are expected to address how they incorporate global themes, equity, and inclusion into their pedagogy and programs under Article 22 policy in place. Faculty Professional Development reports include specific strategies undertaken to ensure that content, scope of assignments, grading policies, and course standards reflect SMSU's commitment to helping students access and implement skills that support lifetime attitudes of openness and understanding.

LEP and MnTC outcomes undergo regular review. MnTC is rolling out amendments to its Goal 7 related to Human Diversity, Race, Power, and Justice with two completion options (one related to human diversity, the other to issues of race, power, and justice) in fall 2025.

The faculty's Professional Development Plans and Reports require discussion of scholarly and creative work through annual reports. "Mustang Ovarions" highlights achievement by individuals who have contributed as faculty or staff to the advancement of their fields of expertise or other accolades. Included in this recognition are teaching fellows, and two SMSU awards: "Campus Contact" and awards for campus and university service. An annual Undergraduate Research Conference (URC) showcases student work conducted under faculty mentorship, highlighting another area of SMSU's alignment between its role in higher education and its mission and values as disseminators of knowledge. Of special note is the publication of student work in research and creative activity in the *SMSU Journal of Undergraduate Research* and high-quality student research published in discipline journals or at regional and national conferences. As part of its graduate program in Education, publication of a discipline-supported *Education Development Network Journal* focuses on teaching methodologies. This journal is distributed to alumni from the program. Examples from other disciplines show a wide range of venues and approaches for dissemination of knowledge, and provide undergraduate and graduate students with experience in research and presentation of research.

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

3.C - Core Component 3.C

The institution has the faculty and staff needed for effective, high-quality programs and student services.

1. The institution strives to ensure that the overall composition of its faculty and staff reflects human diversity as appropriate within its mission and for the constituencies it serves.
2. The institution has sufficient numbers and continuity of faculty members to carry out both the classroom and the non-classroom roles of faculty, including oversight of the curriculum and expectations for student performance, assessment of student learning, and establishment of academic credentials for instructional staff.
3. All instructors are appropriately qualified, including those in dual credit, contractual and consortial offerings.
4. Instructors are evaluated regularly in accordance with established institutional policies and procedures.
5. The institution has processes and resources for assuring that instructors are current in their disciplines and adept in their teaching roles; it supports their professional development.
6. Instructors are accessible for student inquiry.
7. Staff members providing student support services, such as tutoring, financial aid advising, academic advising and cocurricular activities, are appropriately qualified, trained and supported in their professional development.

Rating

Met

Rationale

SMSU provides evidence that its faculty and staff, whether full- or part-time, represent diverse racial and cultural experiences. Employment has increased among the category of employees of color since 2019, based on IPEDS data shared in the assurance argument. As is often true for regional rural institutions, staffing does not fully parallel with the cultural and racial identification of the institution's student body or the local community. Increases in hiring of persons of color has begun to address that gap between employees identifying as white or as persons of color in the last few years. The assurance argument notes that census data from 2023 indicate that Lyon County has greater diversity than the University's employees or its student body. Percentages for employment at the University are not widely different than the area and student body data show, demographically.

SMSU has devoted several years prior to this review to insuring that it has adequate staffing for program delivery and support in proportion to its student enrollment. Apportionment of staffing is data-informed, and shows clear progress in meeting current and future development of programs, and in offices supporting existing cadres of students and their specific needs such as those of online learners, with accessibility issues, technology needs, or other life challenges. Significant resources, mindful staffing and space allocation (or, in some cases, relocation, such as the move of the accessibility services office to be in closer proximity to the Student Success Center) reinforce the

institution's assertion of its efforts to meet its mission and vision.

One of SMSU's strategic goals is actively to recruit faculty and staff according to its Affirmative Action Plan to further model and highlight diverse experiences and points of view. Retention of those faculty and staff require development and delivery of support beyond changes to hiring processes. SMSU uses comprehensive training and other initiatives developed by Vector Solutions, LLC, Learning Connections and others developed 'in house' to provide professional development opportunities specific to higher education. Title IX compliance, building communities and connections for support across campus, and making those connections an embedded part of the SMSU culture are areas stressed in hiring and retaining faculty and staff that reflects its student body. That focus is yielding results, and further evidences SMSU's commitment to putting its support for modeling diversity as a strength for all members of the University, community, region, and beyond. Creation of new positions, reimagining the scope of offices to reflect organic points of interest and contact for students is also evidence of its commitment to offering the 'right-sizing' of its staff to meet students' needs and expectations.

Faculty qualification and currency is evaluated by standard processes set in motion during the first semester of employment under a Professional Development Plan (PDP) and paced to coincide with the period of review appropriate to the assigned faculty rank and contract. This process is designed to be formative, to provide guidance to successful achievement of rank commensurate with the position held. SMSU has a robust set of initiatives offered through offices such as its Center of Learning and Teaching (COLT), Professional Development Days, Equity Teaching Fellows and the Minnesota State Network for Educational Development (NED). Other support to prepare teaching and support personnel to use technology (Zoom telephones, the operation of the institution's LMS, etc.) is also available and offer ongoing and ad hoc topics in several formats.

Under SMSU policy, students can expect faculty to be available in regular office hours, on- or off-campus. Students reported, however, that it was not uncommon for them to receive answers to questions, meaningful feedback on academic issues, beyond set office hours. Faculty also serve as academic advisors to students in their programs, offering information and encouragement on developing co-curricular experiences in the community, through networking with colleagues and peers, and in supporting student research, advocacy, and professional experiences in their future professions. In a student forum, students shared that support offices were also available to them well beyond the "8-to-5." As many students agreed in that forum, they could imagine being able to reach out to either a faculty member, professional, or administrator for everything from recommending a resource for a paper, to finding a research or internship connection, to "changing a tire" in the middle of the night.

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

3.D - Core Component 3.D

The institution provides support for student learning and resources for effective teaching.

1. The institution provides student support services suited to the needs of its student populations.
2. The institution provides for learning support and preparatory instruction to address the academic needs of its students. It has a process for directing entering students to courses and programs for which the students are adequately prepared.
3. The institution provides academic advising suited to its offerings and the needs of its students.
4. The institution provides to students and instructors the infrastructure and resources necessary to support effective teaching and learning (technological infrastructure, scientific laboratories, libraries, performance spaces, clinical practice sites and museum collections, as appropriate to the institution's offerings).

Rating

Met

Rationale

Student support services at SMSU are numerous, useful, well-staffed, with clear missions that support the Institution's strategic educational goals. The Deann Griebel Student Success Center (DGSSC) expresses the holistic approach to supporting its students as a "one-stop" space to accommodate student academic and personal opportunities and challenges. The DGSSC houses the Math Learning Center, an Education Curriculum Library, peer tutoring and other learning-centered offices and services.

SMSU's approach to support services extends to paying attention to not only offering a breadth of services, but to thinking about the proximity of service offices to each other to highlight their availability to students in logical ways. For example, recent building maintenance and renovation to redefine space use on campus led to relocation of accessibility services to be within sight of the DGSSC, reinforcing for students the idea that accessibility and success go hand-in-hand.

Student advising begins at time of entry into SMSU, including "on boarding" programming through regular communication prior to their arrival on campus. Throughout the academic year, Mustang Success Night, Meet your Advisor events, and Finish Strong week every spring focus on preparation for final exams and celebrate the end of the academic year. Other events celebrate and reinforce perseverance as an important trait to support success.

Technology, information and academic resources, life- and career-skills development are available to all students, whether online or in-person. Its Honors Program, Early Alert, at-risk mitigation programs, faculty advising and career and academic programming focus on academic performance. Residence hall programs, Mustang Market (a locale to address food insecurity), a United Way partnership to direct students to its 211 helpline, counseling, and services and centers for niche populations (international learners, veterans, adult learners, etc.) also benefit from significant institutional support.

Connection to student life and government or program-based clubs and organizations share common understandings of how their existence can enhance the student experience. Community outreach, events, and engagement with area organizations and companies also make SMSU an inviting environment that encourages the core virtues of the mission to prepare its students for life as alumni dedicated to enriching their own lives and those of their communities.

Its strategic facilities planning to address maintenance and care of its facilities serves several purposes that also support student learning. As mentioned above, renovation of facilities are seen as opportunities to reimagine spaces with a mind toward environmental responsibility in more ways than one—they can also ignite new ideas that add new layers of support for SMSU’s overarching commitment to the success of its students.

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

3.S - Criterion 3 - Summary

The institution provides quality education, wherever and however its offerings are delivered.

Rationale

Through established processes and committees, its faculty, student support services' professionals, and administration, SMSU monitors the quality of its educational offerings to ensure that its students' educational journeys, regardless of where and how they are experienced, are rigorous, intentional, and appropriate to its mission. The institution's focus on tenets of liberal education fused with applied skills and experiences equip its graduates to engage and contribute to a rapidly-changing world. Well-qualified faculty and staff expect to offer their support and experience toward student success. SMSU reinforces the importance of the individual in creating a quality learning environment in program and curriculum development review, a strong focus on supporting engagement of its students in ways beyond program and curricular content and delivery. Annual and periodic reviews of faculty and staff require reflection on how, as individuals, they engage in professional development and contributions to the learning environment of the institution as a whole to support the learning mission.

Student learning and effective teaching are at the forefront of academic and operational decisions. Learning spaces, whether on-campus or at a distance, offer venues for students to enrich their educational opportunities, reflect how students engage with support from effective degree planning, experiential learning in curricular and co-curricular opportunities. Imagining new use of partnerships, within the institution and with external partners, help the institution expand its reach to wider audiences of learners, within the region, nation, and globally.

4 - Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement

The institution demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs, learning environments and support services, and it evaluates their effectiveness for student learning through processes designed to promote continuous improvement.

4.A - Core Component 4.A

The institution ensures the quality of its educational offerings.

1. The institution maintains a practice of regular program reviews and acts upon the findings.
2. The institution evaluates all the credit that it transcripts, including what it awards for experiential learning or other forms of prior learning, or relies on the evaluation of responsible third parties.
3. The institution has policies that ensure the quality of the credit it accepts in transfer.
4. The institution maintains and exercises authority over the prerequisites for courses, rigor of courses, expectations for student learning, access to learning resources, and faculty qualifications for all its programs, including dual credit programs. It ensures that its dual credit courses or programs for high school students are equivalent in learning outcomes and levels of achievement to its higher education curriculum.
5. The institution maintains specialized accreditation for its programs as appropriate to its educational purposes.
6. The institution evaluates the success of its graduates. The institution ensures that the credentials it represents as preparation for advanced study or employment accomplish these purposes. For all programs, the institution looks to indicators it deems appropriate to its mission.

Rating

Met

Rationale

Southwest Minnesota State University maintains a regular schedule of program reviews, as outlined in *university policies and procedures (A-004 and A-004.1)*. These comprehensive reviews cover all aspects of academic programs, including faculty quality and sufficiency, student support, curriculum, program resources, and more. They are overseen by the appropriate academic dean. External review reports and recommendations are reviewed by the deans, department chairs, and faculty. Actions on recommendations are followed up by the deans.

Program reviews at SMSU occur on a five-year rotating basis for all programs that are not externally accredited, as published on the dean's webpage. Externally accredited programs follow the schedule set by their accreditors. During discussions with department chairs and faculty, it was discovered that program reviews have led to ongoing changes in student learning.

For instance, updated student learning outcomes (SLOs) were developed after consulting an external advisory council to align the curriculum with real-life needs. Additionally, composition classes experienced changes in class sizes to allow faculty to provide more attention to gaps in student writing. Furthermore, the business curriculum incorporated more opportunities for practical activities through the creation of an active classroom.

SMSU transcripts credit hours according to the *Minnesota State Board policy and Minnesota State System Procedure*, which is also maintained as university policy and administered by the Office of the Registrar. SMSU also adheres to *Minnesota State Board policy and procedures* for evaluating all transfer credit, including international, military, prior learning, and examination credit. The institution has a specific employee under the supervision of the registrar who examines all types of transfer credit. When questions arise that cannot be resolved through policy review, faculty expertise is consulted.

SMSU ensures that all courses under their jurisdiction meet appropriate quality and standards of rigor. The institution adheres to the *state system and SMSU policy and process* in curriculum design, learning outcomes, student support services, and faculty qualifications. Through shared governance, the faculty is accountable for the development and maintenance of the curriculum. They are responsible for curriculum design and are accountable to the faculty-led Curriculum Committee, as outlined in institutional policy and procedures (*A-001; A-001.1 and A-001.2*).

Under the *College Now* program, concurrent courses are identical to regular courses taught on the SMSU campus. They are required to meet the same student learning outcomes and assessment requirements as specified by each academic program. Faculty mentors work closely with concurrent enrollment instructors to ensure quality and parity. Mentors review assignments and, in many cases, write exams and enter final grades into the SMSU system.

Numerous student support services are available to scaffold student learning, including library, Writing Center, and tutoring services for all student levels. The Minnesota State system also employs a common learning management program, *D2L*, for all campuses, providing continuity for concurrent and regular students.

SMSU maintains specialized accreditation for several programs, including Social Work, Music, Business, Exercise Science, and Education programs. Nursing is currently in the candidacy stage of accreditation. Information about program accreditation status is publicly available through the *Disclosures page* on the About section of the SMSU homepage.

Southwest Minnesota diligently collects data on the success of its graduates through various surveys conducted at different touchpoints. One such survey, the *graduate survey* that had an 88% response rate, provided valuable insights into both employment status and continuing education plans. These employment reports are made publicly available on the Career Services webpage. Additionally, individual programs administer alumni surveys and actively involve alumni on their *Advisory Councils*. Furthermore, the Alumni Association plays a crucial role in gathering ongoing data for the university by maintaining a strong connection with alumni through a magazine and electronic newsletters that both contain updated contact requests.

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

4.B - Core Component 4.B

The institution engages in ongoing assessment of student learning as part of its commitment to the educational outcomes of its students.

1. The institution has effective processes for assessment of student learning and for achievement of learning goals in academic and cocurricular offerings.
2. The institution uses the information gained from assessment to improve student learning.
3. The institution's processes and methodologies to assess student learning reflect good practice, including the substantial participation of faculty, instructional and other relevant staff members.

Rating

Met

Rationale

Southwest Minnesota State University has a well-developed culture of assessment that is tied directly to their institutional goals. Highly laudable is the extent to which the university community has embraced the value of assessment. There is sufficient evidence that much assessment is undertaken for these outcomes in curricular programs, including the general education program, specifically evidenced in the documentary evidence provided in their Assurance Argument and corroborated in person during peer reviewer meetings with faculty and department chairs.

Program assessment is derived from each academic program's *Plan for Assessment of Academic Learning (PASL)*, which establishes the mapping and three- to four-year timeline for assessment activities. Additionally, the *Report on Assessment of Student Learning (RASL)* is submitted on a two-year cycle, reflecting the data collection over the past two years. Each program maintains a *Program Assessment Leader (PAL)* to assist program faculty in the collection and documentation of assessment data. PASLs and RASLs are reviewed by the *Committee on Institutional Assessment (CIA)* to provide peer feedback. The focus session with this committee underscored the shared knowledge and understanding of best practices in student learning outcomes assessment among those engaged in assessment. Furthermore, they expressed comfort with the leadership and support provided by the Assessment Coordinator and the CIA.

The Assessment Coordinator is also responsible for compiling an annual summary report of assessment activities for the university, titled *Assessment on Campus: A Report and Evaluation (ACRE)*. The ACRE highlights accomplishments and offers recommendations for program improvement based on the information submitted in the RASLs. Some notable themes identified in the ACRE include suggestions for ongoing monitoring of student learning, improvements to assessment activities, proposed modifications to instruction and pedagogy, and identification of curriculum changes.

Academic program learning outcomes are available for each program or school on the program websites. Conversations in various assessment-focused meetings revealed that whole departments

attend and participate in academic program review feedback sessions during the institution's annual Assessment Day. The pride in their efforts was clearly demonstrated by several faculty members attending the Criterion 3 & 4 Open Forum who offered further examples of evidence of assessment. A diverse group of programs, from biology, communications, math, chemistry, music, and social sciences, demonstrated the use of findings and continued efforts at closing the loop in terms of academic and co-curricular assessment interventions. Assessment data is clearly used in academic decision-making from curricular to budgetary decisions. Faculty from music used assessment data to impact both their curriculum and budgetary decisions when determining that introductory piano skills would be better taught in a larger class rather than by individual private lessons. Student achievement improved when students were able to learn in a group setting rather than individually, and the department was able to be more efficient in the use of instructors after an initial investment in more keyboards for a single classroom.

Multiple avenues for disseminating and engaging with data collected from assessment reports are available to the institution and employed in ongoing program improvement. CIA meeting minutes, reports to the deans and the provost, and the use of an annual *Assessment Day* to involve all faculty members are used to examine and update expectations and targets. Examples of the use of assessment data were reviewed by peer review team members in PASL and RASL documents after a request for access to the CIA's Teams site.

Broad and comprehensive participation in all assessment-focused meetings demonstrated a strong understanding, acceptance, and incorporation of assessment practices into the university's work. This was echoed by numerous participants in the discussions.

Student affairs offices also conduct annual assessments of their efforts. An intentional definition of co-curricular activities, employing a series of questions against a given activity, assists in identifying where and how student learning occurs. The 2024 annual reports, presented as part of the assurance argument, revealed that while student affairs areas, apart from the *Deeann Griebel Student Success Center*, which assesses Supplemental Instruction among other programs, are primarily focused on operational activities rather than student learning outcomes, discussions during the Open Forum for Criteria 3 & 4 identified numerous collaborations between student affairs and academic programs. This collaboration resulted in substantial student learning outcomes that student affairs functional areas could assess.

Graduate and undergraduate degree programs at SMSU are designed to achieve discipline-specific learning outcomes and are readily available on departmental pages. The assessment of these outcomes is conducted by the program faculty, with coordination provided by the department chair and *PAL*. All departments are encouraged to upload their assessment information and data to a university *Teams site*, which enables various assessment committees to access and utilize this information where that data is examined by the university-wide CIA. During a random review of academic and non-instructional programs conducted through the university's Teams site that was made available to peer reviewers, it was observed that departments are actively incorporating assessment into their daily operations.

Assessment at SMSU is guided by best practice outlined in the *Campus Assessment Master Plan*. SMSU has a variety of methods for ensuring that strong assessment practice is followed in both academic and co-curricular assessment of student learning. Assessment takes place on several levels at Southwest Minnesota, from the university-wide *CIA* and *Liberal Education Committee (LEC)* to the individual academic departments and student affairs units. All areas are engaging in continuous improvement of student learning, and it is clear that the university has a strong culture of assessment.

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

4.C - Core Component 4.C

The institution pursues educational improvement through goals and strategies that improve retention, persistence and completion rates in its degree and certificate programs.

1. The institution has defined goals for student retention, persistence and completion that are ambitious, attainable and appropriate to its mission, student populations and educational offerings.
2. The institution collects and analyzes information on student retention, persistence and completion of its programs.
3. The institution uses information on student retention, persistence and completion of programs to make improvements as warranted by the data.
4. The institution's processes and methodologies for collecting and analyzing information on student retention, persistence and completion of programs reflect good practice. (Institutions are not required to use IPEDS definitions in their determination of persistence or completion rates. Institutions are encouraged to choose measures that are suitable to their student populations, but institutions are accountable for the validity of their measures.)

Rating

Met

Rationale

Southwest Minnesota State University sets goals for student retention, persistence, and completion aligned with its mission. Until recently, SMSU used a 70% retention rate for new freshmen entering in the fall to fall. However, after discovering that the 2022 cohort had achieved a 69.5% retention rate, the university revised its goal to 73% for the 2023 cohort. This year, they surpassed the 73% mark at a rate of 73.4% by investing in persistence initiatives.

SMSU adheres to Minnesota State University system definitions for retention, persistence, and degree completion and publicly shares this information on its Disclosure page under the About tab. They also provide detailed data breakdowns by degree and demographics among traditional, transfer, and College Now students. Notably, retention and completion rates have shown signs of improvement since the pandemic. The university appears committed to maintaining this positive trajectory.

The university's Data Management/Institutional Research (DMIR) office diligently collects and reports data daily from both internal sources and system-gathered and managed data. They provide both raw and analyzed data. To enhance data reporting capacity, the DMIR office is acquiring additional Power BI licenses. This initiative aligns well with the Minnesota State reporting tool, Equity Scorecard, enabling the examination of disparity patterns and equity gaps. The data clearly supports the ambitious goals outlined in the 2021-26 Strategic Plan, which focuses on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

During campus discussions with the HLC/Strategic Planning Committee, Department Heads, Program Chairs, and other stakeholders, it became evident that data-informed decision-making is

actively taking place on the SMSU campus. The DMIR operates as a central hub for information and data dissemination, ensuring that relevant campus committees, departments, and other constituents have access to the necessary data.

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

4.S - Criterion 4 - Summary

The institution demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs, learning environments and support services, and it evaluates their effectiveness for student learning through processes designed to promote continuous improvement.

Rationale

Southwest Minnesota State University demonstrates admirable responsibility for the quality of its educational programs and a true culture of continuous improvement. The institution conducts regular program reviews to ensure academic quality and student success. These reviews have led to curriculum updates, changes in class sizes, and the creation of active classrooms. SMSU also maintains specialized accreditation for several programs and collects data on graduate success through surveys and alumni involvement.

Southwest Minnesota State University has a strong culture of assessment, with widespread participation and collaboration among faculty, staff, and students. The university's assessment practices are guided by best practices outlined in the Campus Assessment Master Plan, and assessment data is used in academic decision-making and program improvement. Student affairs offices also conduct annual assessments of their efforts, with collaborations between student affairs and academic programs resulting in substantial student learning outcomes.

Southwest Minnesota State University revised its retention goal to 73% and surpassed it with a 73.4% rate. The university's Data Management/Institutional Research office collects and reports data to support data-informed decision-making.

5 - Institutional Effectiveness, Resources and Planning

The institution's resources, structures, processes and planning are sufficient to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its educational offerings, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.

5.A - Core Component 5.A

Through its administrative structures and collaborative processes, the institution's leadership demonstrates that it is effective and enables the institution to fulfill its mission.

1. Shared governance at the institution engages its internal constituencies—including its governing board, administration, faculty, staff and students—through planning, policies and procedures.
2. The institution's administration uses data to reach informed decisions in the best interests of the institution and its constituents.
3. The institution's administration ensures that faculty and, when appropriate, staff and students are involved in setting academic requirements, policy and processes through effective collaborative structures.

Rating

Met

Rationale

Shared governance at SMSU is demonstrated in the structures, practices, and expectations that guide planning and decision making. Governance structure is partly determined by Minnesota's collective bargaining laws and Minnesota statutes for the state university system. The system governing board has policy responsibility for system planning, academic programs, fiscal management, personnel, admission requirements, tuition and fees, and rules and regulations. The system governing board approves SMSU's budget and presidential work plan. Under Minnesota law, three collective bargaining agreements and two plans are negotiated at the state level rather than on the campuses, and two collective bargaining agreements and one plan are negotiated at the system level. Each bargaining unit participates in governance at SMSU in accordance with the statutory language and provisions in their labor agreements. Within this framework, there is considerable additional effort at SMSU, starting from the top, to engage all internal constituencies through existing planning, policies and procedures. Monthly "meet and confer" sessions provide a regular, structured opportunity for each bargaining unit to meet with the President and President's Cabinet. Conversations with System trustees and an open forum with SMSU faculty and staff indicated that SMSU was an early adopter of the meet and confer engagement approach. The meet and confer sessions agenda topics include standing reports on enrollment and retention, budget, IT, HR, government relations, and policy updates and bargaining groups can add other current topics of interest to the agenda. President's Cabinet meetings are held weekly or bi-weekly throughout the year. The president also holds office hours monthly in various locations on campus and holds

monthly town halls, many with a remote option, to engage internal constituencies on a regular basis. Consultation with students occurs through bi-monthly meetings between the president and the student association (SA) president and through weekly meetings between all elected SA senate members and the associate vice president of enrollment management/student engagement and the SA faculty advisor.

SMSU draws upon multiple sources of data and an interconnected set of processes to ensure that data-informed decisions are made to advance the institutions goals. For example, SMSU uses data on the cost, enrollment, and efficiency of academic programs to inform decisions about position requests and to identify areas requiring monitoring and potential additional adjustments. Similarly, SMSU analyzed data on classroom utilization, academic program and student facility needs, and classroom technology needs to develop a plan for taking the Social Sciences building offline and renovate existing campus space to accommodate the relocation of several programs. Another noteworthy use of data to drive mission impact was discussed in a forum with student support services staff. SMSU staff created an entirely new approach and office structure for accessibility services based on usage and need data. This new approach and office nearly tripled the number of students receiving program support. Similarly, survey data from SMSU's Mustang Market (a food pantry for students experiencing food insecurity) led to increased staffing, hours and identification of community donors to expand the needed support to students.

Numerous structures and collaborative efforts allow faculty, staff and student involvement in setting academic requirements, policy, and processes. SMSU adheres to shared governance principles by including all stakeholders in the academic quality decision-making process. SMSU committees work collaboratively to make decisions, establish processes, draft policies and procedures, and make recommendations. Shared governance is also evident in the robust standing committee structure. Bargaining units elect members to serve on each committee, unit representatives and administrators typically serve by function. Each committee also includes student representation, though often it can be difficult to find students to fill these positions. Academic requirements are developed by the Curriculum and Liberal Education Committees through the curriculum approval process. Other academic policy and process committees include Study Abroad and Global Engagement Committee, Committee on Online Learning, Committee on Institutional Assessment, Commencement Committee, and Calendar Committee.

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

5.B - Core Component 5.B

The institution's resource base supports its educational offerings and its plans for maintaining and strengthening their quality in the future.

1. The institution has qualified and trained operational staff and infrastructure sufficient to support its operations wherever and however programs are delivered.
2. The goals incorporated into the mission and any related statements are realistic in light of the institution's organization, resources and opportunities.
3. The institution has a well-developed process in place for budgeting and for monitoring its finances.
4. The institution's fiscal allocations ensure that its educational purposes are achieved.

Rating

Met

Rationale

SMSU has the human resources needed to support its operations and deliver its programs. As of FY 2024, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data indicated there were 271 full-time and 161 part-time employees. The total employee count of 432 is a 1.4% decrease from 438 in Fall 2018. There was an increase in full-time employees and a decrease of 12% in part-time employees during this same period. This reflects increases in full-time employees in student facing categories such as instructional faculty, student and academic affairs, and coaching. SMSU does not rely heavily on adjunct or part-time positions for teaching courses. In the spring of 2024, 83.9% of undergraduate courses (and 82.6% of all courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels) were taught by full-time faculty.

The CFO has been at SMSU for 34 years, and in her current role for over 12 years. She indicated that there are hiring challenges in the local area primarily for hourly custodial and grounds positions. Key leadership positions in business, finance, facilities and human resources were relatively stable.

SMSU is in the middle of an ERP transition to Workday from Integrated Student Records System (ISRS), a system wide homegrown program that has been in various states of use since the 1990s. ISRS provided support for all aspects of operations including being the primary Student Information System. A multi-year system-level effort has been underway for over five years to replace ISRS with Workday software. The first components of the new Workday system—Finance and HR services—went live on July 1, 2024. Conversion of academic services into Workday is in the planning stage. Internet services are provided to the University via a unique partnership among the State of Minnesota, the Minnesota State System, the University of Minnesota, and the Learning Network of Minnesota. The Minnesota State System provides critical information security services including identity management services.

The Minnesota State System Office also manages a system-wide learning management software,

Desire2Learn Brightspace as well as specific enterprise-wide academic services such as Microsoft Office365, Zoom, and Kaltura. The University provides support on these systems for faculty, staff, and students.

A comprehensive facilities plan, finalized in February 2018, found the campus facilities at Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU) in good condition, notwithstanding typical maintenance and asset preservation needs. Housing capacity exceeded current demand then and still does. The buildings are well-maintained and there is adequate existing facility space to accomplish all the current and long-term needs, including plenty of parking space. The comprehensive facilities plan noted the university has far more square footage than required for current students and could consider the demolition or long-term mothballing of facilities to better focus limited resources in key areas of opportunity, that observation still applies. Tours of facilities during the visit indicated that facilities were generally well maintained. Deferred maintenance was estimated to be in the range of \$150-180M. Many key buildings date from the 1960s and 1970s.

A Comprehensive Space Study conducted in 2022 noted low classroom utilization numbers. To provide students with the best educational experience and improve resources available to enhance teaching and learning and in alignment with the comprehensive facilities plan from February 2018, SMSU implemented a plan to take the Social Science building offline and relocate the tenants/departments more centrally on campus. This initiative provided improved access and efficiency for students and improved campus department collaboration and culture. Excess space was leased to local educational organizations and is bringing in some revenue demonstrating the community attachment to system facilities mentioned by system trustees.

SMSU has developed an estimated \$60M plan to move forward with bringing a better-quality environment and experience to students, reduce the deferred maintenance backlog, and correctly size spaces. The project includes new exercise science labs, athletics training labs, active learning classrooms, and student collaboration spaces and has since been divided into three phases to ease the demand on general obligation bonding and make it more likely the project will garner approval through the state system funding process. System and legislative approval still pends.

The SMSU current FY25 budget includes \$48.5 million in total revenues. Approximately 49% of total revenue is state appropriates and 45% is from tuition. In FY2022, SMSU had the second-lowest tuition rates (below 12 credits, banded 12-18 credits and more than 18 credits) of any university in the Minnesota State System. An increase of 14.3%, 7.4% and 14.3% respectively in the three categories put SMSU more in line with its system peers. In the FY25 budget, 75% of expenses are personnel related expenses. Recent fiscal allocations have been realistic and in support of the strategic plan and have included new full-time positions, employee training and development and facility enhancements.

SMSU's composite financial indicator score (with GASB) has steadily increased in the past four fiscal years from 0.72 in FY21 to 2.66 in FY24. The composite financial indicator score continues to be "above the zone" for a public university. While the composite financial indicator score (with GASB) has steadily increased, there has been some fluctuation in component CFIs over the same period. The primary reserve CFI has alternated up and down over the past four years. The net operating revenue CFI has been negative three of the past four years. The return on net assets CFI is steadily increasing from being negative in FY21. The viability CFI has been trending up, with one dip in FY23, as debt has been retired. SMSU's cash balances have remained relatively stable, net assets have decreased because there have not been any significant building improvements over the last few years. The restricted assets have also decreased due to cash reserves in the revenue fund area.

The operating margin is usually negative largely due to the non-cash components of the financial statements.

SMSU has a well-developed process in place for budgeting and monitoring financial health. Yearly budgets are submitted to the system for approval by the Minnesota State Board of Trustees. Funding is then allocated to the system institutions using an allocation framework. The state allocation and tuition revenue create most of the university's revenue budget, but there are other revenue sources such as fees, grants, and donations figured into the total budget.

One of the largest factors in budgeting is the state of the current economy and its effect on legislative funding and on the capacity to change tuition rates. A related factor is inflation and its effects on operating costs. Most employees at the University are within bargaining units whose contracts expire and are renegotiated every two years. Budgets are created using estimates for the following: state allocation, future enrollment trends, inflationary factors on spending, bargaining contractual changes, and new initiatives.

SMSU uses a two-year budgeting process with the second year being much more likely to change and be reworked in the following fiscal year. Estimates to create the budget are discussed between the VP for finance and the president, at cabinet meetings, and at Budget Committee meetings throughout the fall. Cabinet members assist in creating the estimates for enrollment and for staff and operational costs. Often more than one budget scenario is created to assist in planning. Spreadsheets with the ability to change estimates have been provided on the campus T drive for others to use to create their own scenarios. Operating budget goals are provided to each cabinet administrator for their departments and programs to create operating budgets. Salary and fringe estimates are determined for the entire University based on approved positions for the next fiscal year and contractual changes per bargaining.

Once budgets, tuition, and fee rates are set, they are presented at multiple meet and confer sessions to all bargaining units and also to student government for consultation.

Monitoring revenues and expenses takes place at many levels throughout the University including the president and cabinet level, at the unit level, and at the cost-center level. SMSU transitioned its ERP to Workday on July 1, 2024, and as mentioned at open forums and in conversations with SMSU CFO, SMSU is currently working through the learning curve for financial monitoring with the new capabilities of Workday and some implementation challenges. These monitoring challenges are expected to be overcome in the short term.

SMSU's makes fiscal allocations within its budget to ensure strategic priorities and educational purposes are met. Specific strategic goals are included in the budget process such as student success and the system's overarching goal of Equity 2030 along with growing enrollment. Specific areas that have seen additional fiscal allocations are in student retention, growing programs such as social work, and in online programming. Social work has growing enrollment and additional faculty are currently included in the FY 2025 budget. SMSU is committed to growing enrollment both on campus and online.

SMSU has leveraged Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) for technology infrastructure and network improvements, classroom technology improvements for additional and improved online programming, and to offset losses in housing due to lower occupancy rates. Classroom, lab and technology improvements were demonstrated during a campus facility tour.

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

5.C - Core Component 5.C

The institution engages in systematic and integrated planning and improvement.

1. The institution allocates its resources in alignment with its mission and priorities, including, as applicable, its comprehensive research enterprise, associated institutes and affiliated centers.
2. The institution links its processes for assessment of student learning, evaluation of operations, planning and budgeting.
3. The planning process encompasses the institution as a whole and considers the perspectives of internal and external constituent groups.
4. The institution plans on the basis of a sound understanding of its current capacity, including fluctuations in the institution's sources of revenue and enrollment.
5. Institutional planning anticipates evolving external factors, such as technology advancements, demographic shifts, globalization, the economy and state support.
6. The institution implements its plans to systematically improve its operations and student outcomes.

Rating

Met

Rationale

SMSU allocates its resources in alignment to its mission and priorities to teaching, learning, and support services, which include academic affairs, student services, institutional support, administration, athletics, and physical plant and facilities support.

Alignment between resource allocation and mission priorities extends to the broader institutional planning integrated with the strategic plan, including a variety of other institutional plans like Equity 2030, Enterprise Risk Management, Civic Action Plan, IT strategic plan, Strategic Enrollment Management Plan, and the Comprehensive Facilities Plan.

To support the academic enterprise, funds are continually monitored and reallocated toward positions that serve the strategic goals. Faculty and staff positions have been recently reorganized and/or added to support programs and student success initiatives, primarily in accessibility services and to support online students with parent navigators.

Assessment of student learning outcomes, program reviews, ongoing program evaluations, and the evaluation of operational effectiveness of units are all elements considered in planning, prioritizing and budgeting. Assessment of student learning, evaluation of operations, planning, and budgeting are linked through the strategic plan and budgeting processes. SMSU's academic program assessment process identifies recommendations for improving student learning that are reviewed and prioritized by administration, included in the strategic plan, and addressed through annual budgeting and strategic plan action items. Engagements at multiple open forums provided clear and convincing evidence of open collaboration and prioritization of available resources to drive SMSU's student success vision.

The university planning process is conducted through the existing shared governance structures and guided by the commitment to serve the external community. The perspectives of external constituent groups also inform program-level planning through advisory councils for academic programs and for civic and community engagement.

The SMSU strategic plan was developed through a collaborative process that began fall 2020 and concluded spring 2021. The process was led by the provost and the HLC/assessment coordinator in their roles as co-chairs of the HLC/Strategic Planning Committee. This committee consists of twenty-five members representing all bargaining units and administration, staff, and faculty.

Strategic plan implementation is overseen by the Cabinet and by the HLC/Strategic Planning Committee, which collaborate to set annual goals and monitor progress. Campus is kept informed through Town Hall and other meetings. Any member of the campus community can report on a current or new plan initiative via a form posted on the strategic planning landing page.

Open forums included several community members including the local public school system superintendent, nearby technical/community college provost, chamber of commerce representative and a Minnesota state senator. All community representatives were enthusiastic and effusive in their praise for SMSU's engagement, commitment, support and inclusive cooperation with the nearby community.

SMSU's primary sources of funding are state appropriations and tuition revenue. Tuition revenue is obviously driven by enrollment. In FY2023 SMSU made large changes to its tuition structure to align all tuition rates at each level, graduate and undergraduate, to be one rate for each level.

Proposals to create new academic programs must address resources, student interest, and market needs and complete a financial viability analysis with the expectation that a new program must be able to be sustained by tuition revenue after two years.

Requests for new or renovated campus spaces are informed by the campus facilities plan and by data regarding space utilization.

SMSU has an annual process involving a committee made up of faculty, staff, and students to make recommendations to the student senate and university administration on the utilization of available student technology fee revenues.

Assessment of future enrollment trends informs strategic enrollment management planning. The decision to partner with a third party to expand marketing and recruiting for online programs was made in response to the decrease in the number of traditional students seeking higher education. Comments at multiple open forums emphasized the commitment to growing the on-line programs and fully supporting on-line students to the maximum extent possible.

As a regional public institution, SMSU plans strategically for budgetary challenges tied to state and national political decisions, economic fluctuations tied to national and global markets, and changes in technology. The Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) plan was developed in 2022 and is reviewed regularly. SMSU was out ahead of the system in its ERM approach based on discussion with the SMSU cabinet. When the system later implemented a similar ERM approach, SMSU had to adapt slightly to the system framework. The SMSU ERM risk register identifies risks to the institution and articulates strategies to mitigate those that pose the greatest threat. As indicated in the risk register, ERM mitigation steps are included in strategic plan's annual implementation plan. The current

ERM plan has identified the five most salient risks to SMSU, developed mitigation strategies and assigned risk owners. These five risks are: Financial Sustainability: Insufficient financial resources to provide essential programs and services; Enrollment Management: Decline in overall and on-campus enrollment; Program Demand: Insufficient number/variety of in-person courses offered; Facilities: Reduction in residence hall occupancy; and Talent Management: Inability to retain and hire staff.

The SMSU risk register identifies twelve additional risks deemed less likely to occur but still needing to be monitored due to their potential impact on operations, reputation, or compliance. Specific examples include risks posed by network and data security systems, levels of public and corporate support, internal and external perceptions of campus climate, Title IX compliance, and implementation of the system-wide Workday technology platform.

Since the adoption of the Strategic Plan, SMSU has made significant gains in several areas through annual goal setting and ongoing monitoring of progress. The HLC/Strategic Planning Committee reviews plan implementation and provides input on annual goals. Strategic plan accomplishments for each of the six priorities are updated annually and posted on the SMSU website in a summary version and in a more detailed version listing goal-level accomplishments and action items for the coming year.

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

5.S - Criterion 5 - Summary

The institution's resources, structures, processes and planning are sufficient to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its educational offerings, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.

Rationale

SMSU has the resources, structures, processes and planning procedures in place, and collectively these are sufficient to fulfill its mission. As a regional public institution heavily reliant on state support for both operating revenue and capital expenditures, and dependent on enrollment for tuition revenue, SMSU has identified key risks through a well-developed Enterprise Risk Management program to navigate those challenges. Increasing enrollment of its online programs will be key to offsetting the declining demographics in the rural area it traditionally serves. SMSU's composite financial indicator score (with GASB) has steadily increased in the past four fiscal years from 0.72 in FY21 to 2.66 in FY24. The composite financial indicator score continues to be "above the zone" for a public university. While the composite financial indicator score (with GASB) has steadily increased, there has been some fluctuation in component CFIs over the same period.

FC - Federal Compliance

Rating

Met

Federal Compliance Filing Form

SMSU_2024_Federal_Compliance_Filing

Rationale

Federal Compliance Rationale Template
Effective September 1, 2024–August 31, 2025

Instructions: When an evaluation that includes a Federal Compliance Review is released to the peer review team in the Assurance System, copy and paste the text below into the Rationale section of the Federal Compliance tab.

1. ASSIGNMENT OF CREDITS, PROGRAM LENGTH AND TUITION

Conclusion (Choose one of the following statements and delete the other.):

The institution meets HLC’s requirements.

Rationale:

SMSU policy A-049 “Credit Hour Assignment,” which deals with credit hour assignment, dictates that courses are expected to adhere to the 34CFR 600.2 Federal Credit Hour Definition. Further, an internal calendar committee reviews each academic calendar to ensure that classes meet this standard in all delivery modalities. New courses must be approved by a curriculum committee that reviews courses for adherence to the federal definition.

The institution maintains policies that reflect substantive thought involving distance education and that modality's adherence to federal guidelines. Distance courses are offered in several types of delivery, including mostly online, completely online and asynchronous, completely online and synchronous, hybrid, flexible, and others. Each modality adheres to the guidelines indicated in the federal definition.

Program lengths are typical for IHE's. Associate degrees require 60 semester hours of credit, bachelors degrees require 120 semester hours, masters degrees require between 30 and 54 credit hours, and doctoral degrees require at least 72 hours. Program lengths are covered extensively in SMSU policy 3.36.1: Academic Programs.

SMSU does participate in Title IV funding and reports credit hours in conformance with requirements of U.S. Code of Federal Regulations 34 CFR 600.2 and 668.8 (k) and (l)

The federal compliance reviewer scanned courses at all academic levels and in various departments and delivery modalities and found that the credit hour assignment adhered to generally-acceptable credit hour award practices in higher education. The reviewer also scanned several programs at various levels and found them to be compliant with federal guidelines and typical IHE practices.

Tuition varies depending upon length of program (AA, BA, etc.) and state of residency, and the rates are based mostly upon the number of credit hours taken per semester. There do not appear to be any courses or programs that require justification for different fees or tuition rates differing from those in the published policy.

2. INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS FOR HANDLING STUDENT COMPLAINTS

Conclusion (Choose one of the following statements and delete the other.):

The institution meets HLC's requirements.

Rationale: SMSU's complaint policy is prominently articulated in several university documents, the most important of which is the Student Handbook. SMSU maintains a record of formal student complaints and outcomes.

Student complaints are handled under two separate policies; one for grades and one for non-grade related matters. Grade appeals are not addressed under the provided policies and are not considered to be complaints. Complaints are further categorized as appeals, complaints, or grievances (referred to collectively hereafter as 'complaints'.) Further, the complaint procedure has a logical escalation process that can culminate with consideration by the university chancellor.

One possible disconnect is that the student complaint policies 3.8 and 3.8.1 indicate that grade appeals are handled separately from non-grade complaints. However, the 'Institutional Record of Student Complaints' document G-011 states 'Students with complaints about any aspect of academic and non-academic programs may take those complaints to the Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs', which seems to indicate that students can take any type of issue to this office. As students may not be able to discern the differences among grade appeals, other appeals, complaints, and grievances, this verbiage may cause confusion regarding what academic issues fall under which policy.

SMSU also provides clearly articulate policies regarding complaints involving discrimination and sexual violence or harassment.

SMSU maintains a record of formal student complaints and outcomes and a partial record was provided by SMSU in its Federal Compliance filing. The report exhibited 16 complaints, though the specifics for most were confidential. The procedures and outcomes appear to align with institutional policies for complaints.

3. PUBLICATION OF TRANSFER POLICIES

Conclusion (Choose one of the following statements and delete the other.):

The institution meets HLC's requirements.

Rationale:

SMSU provided a link to its transfer policy as it appears in the student handbook: A-052 Transfer Credit and Trasfor (sic) Credit Appeal Policy.

The policy itself meets HLC's requirements, though the reviewer believes that many prospective students will be confused by the terminology and guidelines referenced therein. An example is SMSU's reference to 'national' and 'regional' accreditation, and its discussion of credits earned at nationally-accredited institutions without corresponding discussion of credits earned at regionally-accredited institutions. The transfer policy is no doubt clear to the registrar and other SMSU personnel, but prospective students will require further clarification.

SMSU provided a document indicating transfer agreements with eight different institutions and covering 15 different programs. These agreements indicated how credits at the eight different institutions would transfer to SMSU. No documentation was provided regarding agreements for how credits from SMSU would transfer to other institutions in Minnesota (or elsewhere.)

SMSU does provide credit for prior learning, and the guidelines can be found in policy A-050.1 Credit for Prior Learning Procedure. Coverage is largely general and students will need further guidance should they elect to pursue prior learning credits.

4. PRACTICES FOR VERIFICATION OF STUDENT IDENTITY

Conclusion (Choose one of the following statements and delete the other.):

The institution meets HLC's requirements.

Rationale:

SMSU utilizes a unique identifier called StarID for all students (who must provide government identification to obtain a StarID number and login.) Students (and anyone else associated with SMSU) must utilize StarID identification to access almost all of SMSU academic sites.

The federal compliance reviewer believes that usage of StarID is not, by itself, a sufficient guarantee that students enrolled in courses are the ones taking exams or submitting coursework. However, SMSU does employ other methods to verify student identity. For example, the institution utilizes proctored exams with time limits, locking other websites during exams, and encouraging frequent contact with online instructors. SMSU also requires employees to participate in an annual training program designed to detect and minimize academic dishonesty related to what the institution refers to as 'theft'.

StarID users are required to change passwords semi-annually and are encouraged to do so every 90 days.

The federal compliance reviewer finds these practices to be modestly sufficient to meet HLC and federal requirements regarding verifying student identity; however, he recommends that the visiting team further question the institution regarding its efforts in this area. It is plausible that the

institution takes additional steps to be certain that individuals submitting work are actually the same individuals who prepared it, but the institution's federal compliance report only marginally addressed this issue.

5. PROTECTION OF STUDENT PRIVACY

Conclusion (Choose one of the following statements and delete the other.):

The institution meets HLC's requirements.

Rationale:

There are two aspects to SMSU's student privacy provisions: 1) maximizing the security of collected information, and 2) access of information to internal and external users.

To maximize the security of collected information, the institution abides by numerous policies and procedures related to safeguarding student identities and records. Among them were policies related to vulnerability scanning, records back-up, anti-malware tactics, security of privacy and information resources, breaches, and acceptable uses of computer resources.

Regarding access of information, SMSU clearly illustrates how it protects student privacy by reference to 'Student Records Policy G-009'.

The policy defines Directory Information and non-Directory information, indicates entities that may have a legitimate academic interest, who within the institution may access student information, and covers nearly all instances where student records might be requested.

Though exceptions are made for several narrowly-defined cases, SMSU allows access to the release to a third party of a student's identifiable information and/or academic records only with the written consent of the student.

6. PUBLICATION OF STUDENT OUTCOME DATA

Conclusion (Choose one of the following statements and delete the other.):

The institution meets HLC's requirements.

Rationale:

On various easily-located pages on its Website, SMSU provides much useful information regarding student outcomes. These include retention, persistence, and graduation rates at various program levels and for various majors and for transfer and traditional (non-transfer) students.

More granular information is found - especially in SMSU's Fact Book - relating to currently enrolled students. For example, information is offered regarding the percentages of various ethnicities and genders in attendance. This granularity is provided to a lesser extent in Student Right to Know information. On the Disclosure page of the Website, there is a brief discussion of the retention rate of students of color.

On the Disclosure page of its Website, SMSU lists nine programs under the section titled

'Professional Licensure & Certification Disclosures'. This section details the states wherein SMSU programs prepare students for licensure and certification exams. An additional section, titled 'Applicable Pass Rate Data for Licensure or Certification' provides pass rates for licensure or certification exams for the five programs where exam pass rates are available. Four programs involve disciplines in which exam pass rates are not gathered by the professional organization or are not reported by institution.

7. STANDING WITH STATE AND OTHER ACCREDITORS

Conclusion (Choose one of the following statements and delete the other.):

The institution meets HLC's requirements.

Rationale:

SMSU's various accreditations are easily located on its Website. It displays the HLC widget on the landing page and it discloses the following specialized accreditations within one click from the landing page:

International Accreditation Council for Business Education (IACBE)
National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships
The Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education
The Council on Social Work Education
The Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board
The National Association of Schools of Music
Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs

SMSU's status as a Minnesota State University is confirmed on the following Minnesota Office of Higher Education site:

<https://www.minnstate.edu/campusesprograms/index.html>

Various references to that Office are made throughout SMSU's Website.

8. RECRUITING, ADMISSIONS AND RELATED ENROLLMENT PRACTICES

Conclusion (Choose one of the following statements and delete the other.):

The institution meets HLC's requirements.

Rationale:

SMSU's admissions personnel must abide by a code of ethics that requires (among other things) 'integrity, honesty, fairness, equity, and confidentiality'.

The code of ethics also requires that admissions personnel:

1. comply with all relevant local, state, and federal laws and regulations governing the admissions process, and
2. follow university policies and guidelines related to admissions, recruitment, data security, use of and care for state property, and professional conduct.'

New admissions personnel undertake a four-week training program that includes the code of ethics and other process-related training. This training abides by the National Association of College Admission Counselor Code of Ethics and the MN State Undergraduate Admissions Procedure.

International student and financial aid personnel adhere to their own codes of conduct related to student interaction.

The reviewer requested and received examples of recruiting and marketing materials, and those materials appeared to accurately reflect information provided in SMSU's Website, especially those pages related to public disclosures.

APPENDIX A: TITLE IV PROGRAM RESPONSIBILITIES

Complete this section **only if** the institution has submitted an Appendix A. Review any negative actions taken against the institution since HLC's last Federal Compliance review and identify any implications for the institution's current compliance with the Criteria for Accreditation or other HLC requirements. Provide a detailed rationale for any Core Components identified as Met with Concerns or Not Met.

Rationale:

The institution did not attach Appendix A. Per their Director of Financial Aid "SMSU does not have any negative actions imposed by the Department of Education."

MANDATORY REPORTING: FRAUD, ABUSE OR FAILING TO MEET TITLE IV RESPONSIBILITIES

Federal regulations require HLC to notify the U.S. Department of Education related to the following item. Do not skip this section.

In the course of the peer review team's evaluation of this institution, have the reviewers encountered any reason to believe that (i) the institution is failing to meet its Title IV, Higher Education Act program responsibilities (if the institution participates in Title IV, HEA programs) or (ii) that the institution may be engaged in fraud or abuse?

Answer (Choose one response and delete the other):

No

Rationale (If the team responded "Yes," explain the reasons for concern in detail. Otherwise, leave this section blank.):

Referenced documentation and links:

SMSU Federal Compliance Report

Fact Book: <https://www.smsu.edu/about/fact-book.html>

Disclosures: <https://www.smsu.edu/about/disclosures.html>

Retention, Persistence, and Completion:

<https://www.smsu.edu/administration/datamanagementinstitutionalresearch/retention.html>

Overall Enrollment:

<https://www.smsu.edu/administration/datamanagementinstitutionalresearch/overall-enrollment.html>

Data Management and Institutional Research:

<https://www.smsu.edu/administration/datamanagementinstitutionalresearch/index.html>

Academic Programs and Degrees: <https://www.smsu.edu/academics/programs/index.html>

Tuition and Fees:

<https://www.smsu.edu/administration/businessservices/tuitionfeespayments/index.html> (and links contained therein.)

Academic Catalog: https://catalog.smsu.edu/?_ga=2.232937814.97572952.1728600943-1573475303.1728600943

Academic Calendars: <https://catalog.smsu.edu/academic-calendars/>

Course Descriptions: <https://catalog.smsu.edu/course-descriptions/>

Accreditations: <https://www.smsu.edu/administration/accreditations/index.html>

<https://catalog.smsu.edu/policies-procedures/credit-hour-assignment/>

<https://www.minnstate.edu/board/procedure/3-36p1g2.pdf>

<https://www.minnstate.edu/board/policy/336.html>

<https://www.minnstate.edu/board/procedure/336p1.html>

<https://www.smsu.edu/administration/committees/#calendarcommittee>

Minnesota State Board Policy 3.8 Student Complaints and Grievances Minnesota State - 3.8 Student Complaints and Grievances (minnstate.edu)

Minnesota State Board Policy 1B.3 Sexual Violence Policy Minnesota State - 1B.3 Sexual Violence Policy (minnstate.edu)

Minnesota State Board Policy 1B.1 Nondiscrimination in Employment and Education Opportunity Minnesota State - 1B.1 Equal Opportunity and Nondiscrimination in Employment and Education (minnstate.edu)

SMSU Student Handbook: Student Grievances/Complaints Student Grievance/Complaints | Southwest Minnesota State University (smsu.edu)

SMSU Sexual Violence Policy P-013 Sexual Violence Policy | Southwest Minnesota State University (smsu.edu)

SMSU Title IX Title IX at Southwest Minnesota State University | Southwest Minnesota State University (smsu.edu)

System Procedure 3.8.1 Student Complaints and Grievances
<https://www.minnstate.edu/board/procedure/308p1.html>

System Procedure 1B.3.1 Sexual Violence Procedure Minnesota State - System Procedure 1B.3.1 Response to Sexual Violence and Title IX Sexual Harassment (minnstate.edu)

System Procedure 1B.1.1 Report/Complaint of Discrimination/Harassment Investigation and Resolution Minnesota State - System Procedure 1B.1.1 Investigation and Resolution (minnstate.edu)

SMSU G-011 Institutional Record of Student Complaints G-011 Institutional Record of Student Complaints | Southwest Minnesota State University (smsu.edu)

SMSU Sexual Violence Complaint Procedure Submit a Sexual Violence Complaint | Southwest Minnesota State University (smsu.edu)

SMSU Silent Witness—reporting an incident Silent Witness | Southwest Minnesota State University (smsu.edu)

Campus Resources for Reporting Campus Resources for Reporting | Southwest Minnesota State University (smsu.edu)

Institutional Record of Student Complaints (Complaint Log)

Policy A-052: <https://catalog.smsu.edu/policies-procedures/transfer-credit-appeal-policy/>

Procedure A-052.1: <https://catalog.smsu.edu/policies-procedures/transfer-credit-appeals-proceduresdefinitions/>

Minnesota State - Transfer Agreements Search (minnstate.edu)

Policy A-052: <https://catalog.smsu.edu/policies-procedures/transfer-credit-appeal-policy/>

Minnesota State System Information Technology Administration
<https://www.minnstate.edu/board/policy/513.html>

Minnesota State System Acceptable Use of Computers
<https://www.minnstate.edu/board/policy/522.html>

Minnesota State System Security and Privacy of Information Resources
<https://www.minnstate.edu/board/policy/523.html>

SMSU Student Records Policy G-009 <https://catalog.smsu.edu/student-handbook/records/policy-g-009/>

SMSU Student Records Procedures <https://catalog.smsu.edu/student-handbook/records/procedures/>

SMSU Student Consumer Information <https://catalog.smsu.edu/student-handbook/records/consumer-information/>

SMSU Privacy Statement Privacy Statement | Southwest Minnesota State University (smsu.edu)

SMSU Student Records Policy G-009 Student Records Policy G-009 | Southwest Minnesota State University (smsu.edu)

SMSU Student Records Procedures Student Record Procedures | Southwest Minnesota State University (smsu.edu)

Minnesota Office of Higher Education <https://www.ohe.state.mn.us/>

Minnesota Office of Higher Education: School Closings and Student Alerts School Closings and Student Alerts (state.mn.us)

National Association of College Admission Counselor Code of Ethics

MN State Undergraduate Admissions Procedure

NACAC National Association of College Admission Counselor Code of Ethics
https://www.nacacnet.org/wp-content/uploads/NACAC-Guide-to-Ethical-Practice-in-CollegeAdmission_Dec.-2023_FINAL.pdf

Office of Admission Code of Ethics

Admission Counselor Training

First Week at SMSU Onboarding

Risepoint Training Outline for Student Services

Interim Monitoring (if applicable)

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

Review Dashboard

Number	Title	Rating
1	Mission	
1.A	Core Component 1.A	Met
1.B	Core Component 1.B	Met
1.C	Core Component 1.C	Met
1.S	Criterion 1 - Summary	
2	Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct	
2.A	Core Component 2.A	Met
2.B	Core Component 2.B	Met
2.C	Core Component 2.C	Met
2.D	Core Component 2.D	Met
2.E	Core Component 2.E	Met
2.S	Criterion 2 - Summary	
3	Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources and Support	
3.A	Core Component 3.A	Met
3.B	Core Component 3.B	Met
3.C	Core Component 3.C	Met
3.D	Core Component 3.D	Met
3.S	Criterion 3 - Summary	
4	Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement	
4.A	Core Component 4.A	Met
4.B	Core Component 4.B	Met
4.C	Core Component 4.C	Met
4.S	Criterion 4 - Summary	
5	Institutional Effectiveness, Resources and Planning	
5.A	Core Component 5.A	Met
5.B	Core Component 5.B	Met
5.C	Core Component 5.C	Met
5.S	Criterion 5 - Summary	
FC	Federal Compliance	Met

Review Summary

Conclusion

Southwest Minnesota State University meets all of the criteria for accreditation, and satisfies the requirement for Federal compliance. SMSU has a well developed mission, vision and values. These are in alignment with Minnesota State System values, and have been reaffirmed or refined during the 2019 strategic planning process. SMSU is intricately involved in the life of the southwest Minnesota community. SMSU also acts with integrity in its various functions, and this is supported through a framework of state statutes, Board policies, and institutional policies and processes. SMSU also has sufficient resources to carry out its educational functions wherever and however they are offered. Faculty are well qualified for their various roles, and they provide essential input into the development, revision, and review of academic programs. SMSU has a well-established culture of assessment throughout all parts of the institution, and assessment results feed into decisions institution makes. SMSU has also developed an Enterprise Risk Management process to guide the institution and ensure it is aware of the scope, scale and potential magnitude of numerous threats to ongoing operations of the institution. With the support of the State of Minnesota and the Minnesota State System, SMSU has the financial resources to continue to offer a quality education to its students. Given the strengths of the institution demonstrated in the argument and the site visit, the team recommends SMSU be eligible to choose the pathway for the next reaffirmation cycle.

Overall Recommendations

Criteria For Accreditation

Met

Sanctions Recommendation

No Sanction

Pathways Recommendation

Eligible to choose

Federal Compliance

Met

No Interim Monitoring Recommended.

INTERNAL



Institutional Status and Requirements (ISR) Worksheet

Review Details

Institution: Southwest Minnesota State University, Minnesota

Type of Review: Standard Pathway - Comprehensive Evaluation Visit

Description:

Review Dates: 10/28/2024 - 10/29/2024

No Change in Institutional Status and Requirements

Accreditation Status

Status: Accredited

No Change

Recommended Change:

Degrees Awarded: Associates, Bachelors, Masters, Specialist

No Change

Recommended Change:

Reaffirmation of Accreditation:

Year of Last Reaffirmation of Accreditation: 2014 - 2015

Year of Next Reaffirmation of Accreditation: 2024 - 2025

No Change

Recommended Change: 2034-2035

Accreditation Stipulations

General:

The institution is approved at the following program level(s): Associate's, Bachelor's, Master's, Specialist

The institution is not approved at the following program level(s): Doctoral

The institution is limited to offer the following program(s), within the approved program levels listed above: Master of Science in Education, Master of Science in Special Education, and Master of Business Administration, Master of Science in Physical Education Coaching of Sport, Master of Science in Nursing, Master of Science in Education Administration and Leadership, and Master of Science in Cybersecurity.

- No Change
- Recommended Change:

Additional Locations:

The institution has been approved for the Notification Program, allowing the institution to open new additional locations within the United States.

- No Change
- Recommended Change:

Distance and Correspondence Courses and Programs:

Approved for distance education courses and programs. The institution has not been approved for correspondence education.

- No Change
- Recommended Change:

Competency-Based Education:

- No Change
- Recommended Change:

Pell-Eligible Prison Education Program:

- No Change
- Recommended Change:

Accreditation Events

Pathway for Reaffirmation of Accreditation: Standard Pathway

- No Change
- Recommended Change: eligible to choose

Upcoming Reviews:

No Upcoming Reviews

- No Change
- Recommended Change:

Upcoming Branch Campus or Additional Location Reviews:

No Upcoming Reviews

- No Change
- Recommended Change:

Monitoring

Upcoming Monitoring Reviews:

No Upcoming Reviews

- No Change
- Recommended Change:

Institutional Data

Academic Programs Offered:

Undergraduate Programs		
Associate Degrees:	5	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No Change <input type="checkbox"/> Recommended Change:
Baccalaureate Degrees:	61	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No Change <input type="checkbox"/> Recommended Change:
Graduate Programs		
Master's Degrees:	6	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No Change <input type="checkbox"/> Recommended Change:
Specialist Degrees:	1	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No Change <input type="checkbox"/> Recommended Change:

Doctoral Degrees:	0	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No Change <input type="checkbox"/> Recommended Change:
Certificate Programs		
Certificates:	29	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No Change <input type="checkbox"/> Recommended Change:

Contractual Arrangements:

No Contractual Arrangements

- No Change
- Recommended Change:

Off-Campus Activities

Branch Campuses:

No Branch Campuses

- No Change
- Recommended Change:

Additional Locations:

Albert Lea, 1031 Bridge Avenue, Albert Lea, Minnesota 56470 United States

Belgrade, 710 Washburn Ave., Belgrade, Minnesota 56312 United States

Bemidji - Northwest Technical College, 905 Grant Ave. SE, Bemidji, Minnesota 56601 United States

Bloomington -- Normandale, 9700 France Ave. S., Bloomington, Minnesota 55431 United States

Brainerd, 501 West College Drive, Brainerd, Minnesota 56401 United States

North Hennepin Community College, 7411 85th Ave N, Brooklyn Park, Minnesota 55445 United States

Anoka-Ramsey, 11200 Mississippi Blvd NW, Coon Rapids, Minnesota 55433 United States

Fergus Falls, 526 Western Avenue, Fergus Falls, Minnesota 56537 United States

Fergus Falls, 925 Western Ave, Fergus Falls, Minnesota 56537 United States

Minnetonka - Eagle Ridge Academy, 11111 Bren Road West, Minnetonka, Minnesota 55343
United States

Owatonna, 667 East Vine Street, Owatonna, Minnesota 55060 United States

Owatonna, MN, 515 W. Bridge St, Owatonna, Minnesota 55060 United States

Wadena, 600 Colfax Ave SW, Wadena, Minnesota 56482 United States

Willmar, 2101 15th Ave. NW, Willmar, Minnesota 56201 United States

Worthington, 1250 Ryans Road, Worthington, Minnesota 56187 United States

Sioux Falls, 4300 W Empire Place, Sioux Falls, South Dakota 57106 United States

No Change

Recommended Change: