

Higher Learning Commission Comprehensive Evaluation Executive Summary

Background

SMSU is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), which conducts comprehensive evaluations of member institutions and institutions seeking membership to confirm that the institution meets the Criteria for Accreditation and other HLC requirements, is pursuing institutional improvement, and complies with requirements set by the U.S. Department of Education. Evaluations are conducted by teams of peer reviewers.

All institutions accredited by HLC complete periodic reviews on a 10-year cycle to ensure they continue to meet the Criteria for Accreditation and HLC requirements and pursue institutional improvement. SMSU is required to undergo a comprehensive evaluation in Years 4 and 10 of the cycle. SMSU completed the Year 4 evaluation in 2018 and is now undergoing the Year 10 evaluation. The team of peer reviewers will be on the SMSU campus Monday, October 27 and Tuesday, October 28. Those wishing to learn more about the requirements and components of the comprehensive review can do so [here](#).

The Assurance Argument

The peer review team will have read the SMSU assurance argument submitted prior to their visit. This document has been developed over the past 15 months with the assistance and review of the campus community. In it, SMSU provides discussion and evidence to demonstrate we have met expectations articulated for each of the five review criteria. The following information is provided to assist the campus in preparing for the site visit. Included are suggested talking points, summarizing institutional strengths evident throughout the narrative, and a summary of the narrative provided in response to each of the five criteria.

Suggested Talking Points

The following six themes are evident throughout the assurance argument narrative and stand out as points of pride and emphasis for SMSU. Each receives focused discussion in various sections of the document, as noted.

- 1. Our actions and our aspirations align with our vision—we strive to be inclusive and student centered.**
 - See especially 1A.2, 1C.2-3, 3B.3, 4C, 5C (inclusive) and 3D (student support)
- 2. We serve the public good—we have a positive relationship with, and impact on, the community and region.**
 - See especially 1A.4, 1B.1, 1B.3, 1C.1
- 3. We work well together—we collaborate effectively to accomplish shared goals.**
 - See especially 5A, 5C.3

4. **We have an established culture of assessment—we value and implement effective practices to improve student learning.**
 - See especially 4B, 4C
5. **We are strategic and intentional in our planning and resource allocation—these areas are aligned in support of our mission.**
 - See especially 3D.4, 5B.1-2, 4, 5C
6. **We function productively within the Minnesota State system – we are supportive of, and strengthened by, this relationship.**
 - See especially 1A, 2A-2D, 5B.3

Narrative Summary

Criterion 1. Mission — The institution’s mission is clear and articulated publicly; it guides the institution’s operations.

1A The institution’s mission is articulated publicly and operationalized throughout the institution.

- SMSU’s mission, vision and values are clearly articulated publicly on the website and in recruitment and informational materials.
- The SMSU mission statement is displayed on the most prominent public entrances to campus and is a key page on the institutional website.

1B The institution’s mission demonstrates commitment to the public good.

- Attention to the needs of the southwest Minnesota region is at the heart of the SMSU mission.

1C 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.

- SMSU’s public impact is substantial, both through its economic impact and through partnerships and programming that promote the public good.
- SMSU engages with its external constituencies through these public partnerships, through extensive community service provided by members of the campus community, by hosting events for external groups, and via the many cultural and entertainment opportunities it provides, all of which are open to the public.
- The Center for Civic & Community Engagement plays a central role in preparing students for informed citizenship.
- SMSU strives to create a climate of respect, including inclusion and equitable treatment of all members of the campus community.

Criterion 2. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct — The institution acts with integrity; its conduct is ethical and responsible.

2A 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.

- SMSU acts ethically and responsibly and operates with integrity.
 - SMSU strives to maintain integrity in all its academic functions.
 - Operating within its own fiscal and administrative policies and Minnesota State board policies, it follows all federal and state laws, rules, and regulations pertaining to higher education institutions.
 - As a state-owned public institution, SMSU is subject to state statutes and policies in addition to system policies and procedures that govern financial operations.
- 2B** The institution presents itself clearly and completely to its students and to the public.
- SMSU works diligently to ensure that information is accessible, clear, and complete.
 - Channels used to disseminate this information include the university's website, marketing promotions, and electronic and print publications.
- 2C** 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.
- 2D** The institution is committed to academic freedom and freedom of expression in the pursuit of truth in teaching and learning.
- SMSU is committed to providing students and faculty with academic freedom and freedom of expression in the pursuit of truth in teaching and learning.
 - SMSU's faculty value their right of academic freedom and accept the inherent responsibilities as stated in their union's contract with Minnesota State.
- 2E** The institution's policies and procedures call for responsible acquisition, discovery and application of knowledge by its faculty, staff and students.
- The Institutional Review Board provides oversight to maintain professional standards, regulatory compliance, and ethical behavior and accountability in basic and applied research.
 - The McFarland Library provides spaces, resources, and services to support faculty, staff, and student research. Library faculty provide information literacy instruction sessions for all first-year students enrolled in LEP 101 and in upper-level courses at faculty request. Academic honesty and integrity are enforced through policies communicated to students as part of this instruction.

Criterion 3. Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources, and Support—The institution provides quality education, wherever and however its offerings are delivered.

- 3A** The rigor of the institution's academic offerings is appropriate to higher education.
- SMSU provides a current and rigorous high-quality education.
 - The Liberal Education Program (LEP) provides the foundation for general education at SMSU and the core intellectual inquiry areas for all undergraduate degrees.
 - LEP provides students with a foundational, general education across the fundamental domains of human knowledge.

3B 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.

- The curriculum approval processes at SMSU ensure currency and an appropriate level of student performance.
- The separation of curriculum committees by degree level aids in differentiating learner expectations.

3C The institution has the faculty and staff needed for effective, high-quality programs and student services.

- As required by contract, faculty are evaluated on a regular basis according to five criteria. Faculty describe their scholarly and creative work in their Professional Development Plans and Reports.
- Evidence of scholarship is further documented in departmental annual reports.

3D The institution provides support for student learning and resources for effective teaching.

- The SMSU Undergraduate Research Conference is a significant annual campus event that highlights the scholarship and creative work completed by SMSU students under the direction of faculty supervisors.
- SMSU offers a wide range of student support services aligned with its commitment to provide a student-centered education that equips graduates to meet society's needs.
- SMSU offers multiple opportunities for students to grow their intercultural awareness and experience human and cultural diversity so that they may become engaged citizens in their local and global communities.

Criterion 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.

4A The institution ensures the quality of its educational offerings.

- SMSU demonstrates accountability for the quality of its educational programs, learning environments, and support services.
- Courses and programs maintain college-level rigor and quality through processes and policies around curriculum design, learning outcomes, student support services, and highly qualified faculty.

4B The institution engages in ongoing assessment of student learning as part of its commitment to the educational outcomes of its students.

- SMSU participates in regular assessment and review of programs that follow established policies and procedures set by faculty and staff committees.
- Faculty and staff engage in ongoing assessment and professional development to fulfill the university's mission and meet campus-wide and programmatic learning outcomes.

- Assessment occurs at several levels with information from one level feeding another. The structure of the assessment collection process and the culture of assessment built at SMSU facilitate participation and input.

4C The institution pursues educational improvement through goals and strategies that improve retention, persistence and completion rates in its degree and certificate programs.

- Student Affairs supports students' needs holistically through the variety of programming offered by their offices. Evidence of their overall efforts can be found in annual reports.
- Offices involved with co-curricular programs and experiences conduct assessment to determine success of the program or activity and to inform them of necessary changes.
- SMSU has established goals for enrollment, persistence, and completion and uses data for continuous improvement.

Criterion 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.

5A Through its administrative structures and collaborative processes, the institution's leadership demonstrates that it is effective and enables the institution to fulfill its mission.

- The centrality of shared governance at SMSU is evident in the structures, practices, and expectations that guide planning and decision making.
- Data informs decisions made by the President's Cabinet as a collective and by members for their individual areas of responsibility.
- SMSU administration, faculty, staff, and students collaborate through shared governance structures to set academic policies, procedures and requirements.

5B The institution's resource base supports its educational offerings and its plans for maintaining and strengthening their quality in the future.

- Annual budgets are submitted to the system for approval by the Minnesota State Board of Trustees.
- Oversight and guidelines are provided by the system's vice chancellor of finance and his staff.
- Funding from the State of Minnesota is obtained in response to legislative budget requests presented to the legislature by the Board of Trustees.
- The university budget is created considering the needs of all instructional programs, student support, and administrative areas.
- Student needs are the priority.
- SMSU is united in working with our partners in the legislative and executive branches to increase revenue and is thinking in new ways about growing enrollments.

5C The institution engages in systematic and integrated planning and improvement.

- 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 Cabinet oversees implementation of the strategic plan through annual goal setting and ongoing monitoring of progress.
- The HLC/Strategic Planning Committee reviews plan implementation and provides input on annual goals.