

Contact: Diana Gonzalez

**NORTH CENTRAL ASSOCIATION HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION ACCREDITATION  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA**

**Action Requested:** Receive the accreditation report from the University of Iowa.

**Executive Summary:** The University of Iowa (1) engaged in a two-year self-study process that addressed the criteria for accreditation defined by the accrediting body; and (2) had an on-site visit by consultant-evaluators. The University was accredited for the maximum ten-year period allowed by the accrediting body without interim reports or visits required.

This accreditation report addresses the Board of Regents Strategic Plan objective (1.1) to “offer high-quality programs through ongoing program improvement for undergraduate, graduate, professional, and non-degree students and special school students” and priority (4.0) “to demonstrate public accountability and effective stewardship of resources.”

**Background:**

- ◇ **Description.** In the U. S., colleges voluntarily seek accreditation from nongovernmental bodies. There are two types of educational accreditation – institutional and specialized. Institutional accreditation is provided by regional and national associations of schools and colleges. An institutional accrediting agency evaluates an entire educational organization in terms of its mission and the agency’s standards or criteria and accredits the organization as a whole. Specialized accreditation, also called program accreditation, evaluates particular units, schools, or programs within an organization.
- ◇ **Accrediting Agency.** The institutional accrediting body is The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association. The HLC provides two programs for maintaining accredited status – the Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality (PEAQ) and the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP). PEAQ employs a five-step comprehensive evaluation process to determine continued accredited status. AQIP, which provides an alternative evaluation process for organizations already accredited by the Commission, is structured around quality improvement principles and processes and involves a structured set of goal-setting, networking, and accountability activities. The University of Iowa chose to participate in the PEAQ.
- ◇ **Review Process.** The self-study prepared by the University addressed the five major criteria for accreditation – mission and integrity; preparing for the future; student learning and effective teaching; acquisition, discovery, and application of knowledge; and engagement and service. The University’s self-study also encompassed a special emphasis review of undergraduate education with a focus on the processes and experiences of undergraduate education at the University – entry and transition; common academic experiences; education within the major; getting involved; cultivating student potential; and learning environments.
- ◇ **Purpose of Accreditation.** An institution that is accredited by an accrediting body that is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education is eligible to participate in Title IV programs and to offer accredited programs.

- ◇ On-Site Team Report. In April 2008, the visiting team determined that the University met all the criteria required for accreditation although there were specific core components that needed organizational attention.
  
- ◇ Sample Commendations Identified by the Visiting Team.
  - ☑ “New incentives, such as the University of Iowa Honors Program and newly restructured merit scholarships have helped the university to increase the average ACT composite score and grade-point average of entering students and to admit a record number of honors and minority students.”
  - ☑ “With the recent \$1.05 billion capital campaign, the University of Iowa has made commendable strides in fundraising since the last accreditation review. Even more significantly, the University has taken considerable care in linking fundraising efforts with strategic planning and key priorities.”
  - ☑ “The visiting team was impressed with the University of Iowa’s commitment to community engagement. Not only was 2004 declared as the ‘year of public engagement,’ but the university also instituted a host of initiatives and programs, including volunteer programs, health services, economic development and technology transfer, arts and cultural events, research centers, and educational testing services to enhance the institution’s promotion of the public good. The visiting team commends the institution for instituting mechanisms for tracking student and faculty engagement contributions.”
  - ☑ “A laudable number of pre-college programs and initiatives, such as Iowa Talent Project, and Center for Diversity and Enrichment’s Pipeline Program, assist the university in recruiting multicultural and other underrepresented groups of students.”
  - ☑ “The University of Iowa has historic accomplishments as an AAU institution with low tuition but top ranked academic programs and research patents that bring in about \$15 million annually. Its accomplishments and practices will almost certainly provide the needed foundation and impetus for the continued and ambitious redesign of the undergraduate experience for the benefit of university students.”
  - ☑ “The Health Sciences colleges as a group have exemplary outreach activities that are comprehensive and data driven.”
  
- ◇ Specified Core Components that Need Organizational Attention and Institutional Responses (italics).
  - ☑ **Criterion One – Mission and Integrity.**
    - “The mission statement of the university should be given further attention with the aim of sharpening the focus of the future direction of the university. The current mission statement reflects commitment to excellence and quality in addressing the constituents of the university but the importance of the undergraduate experience could be highlighted.”

- ➔ “Special concern was expressed about the cultural atmosphere for the African American male athletes, a problem that faces most major athletic programs, particularly those located outside major urban areas. They represent a significant proportion of the total African American population on the campus and are, perhaps, too visible in the community. Public attention is called to them whenever disturbances arise in the community where they are present.”
- ➔ “The institution has rightly identified as needing attention some disconnect between student expectations prior to coming to campus and the reality when they arrive. This disconnect is one of the areas the university is trying to remedy. Students were also concerned about the drinking culture and the consequent sexual assaults, harassing, and other unwanted attention that may flow from it.”
- ➔ *The team suggested several ways to strengthen efforts to improve undergraduate education and to address some specific concerns that might impede those efforts – sharpen the focus of the institution’s mission statement to highlight the importance of the undergraduate mission; attend to the climate for African-American male athletes; improve the diversity and availability of extracurricular activities; and address the ‘drinking culture’. The University shares the concerns about these matters and is attending to all of them, as well as other issues that affect the quality of the undergraduate students’ lives and experiences. Attention to the University’s mission with regard to undergraduate education will, for example, inform the University as it embarks on its next strategic plan.*

**Criterion Two – Preparing for the Future.**

- ➔ “As free or reduced tuition benefits are not available in Iowa, campus administration should exercise creativity in order to assure staff that their educational needs are recognized by the institution and that support will be provided either directly or indirectly.”
- ➔ *The University of Iowa offers a tuition assistance program to all staff and faculty with a regular appointment, 50% time or greater. Support is limited to tuition for one credit course (up to four semester hours) per semester. Although there is a cap on available tuition assistance funds, all requests during FY 2008 were honored which is typical for any given year. In FY 2008, 292 awards were made (\$235,768); 273 awards were accepted (\$220,477). A similar program exists for the UIHC employees at the University.*

**Criterion Three – Student Learning and Effective Teaching.**

- ➔ “The university will need to address the issues of the mechanism for the evaluation and use of the information that will emerge from the assessment process. The plan is to embed learning outcomes assessment in the ongoing process of program review. Such reviews occur on a seven-year cycle, and that interval is too long for effective use and monitoring. Recognizing the importance of the role of the individual departments in the development of learning outcomes activities, but also the need for oversight by the colleges and the university, some mechanism for a more frequent routine interaction between and among these levels of administration needs to be determined soon. To accomplish the fundamental purposes of assessment of the degree to which

learning outcomes are being achieved by students, it is necessary to collect and interpret results regularly at the program level and to act upon the results by implementing needed changes in the curricula and their implementation.”

- “The university has a large library collection, but its leadership and staff need additional space and indicate that there remain opportunities for increased interaction with IT staff such as a link to the course management system.”
- *The process of identifying learning outcomes, assessing achievement of those outcomes, and using assessment data for improvement are among the University’s highest priorities for undergraduate education. The University’s efforts within the HLC Assessment Academy will focus on identifying and assessing outcomes across curricula and students’ experiences. In addition, in the 2008-09 academic year, the University began to use the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) to measure students’ learning in General Education courses.*

*The University is constructing a storage facility that will provide much-needed space for teaching and learning in the libraries.*

*Information Technology services and the Library have a long-standing and productive working relationship. The two units currently collaborate in many areas including InfoHawk, the on-line catalog, computer labs, and the underlying technology infrastructure needed to provide services to library patrons. Nonetheless, there are always opportunities for further collaboration and the Library and ITS staff are both committed to pursuing those opportunities whenever they benefit the University.*

**Criterion Four – Acquisition, Discovery, and Application of Knowledge.**

- “The review team noted that faculty and administrators had difficulty defining the university academic experience in a distinct way. One reason may be that there exists little systemic, university-wide faculty orientation or university-wide faculty development that aims to acculturate faculty to the research or teaching mission of the university. Some concerns were expressed that faculty who are research active are responsible for a similar teaching and service load as research-inactive faculty. Moreover, concerns were expressed that faculty who are research active are able to advise doctoral students and direct dissertations. The review team recommends that the university devote serious attention to these issues to ensure greater equity in faculty workload and quality doctoral advisement and work.”
- “Research-active faculty members are challenged by the needs for space, technological resources, and administrative support. The absence of centralized mechanisms for data collection and other support services compels the faculty to perform less productive tasks, often duplicating the efforts of other departments and decreasing productivity for the individual and the institution.”
- “The university would be well served by making greater efforts to regularly track the long-term progress and success of its graduate and undergraduate alumni. Although some colleges, such as the College of Engineering, are undertaking this task, a university-wide effort would help the university better understand its own strengths and weaknesses and assist in the processes of institutional branding, fundraising, resource allocation, and assessment of learning.”

- *Creating and sustaining a shared sense of distinctiveness, particularly with regard to undergraduate academic experiences, are ongoing challenges for any large, public research university. Achieving its mission requires that the University be complex; the University's size requires some degree of decentralization. At the same time, the University recognizes the importance of a clear and cohesive focus for educational effectiveness. This is another key task for the strategic planning process.*

*Teaching responsibilities of research active and research inactive faculty have been raised by collegiate deans and plans to address them are in process. Among the issues under discussion is more effective use of the processes for identifying and reviewing post-tenure effort allocation.*

*The Office of the Vice President for Research recently formalized a grant and contract development network where staff from all colleges and key departments meet regularly to provide administrative assistance in identification of funding sources and centralized assistance in grant and contract submission. This group of staff has expanded in recent months and provided much more proactive staff support for faculty seeking extramural funding.*

*The University expects to launch an exit survey for all graduating seniors. This will not only provide important information about students' experiences but can help move the University in the direction of ongoing collection of data from current students and graduates.*

**Criterion Five – Engagement and Service.**

- *“The university is providing engagement through many activities, programs, and ways of engaging constituencies. These initiatives typically extend from individual units through a decentralized process and leaders are not always aware of what other units are doing. Some greater attention to communication among all of those engaging similar audiences could foster synergies and minimize risks of duplicative activities in the future. Such coordination could also support the monitoring of the alignment between outreach and the needs/capacities of constituencies served and provide a basis for assessing the kind and amount of resources involved.”*
- *Fostering effective communication across units on campus is an ongoing challenge; ensuring effective communication between on- and off-campus entities is even more difficult. The University is aware, however, of the need to address this concern and continues to seek ways to do so.*

- ◇ Accreditation Status. In October 2008, the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association awarded continued accreditation to the University of Iowa for the maximum period of ten years without required interim reports or visits.