

Contact: Diana Gonzalez

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

Action Requested: Receive the Higher Learning Commission accreditation report at the University of Northern Iowa.

Executive Summary: The University of Northern Iowa (1) engaged in a two-year self-study process that addressed the criteria for accreditation defined by the accrediting body; (2) participated in the Foundations for Excellence for the First Year of College project; and (3) had an on-site visit by peer reviewers. 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 priority to provide “educational excellence and impact.”

Background:

- ◇ **Description.** In the United States, 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 recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. 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 Northern Iowa chose to participate in the PEAQ for its reaccreditation process.
- ◇ **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. UNI also chose to participate in a customized self-study process which included participation in the Foundations of Excellence (FOE) program created by the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education. This program supports the university’s desire to focus attention on evaluating and improving students’ first-year experience and the transfer student experience.
- ◇ **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, such as social work and business.

- ◇ On-Site Team Report. In November 2010, the visiting team determined that the University met all the criteria required for accreditation although specific core components were identified that needed organizational attention or Commission follow-up.

- ◇ Sample Commendations Identified by the Visiting Team.
 - ☑ **Criterion One – Mission and Integrity.**
 - ⊗ “There is strong evidence that UNI operates to protect the integrity of the institution.”

 - ☑ **Criterion Two – Preparing for the Future.**
 - ⊗ “The marketing campaign, which is led by a campus wide Enrollment Council that includes the President, is one tangible example of University planning processes that are realistic, future-focused, and cognizant of demographic trends.

 - ⊗ Facilities planning process decisions are guided by a comprehensive campus master plan that is aligned with the University’s strategic goals. Through careful and thoughtful planning, the University has managed to substantially reduce its deferred maintenance even in a challenging budget environment and has recently renovated virtually all of the buildings in the academic core of the campus.”

 - ☑ **Criterion Three – Student Learning and Effective Teaching.**
 - ⊗ “It was apparent that UNI is committed, especially, to undergraduate education. Faculty at UNI are well-prepared in their disciplines and demonstrated genuine commitment to student success.

 - ⊗ The University, based upon retention and graduation rates alone, appears to be doing an effective job cultivating an intellectually enriching and engaging environment.”

 - ☑ **Criterion Four – Acquisition, Discovery, and Application of Knowledge.**
 - ⊗ “The University continues to invest scarce resources in faculty scholarship. The University is building an infrastructure to support scholarship to encourage and support faculty and staff and as an opportunity for students.”

 - ☑ **Criterion Five – Engagement and Service.**
 - ⊗ “From environmental scans and community connections have emerged programs and services spanning six areas – Pre-K-12 education; business and economic development; human services; health; environment; and quality of life. The number of specific projects undertaken in these categories is impressive.”

- ◇ Specified Core Components that Need Organizational Attention.
 - ☑ **Criterion One – Mission and Integrity.**
 - ⊗ “While the University has been consistent in developing a campus mission statement in each of its strategic planning cycles, it has been less consistent in how it makes public its mission statements. At the time of the HLC visit, there was no evidence of a mission statement on the UNI webpage.

- ⊗ Gathering evidence about actual progress in achieving greater diversity is a challenge on UNI's website."

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

- ⊗ "While the program evaluation process, coordinated by the Committee on Academic Program Review, is comprehensive and systematic, the University's assessment efforts are loosely coordinated and not adequately supported. Existing assessment data clearly demonstrate institutional effectiveness, but in many other areas data are not systematically collected, analyzed, or used to inform continuous improvement efforts. In part, this is due to inadequate staffing and budgetary support for institutional assessment efforts."

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

- ⊗ "In both open faculty forums, the difficulty in staffing Liberal Arts Core (LAC) courses with full-time faculty given the need to staff upper division and/or graduate courses was described.
- ⊗ The team could not find a clearly articulated set of goals or a timeline to increase the breadth and depth of the use of the course management system or other technology resources (such as ePortfolios) to improve student learning."

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

- ⊗ "A major component of faculty development, the services provided by the Center of the Enhancement of Teaching, has been denied faculty for most of the last decade, due to budget cuts.
- ⊗ The connection between a more systematic construction and use of student learning outcomes and outcomes assessment on the one hand and action steps to improve learning on the other will become more transparent as a result of the university's enrollment in the Assessment Academy."

☑ **Criterion Five – Engagement and Service.**

- ⊗ "The university finds many challenges in the area of engagement and service, from the assessment of needs and program impact, to the internal coordination of outreach initiatives to the provision of more service-learning opportunities to students and faculty. These challenges are unquestionably valid and reasonable ones for the institution to have raised. We thus urge that they be taken seriously and addressed in the foreseeable future."

◇ Specified Core Components that Require Commission Follow-Up.

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

- ⊗ "The University has developed a process for collecting assessment plans and reports from all academic units, which includes an articulation of expected student learning outcomes for each area. Although this effort has provided the impetus to begin systematically measuring student learning outcomes, the depth of such plans and reports are inconsistent across the various disciplines. The structure appears to be in place, however, to build upon the current efforts to facilitate an even greater utilization of quality improvement assessment strategies to improve student learning across the institution. This is particularly true given UNI's commitment to the HLC Assessment Academy, which will provide ample opportunity for growth in this area."

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

- ⊗ “The Liberal Arts Core is currently assessed using annual cross-sectional administrations of MAPP to freshmen and seniors, annual administrations of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and the assessment of one LAC category each year that employs data from the prior six years. The Review Team noted some apprehension about the adequacy of these assessments to ensure consistency of core guidelines through time and across pedagogies and to provide departments whose courses were represented in the core and faculty teaching sections of those courses timely information about the success of the core in meeting its objectives. The University’s decision to join the Assessment Academy should embed the requirements of assessment more firmly in the culture of the campus and facilitate its consistent use through time and across pedagogies. It should also assist the integration of the Foundations of Excellence goals with the goals of the LAC.
- ⊗ Graduate programs have student learning outcomes and student outcome assessment measures. However, the former are not uniformly expressed in behavioral terms, and the latter are often expressed as minimum course grades and/or successful completion and defense of a thesis. In addition, little information is provided on the collection of data, its analysis, conclusions drawn, or actions taken as a consequence. Even in small graduate programs, where students and their progress are well-known to faculty, assessment can benefit from regular, documented discussions among faculty about student success/difficulties that become the basis for curricular or pedagogical changes. The university’s decision to become a member of the Assessment Academy will provide opportunities for graduate program assessment to be recast in more systematically informative ways.”

◇ Foundations of Excellence Initiative Recognition of Significant Accomplishments, Progress, and/or Practices.

Academic Assessment Office.

- ⊗ “The team recognizes the director for developing basic structures and processes that can be built upon in the future. The director has served as an excellent resource for academic units, both through individual consultations and the development of a substantial assessment resource library.”

Administrative Fellowship Program in the Provost’s Office.

- ⊗ “The University should be commended for employing a robust and effective fellowship program that allows faculty members the opportunity to participate in various projects through the provost’s office. This appears to be an excellent mechanism for enabling more faculty members to appreciate more fully the complexity of University operations, while engaging individuals with specific talents and skills in completing initiatives.”

Foundations of Excellence Participants.

- ⊗ “The energy, talent, and commitment of the Foundations of Excellence participants cannot be overemphasized. What they are in the process of achieving, bringing the best efforts of academic and student affairs together to transform elements of the University of Northern Iowa is an inspiration. Intentional recognition of their efforts, ongoing expansion of the involvement within the wider campus community, and visible support for their efforts through the formal budget process will all be key to their continued commitment and success.”

Sponsored Programs Office.

- ⊗ “The Sponsored Programs Office is a relatively new addition to the campus, but it has made a substantial impact in a short period of time. Its efforts to stimulate, support and celebrate campus funding achievements are commendable, as is the transparent connection between the Office’s strategic plan and the University strategic plan, for which the office holds itself accountable. Of particular note is the Connexus program which matches faculty, in groups of four, to funding opportunities.”

Strategic Planning Task Force.

- ⊗ “The team wishes to underscore the importance and effectiveness of the work, both process and product, of the Strategic Planning Task Force. The approach used and strategies employed during the life of this task force will be effective models for the University in the future.”

◇ Examples of Advice From the Visiting Team Regarding the Foundations of Excellence (FOE) Initiative.

- “The commitment and ‘can-do’ ethos of those working on the first year needs to be rewarded, protected, and nurtured by focusing on the essential gains that can be realistically made. The broad range and number of goals and recommendations embodied in the special focus portion of the self study and the First-Year Council’s progress report suggest that momentum could be slowed and progress foundered unless a stringent examination of goals can result in pairing them down to an essential few.
- The faculty members involved in this process appear to be predominately newly tenured associate professors with great energy and talent. This is a group of faculty at risk of becoming ‘the usual suspects’ who give of their time, intellect, and energy. They could be subject to burnout if they are not reinforced with other, more senior colleagues.
- Currently, the twin initiatives of improving the experiences of first-year students and the revision of the Liberal Arts Core (LAC) have lines of inter-connection but are advancing on roughly parallel lines. The point at which these initiatives mature and produce recommendations will be when combining energies, momentum, and goals could help ensure the sustainability of both. Timing the work of these initiatives such that their recommendations are considered simultaneously may be advantageous.

- ☑ Strong administrative and faculty leadership will be needed if the dichotomy of curricular versus co-curricular content in first-year or LAC courses is to be addressed. Explicit conversations about faculty roles and responsibilities and expectations for promotion and tenure will need to occur; investments will have to be made in professional development for faculty members.
 - ☑ The branding of UNI as a place where undergraduates receive personal attention and experience quality teaching creates a very distinct opportunity to align FOE goals with institutional goals, provided data can be offered to quantify the impact of FOE initiatives and can be generated.
 - ☑ Student affairs and academic affairs may want to explore possibilities for themed housing, clustered course enrollments, or other actions to create informal learning community experiences for students.
 - ☑ Considering the experience and success of transfer students as seriously as it considers first-time-in-college success is vital to UNI. Other institutions that emphasize the first year alleviate the problem of transfer students bypassing first-year experiences by creating 'transfer study only' sections of a required general education course not typically transferred in from other schools.
 - ☑ Successful sophomore-level practices could greatly assist in improving retention rates and if successful would be a great contribution to the larger academic community."
- ◇ Accreditation Status. In April 2011, the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association awarded continued accreditation to the University of Northern Iowa for the maximum period of ten years without required interim reports or visits.
- "The University was recently accepted into the HLC Assessment Academy. Were that not the case, the team would recommend a focused visit on the development of a coherent general education program, articulation of measurable student learning outcomes for that program, and the implementation of effective assessment strategies with evidence of their use for ongoing curricular improvement. However, with UNI's commitment to complete the four-year Assessment Academy program focusing on precisely these areas and its ongoing work on the Foundations of Excellence initiative, the University will have ample, proactive opportunities to address these challenges."