

REPORT OF THE WASC VISITING TEAM  
EDUCATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS REVIEW

SONOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

October 7-9, 2009

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
Reaffirmation of Accreditation

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The evaluation team in conducting its review was able to evaluate the institution under the WASC Commission Standards and Core Commitments and therefore submits this Report to the Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges for action and to the institution for consideration.

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## **SECTION I. OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT**

### ***A PREFACE CONCERNING FISCAL DISTRESS***

This report of the WASC visiting team on the educational effectiveness of Sonoma State University reflects documentary analysis and campus consultation that must be seen as coinciding with an unprecedented reduction in support equivalent to a cumulative reduction of \$20 million. The results of this reduction include reduced access to the University, efforts to reduce personnel costs, a compromised commitment to planning and strategic operation, and a sharp decline in faculty morale.

The experience of SSU of course reflects statewide efforts to address a \$26.3 billion budget shortfall resulting from reduced general fund support to the CSU system. Even with some assistance provided by Federal stimulus funds and other sources, the CSU system began the academic year facing a \$564 million gap. By way of response, the CSU system mandated furlough days for nearly all campus employees, the effect of which is a savings of \$275 million for the system but an average reduction of nearly 10 percent in individual compensation. In addition, CSU increased the student fee by 30 percent and imposed enrollment reductions—both steps at sharp variance with a system priority on access.

To further address the shortfall, institutions have restricted professional travel, imposed limitations on hiring, suspended all but the most essential purchases of equipment, and reduced investments in infrastructure. As the visiting team conducted its visit to SSU, it became apparent through discussions with campus administrative leadership that the search for funding reduction targets would have to continue.

As though the current funding crisis were not serious enough, its impact on SSU is exacerbated by a long history of the university's own particular budgetary challenges within the CSU system. Early in the University's history, a system funding formula favoring institutions

focused on science and technology placed institutions such as SSU at a decided disadvantage. When this system was superseded in the 1990s, SSU found its historical disadvantage preserved in a new system that protected the base levels attained through the former one. According to university administrators, this disadvantage may amount to as much as \$10 million.

For a review of educational effectiveness, an environment of fiscal distress has several implications. Priorities developed in more favorable circumstances may be suspended or reexamined. Planning must become more agile, more responsive to challenges not yet fully apparent. Differing opinions as to competing priorities become more urgent. Conventional tensions between constituencies harden into suspicion. And confidence in the capacity of the institution to maintain its effectiveness can suffer.

An example of how funding issues may intensify and aggravate what might otherwise be rational differences of perspective appears in the frequently invoked investment by the University in the Green Music Center. By one standard, this compelling project will enable the University to fulfill more fully both its curricular and its community outreach commitments through a world-class facility. Many of the administrators and some of the faculty with which the team met expressed this view, and a visit by the team to the construction site confirmed the potential of the project for enhancing the University's visibility and outreach. By another perspective, one voiced assertively in the team's open meeting with the faculty, the project has been a drain on resources, both public and private, that would have been invested more appropriately in the University's primary instructional mission. The EER Team believes that the wisdom of this project may or may not be confirmed over time, but it observes that in a more prosperous time, the debate would not be as divisive as it has proved to be.

A university cannot invoke a funding crisis as an excuse for inadequate planning, for ineffective management, for a lack of commitment to improvement, or for a sustained decline in

collegiality. To its credit, SSU has not done so. Repeatedly in the course of its analysis of materials and its conversations with SSU personnel, the EER Team found the SSU EER Report to represent the work of a university determined to maintain its identity, to pursue important priorities, and to make itself more effective despite the current fiscal environment. Nor should a visiting team exempt an institution in the throes of such a crisis from the obligations of educational effectiveness made explicit in long acknowledged expectations. Nor has this team offered such a concession. But the visiting team cannot and should not disregard the effects of a fiscal environment that can magnify issues of otherwise moderate importance, provoke ill-founded assertions of malfeasance, and obscure what are after all commendable achievements. Hence, the report that follows attempts to maintain an important balance by offering a candid, detailed, and objective assessment that both acknowledges the challenges faced by the University during a period of extraordinary stress and rests firmly on a careful review of documentation and an assiduous pursuit of confirmation “on the ground.”

#### **IA. Description of the University and Visit**

Sonoma State University, founded in 1960, is a distinctive member of the California State University System because of its size, its scope, and the mission it asserts. Seeking to balance being both a comprehensive university and a public liberal arts college, SSU is the only California member of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC). Consistent with its efforts to align itself with liberal arts colleges and thus to strengthen its undergraduate mission, currently 35% of its more than 8000 students live on campus, making SSU one of the most residential universities in the system. SSU emphasizes that faculty and staff provide close mentoring relationships for students and provide an education that fosters ethical exploration, civic engagement, social responsibility, and global awareness combined with a solid foundation

in an academic discipline. The University is comprised of five academic schools: Arts and Humanities, Business and Economics, Education, Social Sciences, and Science and Technology. Degrees are offered in 41 majors at the bachelor's level and 14 at the master's level with a joint doctorate in educational leadership offered with the University of California, Davis. SSU offers one of the few Wine Business programs in the country along with nine credential programs and eight undergraduate and graduate certificate programs.

Issues regarding mission, institutional priorities, educational effectiveness, and academic and institutional planning have been raised during every accreditation visit over this past decade. These visits included a comprehensive visit in February 1999 and a Special Visit in March 2004. This Special Visit focused particularly on issues of alignment of institutional priorities with mission, the assessment of educational effectiveness, improvement of the climate for diversity, and institutional commitments to sustainability. That report commended the faculty's commitment to develop a new general education program with clear student learning objectives. Assessment of these objectives would in turn contribute to SSU's attempt to identify "The Marks of the SSU Student Experience," an activity that the University continues to pursue. The Commission also encouraged the institution to develop a conceptual framework for planning and decision-making with the goal of supporting underrepresented students.

When the five member Capacity and Preparatory Team (all of whom have returned as part of the EER Review with one additional member) came to campus in March 2008, their focus continued along these same lines of inquiry. In its letter of June 25, 2008, the Commission recommended that by the time of its EER visit, the University should: 1) address systematically the elements of concern around SSU's sense of community; 2) reach consensus on the University mission to inform campus planning; 3) combine planning efforts into a single process; 4) assure that educational outcomes drive assessment for course and program improvement; 5) reach

agreement on general education reform in light of clarification of mission and planning; and 6) extend its diversity efforts.

The EER Team sought to verify that SSU has established indicators for institutional performance, that the University demonstrates educational effectiveness through vigorous program review (for academic, co-curricular and non-academic programs), and that the University uses data and evidence including direct assessment of student work to inform curricular improvement, budgeting and planning.

### **IB. The Institution's Educational Effectiveness Review Report: Alignment with the Proposal and Quality and Rigor of the Review and Report**

In its institutional proposal (p. 7), SSU states: "SSU's primary institutional goal for the re-accreditation process is to become an intentional, reflective and evidence-based learning organization." Specifically, the stated outcomes were: a) to develop and utilize indicators of performance; b) to define the signature of an SSU education, including the roles of general education and the major; c) to conduct a comprehensive system of program review; d) and to use assessment data and evidence for reflection and improvement. The CPR Report included reflective essays on the four WASC Standards of Accreditation. The EER Report is framed, as its institutional proposal indicated, around the major topic of "Educating the Whole Student." But because both the Commission and the CPR Visiting Team identified as central the need for SSU to improve its multiple planning efforts, SSU has responded appropriately including in its EER Report the following five essays:

1. SSU's Planning Efforts
2. The Distinctive Qualities of an SSU Education

### 3. Curriculum and the Roles of General Education and the Major

- General Education
- Academic Program Review
- Diversity

Like the CPR Report, the EER Report was written by Faculty Associates and shared with the community before submission. We believe that the well-written report accurately portrays the issues facing the University. Good intentions abound, and structures, committees, and plans are in place. This EER Report concerns itself with whether those structures, intentions, and plans are being translated into actions likely to lead to the desired outcomes. Has the University, within an organizational structure that fosters analysis, quality improvement and reflection, integrated the use of data and evidence to inform planning, decision-making, and resource allocation with the ultimate goal of improving student learning?

#### **IC. Response to Issues Raised in the Capacity and Preparatory Review**

Responses to issues from the CPR Report are summarized here, but since these coincide with SSU's EER themes, Section II of this report provides additional analysis.

1. *Address systematically the elements articulated in recent expressions of concern so that it can strengthen the sense of community and enable the accomplishment of other critical aspirations.*

The EER report attests to a stronger sense of community and collegiality joining faculty and administration. Specifically, the report cites the President's letter to the Chair of the Academic Senate dated August 16, 2008, as evidence of an administrative effort to improve relations with the University community. In that letter the President invites the Senate to join in a commitment to "transparency and civility in faculty-administration relations." He states: "The

entire Cabinet and I are certainly committed to these goals, and committed to working constructively with the Senate and the entire campus community to move our university forward.” Furthermore, there are a number of explicit commitments. Investment in curriculum will take priority over physical and administrative infrastructure, there will be more frequent meetings with various campus constituents and committees, strategic planning will become more inclusive, and the administration will offer more transparency in budgeting and in reporting the financial implications of the still unfinished Green Music Center. His letter is also clear on matters of his own authority regarding fiscal and budgetary matters. The President also addresses the need to expand efforts in the area of diversity by referring to the implementation of the President’s Diversity Council.

In both its open meetings with faculty and its more focused meetings with governance leadership and staff leadership, the team found enthusiasm and appreciation for the town hall meetings and various retreats that had been held on campus in order to further communication. The success of the Joint Council on Academic Planning also represents evidence that attests to the value of collaboration. The EER Team found as a result of all these efforts a reduction—but by no means an elimination—of tension between faculty and administration. Serious concerns continue to be expressed with regard to the alignment between mission and budget, the priority given to the completion of the Green Music Center, and the effects on diversity of funds reduction strategies that target part-time faculty in particular.

***2. Reach consensus on clear definition of University’s complex mission so that planning efforts are informed by this understanding.***

The EER Team believes that the University has made considerable progress in clarifying the relationship between its mission as a comprehensive university and its distinctive mission as a public liberal arts university. The white paper by the Provost (following a retreat in the summer

of 2008) is cited throughout the report as addressing this concern. Because implementation of the strategic plan is in its initial stages, how the articulation of the complex mission will infuse the planning processes remains to be seen. Nonetheless, the support of the liberal arts mission was evident throughout the University, and SSU students enjoy a breadth of educational options while experiencing the sense of community and engagement characteristic of a smaller liberal arts college. Paradoxically, however, evidence cited by members of the University's planning group to demonstrate the effectiveness of the planning process, namely, the diversion of funding from arts and sciences disciplines to fund the accreditation efforts of the School of Business, appears to add to, not reduce, the ambiguity as to mission.

***3. Yoke disparate planning efforts in to a single, respected process.***

The University has made considerable progress in the development and articulation of pragmatic planning documents. The University Strategic Plan (USP), still a draft at the time of the CPR visit, is now fully adopted through an extensive consultative process. It is now supposed to provide a cohesive framework for divisional and unit plans.

An important indicator of the congruence among planning efforts may be found in the fruition of an observation in the CPR Team Report that Academic Affairs planning efforts had "been pursued in parallel tracks." The Provost's Joint Council on Academic Planning (JCAP) "yoked" the various academic plans/planning groups and emerged with a unified Academic Affairs Strategic Plan, approved and implemented in May 2009. This effort is seen uniformly as a sign of progress in both the content of the plan itself and also in the positive outcomes associated with the collegial efforts towards its construction. However, additional plans (Diversity Plan, Enrollment Management Plan, Academic Technology Plan) are now underway and need to be coordinated, and integrated in the institutional planning effort.

In sum, while there are “plans,” there is not yet *a* plan, with the result that some members of the University community express concerns that plans may compete with one another.

***4. Assure that educational outcomes directly drive appropriate assessments that yield information used in course and programmatic improvement.***

While there has been significant effort made to bring departments/programs to the competent level in terms of their assessment plans, the SSU EER Report states that as of 2007-2008 three academic units were evaluated to be at the beginning level, 18 were ranked at the developing level, and 18 were ranked as competent. In the CPR Report (CPR, p. 35) the Team gives the following recommendation:

*First, the University should endeavor to assure that educational outcomes, evident in all course syllabi, drive directly appropriate assessments that yield information useful in course and programmatic strengthening.*

While a system of program review is in place, and a serious effort has been undertaken to review nearly all academic programs, reviews for departments not in the competent stage cannot fully attest to educational effectiveness. In the fact of considerable enthusiasm among many for assessment, and an appreciation for what can be learned by engagement, some faculty members express “assessment fatigue,” but a clear priority for the University must be to sustain its commitment and the energy required for its continued pursuit.

***5. In the context of a clear mission and coherent planning, reach agreement on the long-proposed general education reform with timeline and progress.***

This and earlier teams have commended the University for undertaking a long overdue review of the General Education Program. The EER Team believes that the University as a whole understands and supports the values of General Education as a critical component in assuring the liberal education of all SSU students. The First Year Experience (FYE) course is an

exemplary addition to the SSU curriculum. But the bottom line is that a decade of reform efforts has led to relatively modest improvements.

***6. Extend diversity efforts through pragmatic strategies to reach its goals.***

Leadership on this issue has come from faculty governance through the Faculty Senate. In the President's letter of August 2008, the President directly addresses their concern surrounding diversity by establishing a President's Diversity Council. However, other groups, including the Ad Hoc Diversity Committee (with overlap on the President's Diversity Council) and the California Faculty Association continue to pursue this work as well. We also note that program review includes a section where departments/units have to address their progress in furthering diversity and that GE Objective 2 stresses that students "understand and appreciate human diversity and multicultural perspectives." Significantly, increasing student, staff and faculty diversity is part of the Strategic and Academic Affairs Strategic Planning Effort as well as being a primary concern of the administration and several administrative offices.

**SECTION II. EVALUATION OF EDUCATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS UNDER THE STANDARDS**

**IIA. Evaluation of the Institution's Educational Effectiveness Inquiry**

**THEME 1: SSU's PLANNING EFFORTS**

WASC has regularly cited concerns about the ability and inclination of the University to engage in a serious, integrated, coherent, and sustained planning effort. (CFRs 4.1, 4.3) The CPR Team arrived on campus just after a draft of the University Strategic Plan (from the University Planning Steering Committee in March of 2008) had been completed but not yet shared with the University. Therefore the CPR report "...could not have indicated the extent to

which the plan would be embraced by campus stakeholders, how its objectives might be accomplished, and whether the implementation of the plan would be monitored according to real benchmarks.”

Furthermore, the CPR Team noted that broad-based planning had taken place along “parallel” tracks within the administration, the Senate, and Academic Affairs. In addition to the University Strategic Plan, the Academic Planning Committee (APC) had revised a Long Range Academic Plan (LRAP, revisions adopted 2/5/2004) from a previous version from a decade before. A widespread interest in and commitment to strategic planning on the SSU campus was clear. Less clear was how this commitment would support well-coordinated strategic action. (CFR 4.3)

The CPR Review Team’s concerns were made clear in its report: “all of these planning efforts must work in close correspondence with the faculty governance system (CFR 3.11) to insure that the faculty exercises ‘effective academic leadership and acts consistently to ensure both academic quality and the appropriate maintenance of the institution’s educational purposes and character.’” Moreover, the CPR Team called for a clearer demonstration in the Educational Effectiveness Review of continuity, cooperation, and visibility in the planning process. Commending the proposed working agreement between the Academic Planning Committee and the Academic Affairs Council as an unprecedented opportunity for the resolution of tensions between governance and administrative approaches to planning, the CPR Team indicated that it would seek through the Educational Effectiveness Review clear evidence that this agreement had prospered and had proved productive. These sentiments were echoed by the strong recommendations from the Commission: “By the time of Educational Effectiveness Review (EER) Visit, the University should yoke disparate planning efforts into a single, respected process.” (CFR 4.1)

Recognizing the need for increased communication and input from the faculty, staff, and students, the University Strategic Planning Committee (USPC) collected comments on the University Strategic Plan. Then the USPC reconvened, incorporated suggestions from the campus, and forwarded an amended draft to the Academic Senate for approval. The plan was officially adopted in the spring 2009.

The University plan identifies nine strategic areas (academic programs, community engagement, diversity, enrollment management, external support, faculty and staff, infrastructure, quality of student experience, and sustainability) as priorities for the University. It includes clearly stated goals and objectives and provides criteria by which accomplishment will be measured. In sum, the plan appears to set forth an ambitious agenda for the continued development of the campus consistent with an emerging sense of identity and a growing understanding of shared values.

Given the importance of a broad-based and enthusiastic launch, the University plan should embody the strategic focus of the institution and command virtually exclusive attention. In large part, that appears to be the case. But the EER Team again finds itself puzzled by the prominence of ancillary planning efforts, perhaps important in their own right but at least potentially a source of distraction.

For instance, recognizing that planning on the academic side needed to be combined and streamlined, the Provost chaired the Joint Council on Academic Planning (JCAP), whose membership included: APC, Academic Affairs Council, Academic Senate Chair, and the President of the Associated Students. The work of the JCAP (which examined previous planning efforts of all kinds for alignment) resulted in the Academic Affairs Strategic Plan which was approved by the Senate and implemented in May 2009. This plan too identifies seven strategic areas (excellence, collaboration, diversity, sustainability, and shared governance) as well as goals

and initiatives for each. While these strategic areas and goals appear to be in alignment with the University Strategic Plan, the Team continues to wonder why these goals were not integrated into the University Strategic Plan document itself so that one over-arching document might serve as a guide for the University's efforts (CFR 3.8). In a future likely to be impacted by continued fiscal and budgetary challenges, wouldn't such a single and unified effort better serve SSU? However, the EER Team acknowledges the historical reasons and challenges that may have made the present approach appear more feasible.

In addition to these plans, the EER Team observes also the more recent commitment to "brainstorming and gathering information to produce a Diversity Strategic Plan." Similarly, as the Academic Affairs Technology Advisory Committee and the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management develop their own strategic plans in order to accomplish the initiatives of the University Strategic Plan and the Academic Affairs Strategic Plan as related to their sectors, the risk of confusion may increase. (CFR 3.8)

Multiple plans do not by themselves indicate a culture of intentionality. To the contrary, a proliferation of planning efforts and plans can complicate the effort to move the institution forward in a systematic and coherent way. Hence, despite acknowledging important efforts, the Team continues to question whether the culture of the University has now shifted to one of institutional planning, or whether these documents represent "static" reminders of an effort geared towards accreditation rather than the achievement of tangible results. Only time will tell. The University realizes fully that next steps must include a serious prioritization process including direct statements of intended outcomes and criteria for accomplishment. (CFRs 4.2, 4.3, 4.4)

As the CPR Team noted in their Report, "Discussion around the strategic planning effort and wide-based campus communication on its progress can serve to unify the faculty, staff,

and students to create excitement around its goals and its accomplishments.” This statement remains as important now as it was eighteen months ago, especially within the current financial environment.

## **THEME 2: THE DISTINCTIVE QUALITIES OF AN SSU EDUCATION**

SSU’s Institutional Proposal identified “the distinctive qualities of a SSU education” as one of the themes for its WASC review. This choice grew out of developing discussions of the “mark” of a SSU student sparked by work of the AAC&U, including the LEAP initiative and the publication, *Taking Responsibility for the Quality of the Baccalaureate*. The University’s CPR Report was organized by standards rather than themes; explicit mention of inquiry into the distinctiveness of the SSU educational experience was made at the conclusion of the CPR essay as one of the goals of the accreditation process: “Define the signature of an SSU education, including the roles of GE and the major, by engaging the campus community in conversation....” In several places in the CPR Report, however, there is reference to the institution’s long-standing commitment to creating and developing itself as a “premier regional university emphasizing liberal arts and sciences.” (CPR, p. 12) During the CPR visit, the Team engaged various constituencies in discussions of SSU’s “dual identity” as a medium-sized comprehensive university and a public liberal arts institution as demonstrated by its membership in COPLAC. The CPR Team came to believe that a clear, collaboratively developed articulation of this complex identity could help SSU frame a “unified, coherent self-definition that reflects the full extent and diversity of its aspirations.” The WASC Commission letter of June 25, 2008 also noted that SSU should “reach consensus on a clear definition of the University’s complex mission so that planning efforts are informed by this understanding.” (CFRs 1.1, 1.6)

In response, a retreat was held in summer 2008 in which the Provost engaged the Academic Affairs Council and the Academic Planning Committee in a discussion of the institution's dual mission. The resulting document, "A Liberal Arts and Sciences-Based Comprehensive University," asserted that SSU is successfully achieving the desired outcomes of a liberal arts and sciences education within the scope of disciplines and professional programs consonant with a comprehensive university as defined by the Carnegie Corporation. The SSU EER Report points to documents such as the University's mission statement, strategic plans, and the "Mission, Goals, and Objectives of General Education" as central to an articulation of the distinctive qualities of the SSU education. These documents go far to define desired outcomes and methods of achieving them. Since the mission of a comprehensive university by nature includes the goals and outcomes of a liberal education, there are many elements of the SSU mission and strategic plans that overlap with those of numerous institutions: critical thinking, civic engagement, experiential learning, ethical exploration, interactive teaching and learning, global awareness, a valuing of diversity. The challenge for SSU is to carve out its particular distinctiveness in a field of similar institutions, particularly as important funding decisions and enrollments appear to favor disciplines other than those more traditionally associated with liberal studies.

SSU also sees its co-curricular and residential life programming as central to its goal of educating the "whole student" in a distinctive way. Important features include a strong emphasis on mentoring, such as the Educational Mentoring Team program, where faculty, student services professionals, and students work as a team to mentor and orient freshmen. Currently 60-70% of entering freshmen are served by this program. SSU provides a range of options for residential living communities supported by co-curricular learning programming and shared learning experiences such as field trips, service learning, and common core classes. SSU appears to have

put a great deal of energy and effort into developing co-curricular, mentoring, and support programs designed to address the “whole student.” (CFRs 2.9, 2.13)

In addition to the focus on a residential life rich in learning, supportive of personal development, and conducive to student retention and graduation, liberal arts and sciences institutions are often characterized by strong attention to student learning in the major and in General Education and by a strong program of academic advising. A focus on these characteristics of a liberal arts and sciences institution can help clarify how SSU is achieving the distinctiveness of its liberal education mission despite the severe, even unprecedented, budget cuts that it is experiencing as a member of a public comprehensive system of higher education.

The EER Team believes that the University has not fully resolved the issues of its dual identity but that it has made considerable progress in unifying and clarifying the relationship between its mission as a comprehensive university and its distinctive mission as a public liberal arts university.

### **THEME 3: CURRICULUM AND THE ROLES OF GENERAL EDUCATION AND THE MAJOR**

Because assessment is so important in overall educational effectiveness and influences program review and general education sub-themes in this section, it merits a separate section.

- **General Education**
- **Assessment**
- **Program Review**
- **Diversity**

## **GENERAL EDUCATION**

SSU offers a consistent message in all three of the WASC documents--the Institutional Proposal, the Capacity and Preparatory Review Report and the Educational Effectiveness Report--that improving student learning in the General Education Program continues to be a central topic of discussion. The SSU EER Report highlights several areas of General Education reform or renewal. These are: (1) the General Education Program Review; (2) the First Year Experience program (UNIV150); (3) the Hutchins lower division general education program; and (4) ongoing reform efforts in the School of Arts and Humanities and in the School of Social Science.

The General Education Program Review is a comprehensive document that assesses the current state of the program and makes a series of recommendations concerning alignment of the program with institutional mission and priorities. (CFR 2.1) The review also recommends steps that need to be taken regarding the assessment of the GE Program. These include how the GE subcommittee can assist departments in determining how current course evaluations can be redesigned to assess GE learning outcomes. In addition, it recommends developing procedures for translating observational or anecdotal data into assessment data. The departments need to build on the assessments that they are currently using and tie them to the GE area learning objectives as well as the missions and goals. The GE subcommittee needs to continue to develop an overall, systematic assessment plan for the General Education program at SSU. (CFRs 2.3, 2.7)

The campus did engage in a fairly extensive process to obtain feedback on the new learning outcomes for the GE program. A blog was set up to provide the campus community an opportunity to review and comment on these. (CFR 2.4) In the action plan entitled "Educating the Whole Student," task number 15 charges Sub-areas A and C to convene to write learning

outcomes for their areas. According to this document, this task was to have been completed in Fall 2008. In the document entitled “The Future of General Education” the General Education Subcommittee outlines a history of the development of GE reform at SSU. The document indicates that during the academic year 2007-2008 the GE Subcommittee worked with faculty from the schools that were teaching GE courses to develop learning Outcomes for General Education. (CFR 2.4) All of the GE Area objectives were approved in draft form by the GE Subcommittee, the Educational Policy Committee (EPC), and the Academic Senate. The GE Subcommittee acknowledges that these outcomes are in “draft” form and that some of the objectives may go through another revision before becoming final. (CFRs 2.3, 2.4, 2.5)

The GE Subcommittee at SSU may want to consider further refinement of their Learning Objectives for General Education to more accurately reflect Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs). In other words, statements should move beyond describing what the course is intended to achieve so as to consider what will be achieved and assessed. (CFR 2.6) The EER Team makes a similar comment regarding program SLOs on p. 23 of this report.

The First Year Experience (University 150) was approved by the Academic Senate as a nine-unit course that satisfies the GE areas of A1 (Written and Oral Communication) and A3 (Critical Thinking). However, it has been stipulated that the program should remain at its current size of 170 students. A residential life component was added to the program to facilitate co-curricular activities that enhance the program’s curriculum. (CFR 2.13) In its pilot form, the program offered credit for A3 (Critical Thinking) and A2 (Expository Writing). Evaluation and assessment revealed that the course aims and pedagogy were appropriate for critical thinking, but not for Expository Writing, which required more detailed attention to writing instruction than the multidisciplinary nature of the program could offer. Because the students undertake year-long research projects, which they present in their sections and to the overall program, the decision

was made to award students GE credit for area A1 (Written and Oral Communication). The Academic Senate accepted this recommendation when the program was given permanent status in 2008. The faculty in the program revised their learning outcomes accordingly for 2008-09. (CFR 2.5)

The Hutchins Program offers an alternative GE program to a small amount (3 percent) of first-time freshmen. They completed a program review of the program in 2006 which documents the continued success of the seminar-based, reading intensive and multi-disciplinary curriculum which awards GE credit in all areas except mathematics (B4). Students must also complete 9 units of upper division GE when they have attained upper division status. (CFRs 2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 2.7).

There is quite a bit of work that is occurring in the School of Arts and Humanities in terms of the development of new courses to address area A1 (Written and Oral Communications) and area C (Comparative Perspectives). The School has developed several strategic initiatives as a part of their planning process (CFR 4.2) which calls for more integration and distinction. There is mention of the chairs in the Social Sciences having recently completed an analysis of the GE courses and learning outcomes in that school and examining their alignment with the revised learning outcomes from the GE Subcommittee. The Educational Policy Committee (EPC) approved and forwarded a recommendation to the Provost for the creation of a school-level unit in order to provide oversight and coherence to university-wide courses and general education. The Provost has distributed this proposal for further consultation by the campus community and will make a decision in Fall 2009. The Provost indicated that he has not received a recommendation on this as of our meeting with him during the EER Team's visit. Given the current fiscal situation, he is not expecting that this type of major reform will be possible any time in the near future.

Again, perhaps paradoxically, the University has within its midst exemplary programs that model effective and compelling approaches to general education. But so long as they serve only a small percentage of SSU students, their contribution to the University as a whole may be limited.

## **ASSESSMENT**

During the visit, members of the EER Team reviewed assessment-related documents from many departments and interviewed faculty from the departments of Anthropology, Business and Economics, Engineering Science, History, Hutchins School, Physics and Astronomy, and the General Education Subcommittee. The Team also met with faculty and administrators who serve as assessment coordinators from across the University. Through these activities the Team found a high degree of awareness and acceptance of student learning outcomes (SLOs) among SSU faculty and administrators. SLOs have been developed for all major programs and the general education program, and those for the general education program have been endorsed by the Academic Senate. (CFRs 2.2, 2.4)

Since the Capacity and Preparatory Review (CPR), the SSU faculty have continued to make progress in developing a culture of inquiry and evidence as illustrated by the fact that the majority of SSU departments are now rated by the institution as “competent” in programmatic assessment for educational effectiveness. To be rated as “competent,” “All faculty members in the department are in assessment and program improvement activities. Program faculty members are proficient in assessment methodologies, feedback and improvement and able to provide training to other faculty within and outside the department.” (SSU EER Report, p. 53) Many departments have advanced their programmatic assessment rating since the CPR. (CFRs 4.3, 4.5, 4.6) The campus has provided support for these improvements in part through workshops

provided by the Center for Teaching and Professional Development (CTPD) on a range of topics spanning educational effectiveness. (SSU EER Report, p. 22) (CFR 3.4)

Faculty members have worked at aligning course-level and program-level SLOs and have developed assessment plans for their academic majors. These assessments are a required element of the self-studies prepared by the academic departments as part of the process of program review, and assessment results were included in nearly all of the self-studies reviewed by the EER Team. Perhaps most importantly, in all department interviews, the faculty provided examples of how assessment results were used to make improvements to their programs.

That said, the EER Team found that the depth and breadth of assessment from one department to another are uneven and suggests that SSU continue its efforts to improve its assessment activities. In its review of course level and program level SLOs, the Team found in some instances broad statements that might best be described as aspirational. For example, rather than revealing what students will know or be able to do upon completion of a course or program in observable and measurable terms, a broadly stated SLO might indicate that a student will “understand” a concept, theory or idea. To facilitate assessment, SSU should revisit these broadly stated SLOs with the goal of revising and enhancing them so that they can be assessed directly. In its interviews with SSU faculty, the Team found that the terms “objectives” and “learning outcomes” are regarded as synonymous by many and that there are not consistent definitions for these terms across the campus. In working towards greater consistency in the quality of SLOs across departments, the University should develop campus definitions for assessment terms.

The EER Team found that SSU has taken important steps in conveying course and program level learning outcomes as SSU students reported that most faculty include SLOs in their course syllabi. (CFR 2.3) However, the Team’s review of department websites and

documents found that there is not a widely accepted set of practices regarding the dissemination of SLOs at SSU and it was difficult to find course and program SLOs in some instances. The EER Team believes that an effective commitment to the development and pursuit of SLOs necessarily should include a commitment on the part of all faculty members to state such SLOs in their syllabi.

The EER Team also found a wide variation in the mix of indirect and direct assessment used across departments. While there are departments that rely primarily on direct assessment of student work supplemented by indirect assessment, there are also many departments that rely too heavily on indirect assessment measures like student evaluations of teaching effectiveness and student surveys. Assessment plans in these latter departments will be enhanced by increasing their reliance on direct assessment of student work.

In order to improve assessment activities in the areas described above, SSU will need to continue to develop assessment expertise among its faculty. In its self-study, SSU reported that it has, in the past, offered faculty workshops on assessments through the CTPD. (SSU EER Report, p. 22) A review of the workshops offered by CTPD in recent semesters suggests that these efforts may have slowed. SSU might choose to bolster faculty assessment expertise by sending faculty to assessment workshops offered by outside agencies or to assessment conferences, or by increasing the number of workshops offered by CTPD. Of course, these CTPD workshops could be offered by outside experts, but they might also be offered by SSU experts. In its interviews with faculty, the EER Team found high levels of assessment expertise in some departments, particularly those departments that have sought and earned disciplinary accreditation. Because no assessment program can be stronger than the expertise of the faculty, the University should sustain its commitment to their professional development in this important area.

## **PROGRAM REVIEW**

SSU is currently in the fourth cycle of academic program review following a substantial revision of its program review policy in 2006. The normal period of review under the policy is five years, but a decision was made to expedite the review process for all programs in light of the institution's choice of "Curriculum and the role of GE and the major" as a theme for its Educational Effectiveness Review. (CFR 2.7)

The SSU program review process begins with a self-study document prepared by faculty of the academic program in collaboration with constituencies according to a prescribed template for the self-study. Assessment of student learning figures prominently in the self-study, as does a required section on diversity with respect to the student body, advising, and faculty recruitment. (CFRs 1.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6) All programs under review are visited by a recognized expert in the discipline, who provides an external review report that becomes part of the review process. (CFR 2.1)

Units other than academic departments may also be deemed subject to program review by the Educational Policies Council of the Academic Senate. Examples given include the library, certificate programs, and counseling services.

At SSU, review materials are examined by the school's curriculum committee, which then makes a report to the dean. The dean in turn comments on and sends all materials to the Educational Policies Committee of the Academic Senate. This role is fulfilled by the Graduate Studies Committee for graduate programs. Eventually all materials and reports go to the Office of the Provost. The end result should be a MOU that spells out agreed-to action items.

The stated goal of program review of majors and GE is to inform and be informed by strategic planning, so that resources are aligned with mission. The EPC studied the implementation of the revised program review policy and wrote an analysis. In the meeting with

Team members, EPC noted that programs acted on issues arising from the review, particularly in the area of curricular reform. The EPC further found that the diversity section of the report needed to be more adequately addressed, given that many programs treated this section in a perfunctory manner; this observation of the EPC was borne out in a number of the program review documents examined by the visiting Team. The report also noted that all reviewed programs had made a case for increased resources, a typical outcome of program review in the California State University System despite reductions in funding from the state since 2000, with precipitous declines in 2008-09 and 2009-10 and additional cuts projected for 2010-11.

Further refinements will be made to the program review policy by EPC and to the process, through workshops, for the next cycle. EPC is to be commended for taking this reflective look at the revised policy and taking appropriate steps to make it even more effective and supportive of SSU as a learning organization. The EER Team commends also the commitment of the University to the continuous improvement of program review through the continuing engagement, oversight, and reflective assessment of the Educational Policies Committee.

SSU's revised program review policy promises to become robust and comprehensive. One of the strengths of the current process is that it applies also to important non-degree programs and units and, as such, provides a significant mechanism for ensuring effective education of "the whole student." The recently completed review of the General Education program by the GE Subcommittee provides an important example of the review process's ability to use data to identify areas that need improvement; for example, an analysis of 256 GE course syllabi found a lack of explicit integration of the GE program's Mission, Goals and Objectives into the courses and a general lack of direct assessments or measures of GE learning. Exceptions were the now-permanent FYE pilot and the respected Hutchins version of the SSU GE

experience. The review concludes with a number of important next steps for assessing the learning that takes place across the GE program at SSU and validates the reforms and innovations implemented to date. (CFR 2.4)

## **DIVERSITY**

Currently at SSU there is significant activity, energy, and commitment with regard to the issue of diversity, prompted in part by incidents on campus that led to concerns that the campus community be educated about policies on discrimination, harassment, etc. The EER Team believes that the University's prompt and compelling response embodies important values and signals a more robust approach to the pursuit of such values in pragmatic and meaningful terms. (CFR 1.5)

In spring 2007, the Office of Institutional Research conducted a comprehensive campus climate survey, as part of its program of assessing campus climate toward diversity on a three-year cycle. The Office of Institutional Research then produced an analysis of trends since 1998, finding that the campus climate toward diversity "is generally supportive, positive and stable over time." However, it also finds that some faculty, staff and students experience harassing or discriminatory behaviors and attitudes on campus. (CFR 2.10)

The University has developed a diversity vision statement, and diversity is a key component of both the University Strategic Plan and the Academic Affairs Strategic Plan. Two committees on diversity grew out of faculty initiatives (one created by the CFA and the other by the SSU Senate) and the EER Team commends faculty governance for its sustained determination to maintain focus on the priority that strong universities assign to diversity in all elements of their organization and their operations.

In fall 2008, the President created a President's Diversity Council in order to "make at this time a concerted institutional effort to increase and enhance the diversity of our institution: to enrich the educational experience of our students and to improve access to higher education to all Californians." Significant overlap of membership with the CFA and Senate committees was deliberate in order to facilitate coordination of initiatives and activities. A draft strategic plan was disseminated by the President's Diversity Council in April 2009. At the time of the visit, it was clear to the Team that issues of diversity are of great importance to the campus and are also addressed in a number of ways. However, there was agreement that the severe budget cuts to SSU may retard implementation of many or most of the draft plan's proposed initiatives to create a support structure, such as the appointment of a Campus Diversity Coordinator.

Discussion of diversity came up in virtually every meeting during the EER Team's visit regardless of the primary topic of the meeting. Vice presidents of two divisions detailed the programs of diversity awareness education provided to managers and staff as well as the variety of diversity and cross-cultural programming included in co-curricular and residential activities for students as well as a new residence hall with paired classes specifically focused on diversity. A strength of the academic program review policy is the required section on analysis of the diversity of faculty and students, multicultural aspects of the curriculum, and diversity initiatives in the program. As stated previously, the Educational Policies Council expressed concern that in the self-studies it had examined, many departmental responses were perfunctory in respect to the section on diversity. The EPC also expressed its intent to address this deficiency in its review of the revised policy and process for program review.

SSU's commitment to the recruitment of diverse students has prompted debate. Some faculty members see the institution's emphasis on a residential liberal arts and science mission as a deterrent to the recruitment of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, while

representatives from Student Affairs and Enrollment Management as well as other administrators point to a range of outreach strategies such as the President's participation in Super Sunday, a CSU system outreach to African-American churches in northern and southern California. In a large meeting with students, EER Team members met a student who had been recruited to SSU through a visit to her church. Still, some students of color present expressed disappointment with what they feel to be an unwelcoming climate, a lack of support for offices and programs focused on diversity, and lack of faculty of color.

It is clear that while there are sincerely held differences in point of view on the University's approaches to diversity, the campus community as a whole views diversity as important and is committed to the goals expressed in the strategic plan drafted by the President's Diversity Council. The EER Team commends the University for the persistence of its interest in and the emergence of a strong commitment to creating a campus more fully informed by diversity – particularly ethnic diversity.

In the current fiscal situation, the EER Team echoes a sentiment expressed by a member of that Council: that SSU continue to build the collaborative structure it has put in place and target what can be done in the present constrained environment, with a view to implementing its strategic initiatives as resources return.

## **IIB. Student Success - Focus on Graduation and Retention**

Sonoma State University provides a variety of reports on student success, graduation rates, and retention through the office of Institutional Research. The most obvious of these sources is the IPEDS data, which is publicly available. Preliminary analyses of these data shows performance that is likely to be in the "middle of the pack" with respect to other CSU institutions, and other reasonable national comparisons are possible given the generation of

comparison lists by IPEDS. Indications are that first-year retention rates in recent years have remained rather steady in the mid-to-upper 70% levels, dropping to slightly over half (53%) for white students and slightly over 30% for black students in terms of 6-year graduation rates. The rates for Hispanic students are located between that for whites and blacks. More detailed data for specific programs and degree areas at SSU should represent an institutional priority and an important direction for additional inquiry. (CFRs 1.5, 2.7, 2.10, 4.4, 4.5)

SSU participates in a number of data collection programs related to student engagement, success, and retention. The following reports, again available through Institutional Research appear to be some of the main additional sources of information to be further explored:

- SSU CIRP Freshman Survey Trend Analysis: 1993-2007
- National Survey of Student Engagement (Spring 2006 and Spring 2008)
- Sonoma State University Students Needing Remediation
- Graduation Rates from the American Enterprise Institute
- End-of-Semester Freshman Survey (Fall 2006 to Fall 2008)
- The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) at Sonoma State (2007-08)

The EER Team did not examine these specific reports in detail, but our appraisal did suggest that these various data sources may be useful in the context of a new effort that SSU is mounting to better understand and influence retention and graduation rates. Beginning in spring 2009 Sonoma State formed a Retention and Graduation Task Force, which was charged with 1) examining factors related to student retention, and 2) making recommendations regarding actions the institution might take to improve student success and retention. This task force was formed at the request of the President and charged by the Provost. The Dean of the School of Science and Technology leads the initiative. During the visit, members of the Team met with the committee and read a first draft report that had just been completed. Our overall impressions of

the seriousness of this work, the quality of ongoing analyses, and the likelihood of this effort continuing to bear fruit are very good. (CFRs 2.12, 4.4, 4.5)

The task force in its first report produced many interesting analyses that utilized existing data on retention and graduation as well as data from its own 44-item survey addressing “what students like about SSU.” Overall, these analyses show that SSU is certainly not in “dire straits” with regard to either 6-year graduation rates or retention during the first year or two. Overall 6-year graduation rates are within a percentage point of the CSU average, for example, but the data do show that SSU is unique in terms of the number of students who make a fairly early decision to leave SSU for other CSU institutions. The report provides a detailed accounting of this transfer phenomenon including comparisons to other CSU schools whose retention performance is both better and worse. The report also shows that students transfer to other UC schools and to community colleges. (CFR 2.7)

A significant feature of this work is the construction of a regression model that will allow SSU to refine its analysis as more extensive data sets are incorporated within the model. The current analysis dealing with one and two-year retention draws from one class—the 2004 freshman class—and the new student survey has been administrated only once in late spring 2009. Nevertheless, SSU is already developing a clear picture of variables that require more attention in dealing with the retention puzzle. The current report describes three main challenges that at this point seem clearly related to retention. First, SSU is located in a semi-rural location that may be perceived as offering fewer resources than the locations of other institutions. Second, SSU has a fairly low level of ethnic diversity, lower than what some students desire. Third, the level of academic challenge may be lower than many well-prepared and highly motivated students may be expecting and wanting. Other variables include financial aid, satisfaction with advising, academic classes, and extracurricular activities. The task force

expects to learn more about these variables and how they influence student retention and success. Needless to say, the institution would like to better its relative position within the CSU with regard to these issues. (CFR 4.4)

In terms of outcomes the task force has made several recommendations intended to make a difference in student retention. The most creative recommendation is to institute a “student feedback week” that will bring campus-wide attention to retention challenges and bring faculty, staff, and students together in a variety of activities. This week of activity would also routinely include the collection of survey data that can be fed into the regression models recently developed. The overall goal of a feedback week is to reinforce unique aspects of SSU, its mission and people, and opportunities for students. This focused effort could also be another opportunity for SSU to attend to one of the Team recommendations that the institution make a greater effort to market its liberal arts and sciences mission more effectively in the context of its role as a comprehensive university. (CFR 2.10)

Other recommendations include developing a more sophisticated monitoring system that would involve institutional research as well as members of the faculty and staff; allowing students to declare a major earlier; providing more support if remediation is needed; and paying particular attention to first year students who the data show may be already thinking about transfer to another institution.

In short, SSU has defined retention and graduation challenges that it wants to examine more closely and work toward improving. The efforts currently underway appear very promising. Earlier it was noted that SSU already collects a variety of data that could inform the more refined analyses currently underway through the Student Retention Task Force. For example, if one hypothesis is that some students may not be sufficiently challenged during the critical first year or two, then a more focused look at data from the National Survey of Student

Engagement may be useful. Similarly, existing data on the freshman year experience, the freshman seminar program, and even the CLA may take on an appropriately more central role in contributing to a more aggressive analysis of challenges and potential solutions.

### **IIC. Ukiah Program in Liberal Studies**

The program in Liberal Studies at Ukiah represents a stable and important outreach effort by SSU aimed at providing an upper level degree completion opportunity for students in the Mendocino and Lake County regions north of the main campus. Students enroll in this program after completing approximately 70 units of credit at Mendocino Community College. Following graduation about two thirds of the students become teachers, while others retain existing positions or find other employment in the region. (CFR 2.2)

During the EER visit one member of the EER Team spent an afternoon and evening visiting the site with the coordinator of the program who has taught in the program for many years. An extended discussion on the 150-mile round trip yielded a great deal of history and perspective on the program. Several notable features included:

- Acknowledgement of the more than 30-year history of the program.
- Recognition that the program operates on a low-cost efficient model that is now being replicated in Napa County. Operating costs are reported to be approximately \$60,000 annually.
- Recognition and appreciation of the intimate working relationship with Mendocino Community College which provides the land on which a small building housing the SSU program is located.

- An understanding of how the program serves and enhances SSU's mission of providing educational and cultural access to the more remote areas north of campus, and, importantly, service to a more diverse population of students who would otherwise not have access to degree completion following academic work at the community college. (CFRs 1.5, 2.1)

While on site the Team member was able to visit with a SSU faculty member shortly before his class was to begin and to engage in an informal discussion with the students who were present for the class. Impressions of these interactions coincide with those of the external reviewer who earlier participated in the program review completed in 2008. In short, faculty members who teach in the program are dedicated to the overall mission and respect the students who persevere in the program despite balancing day jobs and traveling significant distance in many cases. Students for their part were not hesitant in expressing appreciation for the opportunity provided through this program. When asked how many had driven more than 50 miles to class that evening more than half raised their hands. Students who participate tend to take a full load of credits each semester and tend to graduate on time. On average, 16 degrees are granted each year. (CFR 2.5)

In conclusion, the program appears to be on solid footing, continuing to respond to challenges noted in its program review, such as taking steps to improve technology access at Ukiah, making the advising process more robust, securing a steady stream of faculty members willing to undertake the journey to Ukiah, and advancing alternative delivery models that might include combining face to face instruction with web-based strategies. (CFR 2.7)

## **II. D Sustainability of Effectiveness Plans**

One of the new requirements of the WASC process is for institutions to include a description of their plans regarding program review and assessment of student learning outcomes beyond the Educational Effectiveness Review. Although the final SSU's essay (SSU EER Report, p. 32) is titled "The Future at SSU: What We've Learned and Where We're Going," very little reference is made to effectiveness plans going forward. Nonetheless, on the basis of the strength and forward-looking elements of current program reviews, the evident commitment to assessment and evaluation among the administration and members of the faculty, and the widely shared understanding that the accountability loop must be closed to make possible the benefits of a commitment to continuous improvement, the EER Team believes that the SSU effectiveness plan is sustainable. Further evidence may be found in a program review calendar that projects a schedule of future program reviews well into the future. While the Educational Policies Committee has taken on the task of program review, and that the campus clearly sees the value of these reviews, the EER Team welcomes the understanding suggested by the schedule of future reviews that assessment must continue to be strengthened.

The EER Team does have a concern about leadership and coordination, however. SSU indicated that there are plans for continuing to develop student learning outcomes and to provide appropriate faculty development opportunities in this area. However, to this point, the responsibility for managing assessment efforts and monitoring student learning outcomes has rested on one individual in the Provost's Office, rather than being the responsibility of a designated committee or set of individuals. In order to be fully integrated into the campus culture, ownership of the assessment effort must be widened and deepened within the institution, and the locus of responsibility for coordinating the evaluation of educational effectiveness must be made clear. A more thorough integration of effectiveness plans with the University Strategic

Plan and the Academic Affairs Strategic Plan would represent additional persuasive evidence of sustainability.

**SECTION III. FINDINGS, COMMENDATIONS, OBSERVATIONS, AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CAPACITY AND PREPARATORY REVIEW  
AND THE EDUCATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS REVIEW**

As stated in SSU's Institutional Proposal, "SSU's primary institutional goal for the re-accreditation process is to become an intentional, reflective and evidence-based learning organization." Their proposal reiterates the institution's intent "on achieving its core mission of being a premier public liberal arts and sciences university. The University is engaging in strategic planning that is intentional, consistent, and mission-driven, and will result in aligning priorities with resources." (SSU Institutional Proposal, p.7)

Also included in the proposal was the intention to a) to develop and utilize indicators of performance; b) to define the signature of an SSU education, including the roles of general education and the major; c) to conduct a comprehensive system of program review; d) and to use assessment data and evidence for reflection and improvement. Significant progress has been made in all categories, as indicated in explicit performance indicators reviewed by the team, in more detailed explications of the SSU "signature" in publications and on the web site, and the ample information available with regard to program review. With regard to the use of data for benchmarking and decision-making, the University points to the following:

- The examination of IPEDS financial data on core expenses per FTE enrollment by function (instruction, research, public service, academic support, institutional support, student services, etc.) for purposes of benchmarking relative to other CSU campuses;

- The use of IR data to compare student-faculty ratios department by department with the CSU average for the last nine years as a basis for budget allocations to the schools. Such information has also guided the deans in allocating funds within schools. For instance, such data enabled the School of Science and Technology to achieve the CSU average;
- To support rational, transparent decision making in the light of budgetary realities, the dissemination to academic deans and faculty governance of information for each academic program regarding FTE faculty, student enrollment, the number of majors, advising ratio, number of tenure/tenure track faculty, number of lecturers, and ratio of tenure faculty to lecturers.
- Use of both the National Survey of Student Engagement (to benchmark SSU against other COPLAC campuses) and the Collegiate Learning Assessment (to measure changes in student achievement from Freshmen to Seniors) to support participation in the Voluntary System of Accountability (see <http://www.collegeportraits.org/CA/SSU/> <<http://www.collegeportraits.org/CA/SSU/>> ) and to enhance the background for decision making. Reference to data provided through COPLAC has also informed clarification of the SSU binary liberal arts/comprehensive mission.
- Participation in the University of Delaware National Study of Institutional Cost and Productivity to prompt comparisons of SSU departmental cost/FTE ratios with those peer institutions within its Carnegie classification, to benchmark the distribution of instructional funds relative to mean CSU salaries for new hires by discipline, and to monitor accordingly the distribution of instructional funds.

It is the view of the EER Team that Sonoma State University has by and large engaged in serious curricular and institutional planning and in assessment of both major programs and general education through a pervasive commitment to program review.

The Team addresses concerns of both the CPR and EER Reviews with the following commendations, observations, and recommendations. Note the difference between observations and **recommendations in bold face**.

### **MISSION**

- The Team believes that the University has made considerable progress in clarifying the relationship between its mission as a comprehensive university and its distinctive mission as a public liberal arts university. Its students enjoy a breadth of educational options while experiencing the sense of community and engagement more characteristic of a smaller liberal arts college. (CFR 1.1)
- The Team commends the support for the liberal arts mission evident throughout the University and made highly visible in the opportunities for leadership and community offered to students. (CFR 1.1)

### **Observations and Recommendations**

- As the University articulates its complex identity and mission, the Team observes that it should continue to give its attention to articulating and solidifying this identify among students and faculty and within the broader community. (CFRs 1.1, 1.7)
- **The Team recommends that, so far as possible, as the University's planning statements suggest, SSU should attempt during this period of budgetary challenge to sustain those elements within the University that give meaning to its distinctive identity.** (CFRs 1.1, 1.2)

### **INSTITUTIONAL PLANNING**

- The Team commends the University for the considerable progress it has made in the development and articulation of pragmatic planning documents. Both at the University and the Academic Affairs levels, completed plans now guide decision making. Academic Affairs

deserves particular credit for having integrated two disparate strands into a single coherent planning thrust. (CFRs 4.1, 4.2, 4.6)

- The Team commends in particular the Retention Task Force for exemplary planning and implementation grounded in resourceful information gathering and appropriate expertise.

### **Observations and Recommendations**

- Because a robust planning process may prove more critical within the near term than plans on paper, the Team observes that well-functioning planning groups should convene according to a regular schedule in order to assess the continuing relevance of existing plans and to adapt them to changing circumstances. (CFRs 4.1, 4.8)
- The Team observes that the relatively easy work of creating plans must yield to the more difficult stage of determining relative priorities according to benchmarks developed collaboratively and within a culture of evidence. (CFR 4.3)
- **The Team recommends that, so far as practical, the different strategic plans— institutional, academic, diversity, technological—should be integrated into a single comprehensive plan or at least articulated as complementary elements in a single coordinated approach to decision making.** (CFRs 3.8, 4.1, 4.2)

### **ASSESSMENT**

- The Team commends the University for the broad awareness of assessment that has developed and for its explicit commitment to comprehensive and meaningful implementation. Student learning outcomes have been developed for all major programs, the faculty appears broadly engaged, and students in courses are aware of the learning outcomes they are pursuing. (CFR 2.3)
- The Team heard many examples of the use of assessment results to prompt program improvements. Such examples are not limited to Academic Affairs. Through the use of a

consulting group, the Administration and Finance Division, which contributes in many ways to educational effectiveness, has used assessment to create efficiencies and substantive costs savings. (CFR 4.3)

- The Team commends the University for incorporating the expectation of assessment within its revised program review process—both for the curriculum as a whole and for General Education in particular. (CFR 2.7)

### **Observations and Recommendations**

- The Team observes that the University should adopt a more systematic approach to acquainting students with the alignment between degree level outcomes, program outcomes, and course outcomes.  
(CFRs 1.2, 2.3)
- Because no assessment program can be stronger than the awareness and expertise of the faculty, the team observes that the University should sustain its commitment to their professional development in this area. (CFRs 2.3, 2.4)
- **In the light of the uneven depth and sophistication of learning outcomes statements from one discipline to another, the Team recommends that the University seek greater consistency embodying contemporary best practice. For instance, statements indicating what students should know and be able to do in terms of observable and measurable results should supplant those that appear simply aspirational.** (CFR 2.3)

### **PROGRAM REVIEW**

- The Team commends the University for the implementation of a revised program review policy. The completed review of nearly all programs according to an expedited timeline reveals a robust process grounded in clear understanding of program-level learning outcomes. (CFR 2.7)

- The Team commends also the commitment of the University to the continuous improvement of program review through the continuing engagement, oversight, and reflective assessment of the Educational Policies Committee. (CFRs 2.7, 3.11)

### **Observations and Recommendations**

- The Team observes that as the schedule of reviews becomes more incremental, the University should seek to strengthen the use of assessment within the process. (CFR 4.6)
- **The Team recommends that the University continue its broad movement towards completing the “accountability loop” through the development within the Office of the Provost of memoranda of understanding that specify action items and necessary support.** (CFR 4.8)
- **The Team recommends that all program reviews address more assiduously issues of diversity so as to ensure that concerns are addressed and that opportunities are pursued.** (CFRs 1.5, 2.7)

### **GENERAL EDUCATION**

- The Team commends the University for the refinement and rejuvenation of its General Education program through the broad engagement of faculty in the development and articulation of explicit learning objectives. The GE subcommittee of the EPC deserves particular commendation for sponsoring and attending to inclusive campus conversations relative to refinements possible within the framework dictated by CSU. (CFRs 2.4, 3.11, 4.7)
- The Team believes that the University as a whole understands and supports the values of General Education as a critical component in assuring the liberal education of all SSU students. (CFRs 2.4, 4.7)
- The Team commends the University for having completed a revealing and useful program review of General Education. (CFR 2.7)

### **Observations and Recommendations**

- The Team observes that as the University seeks examples of best practice in General Education, it need look no further than its exemplary First Year Experience program. (CFR 2.5)
- **The Team recommends that the University persevere in developing a robust assessment plan for General Education and in maintaining the momentum it has created in the early stages of program rejuvenation.** (CFRs 2.6, 2.7)

### **DIVERSITY**

- The Team commends the University for the persistence of its interest and for the emergence of a strong commitment to creating a campus more fully informed by diversity—particularly ethnic diversity. (CFR 1.5)
- The Team believes that the University’s prompt and compelling response to incidents of concern embodies important values and signals a more robust approach to the pursuit of such values in pragmatic and meaningful terms. (CFRs 1.5, 1.7)
- The Team commends in particular Faculty Governance for its sustained determination to maintain focus on the priority that strong universities assign to diversity in all elements of their organization and their operations. (CFR 3.11)
- The Team admires the multi-cultural programs and activities that invite participation in and celebration of the important values of diversity. (CFR 2.8)

### **Observations and Recommendations**

- The Team observes that the University should make every effort to sustain this important institutional commitment to diversity through the present period of budgetary challenge. (CFRs 1.5, 4.1)

- **The Team recommends that the University take steps to ensure that all faculty and staff searches are informed not only by a commitment to greater diversification but also by a knowledgeable and resourceful approach to managing searches that in fact lead to enhanced diversity. (CFRs 1.5, 3.2)**
- **The Team recommends that the University strengthen its commitment to diversity within the student body by re-examining its recruitment strategies and admissions standards as they apply to students recruited from beyond its service area. (CFRs 1.5, 4.1)**