

Southwest Minnesota State University  
2018 HLC Assurance Argument  
Executive Summary

Criterion 1: Mission.

The Mission of Southwest Minnesota State University states: *Southwest Minnesota State University prepares students to meet the complex challenges of this century as engaged citizens in their local and global communities. Our comprehensive degree programs, taught in the liberal arts tradition, are dedicated to connecting students' academic and practical professional development experiences in southwestern Minnesota to the wider world.* In living out its mission, SMSU engages in meaningful partnerships across the region and provides students and community members access to a broad variety of educational opportunities, not only through its degree programs, but also through the rich activities it sponsors. Over the past four years, SMSU has added key programs in demand in the region, strategically expanded and improved its facilities to enable community use, and enhanced leadership and critical thinking skills of its students through civic engagement and professional development.

The current Strategic Plan and the five sub-plans (Academic Plan, Diversity Plan, Enrollment Management Plan, Institutional Capacity and Effectiveness Plan, and a Facilities Plan) directly link SMSU's operations to the Mission as SMSU prepares students to meet current challenges and participate fully in their local and global communities. SMSU's mission and current values were developed through shared governance procedures and in accordance with state statutes and system policies. The four core values of SMSU are as follows:

- Excellence and Innovation
- Civic and Community Engagement
- Diversity and Global Awareness
- Environment, Stewardship, and Sustainability

The synergizing thread of SMSU's undergraduate education is the Liberal Education Program (LEP), which is compatible with the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum. The learning outcomes for the LEP include:

- Communicate effectively.
- Be creative thinkers able to identify, formulate, and solve problems using interdisciplinary perspectives.
- Be critical thinkers who evaluate information wisely and examine how assumptions and positions are shaped.
- Understand both physical and social aspects of the world and their place in it.
- Embrace the similarities among peoples and appreciate the diversity that enriches the human experience.
- Analyze moral judgments and engage in moral discourse.
- Practice responsible citizenship in their local and global communities.

## Criterion 2: Integrity.

SMSU operates with integrity whenever and wherever its programs are offered. This is, in large part, due to its compliance with state statutes, system and Board of Trustee policies and procedures, and campus policies and procedures. SMSU takes shared governance seriously and upholds the bargaining unit contracts and labor plans.

SMSU holds external specialized accreditation through the following organizations:

- The National Association of Schools of Music
- The Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board
- The Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education
- The Council on Social Work Education
- National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP)

These national and state accrediting bodies provide specialized integrity to the listed programs. These programs are aligned with national and state standards that indicates that our students have comparative and competitive skills of excellence.

## Criterion 3: Teaching and Learning Resources & Support.

SMSU uses the Professional Development Plan/Review processes to ensure that faculty remain current in the field. In addition, many SMSU programs have developed advisory councils to keep programs relevant and up to date. SMSU Advisory Councils include:

- Culinology and Hospitality
- Agriculture
- Exercise Science
- Graphic Design
- Teacher Education
- College Now
- GOLD College (formerly called "Senior College")
- Nursing

Each undergraduate and graduate academic program have developed student learning outcomes that guide curriculum and instruction. Course-level outcomes are the same for on-campus, off-campus, and College Now offerings.

In addition to the 7 LEP learning outcomes in Criterion 1, Additional graduation requirements include an extension of these LEP requirements in upper-division courses in a student's major:

- 1) a communication/critical thinking-focused (Core Skills) course in the major
- 2) a major capstone course
- 3) the LEP 400 Contemporary Issues Seminar- an interdisciplinary capstone course, which emphasizes the creative thinking outcome through approved topic sections.

Many SMSU students complete undergraduate research projects during their time as students. The SMSU Undergraduate Research Conference, Celebrate Science Week, and the School of Education's Learning Community Research Conference are the largest venues for

students to present this work. Data from the 2017 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE Survey) indicates that 29% of SMSU seniors have participated in some kind of research with faculty compared to 22% at other Minnesota State institutions and 25% at similar Carnegie class institutions.

For faculty, scholarly and creative work is completed in accordance with Article 10 of the “contract.” Administration and faculty are having ongoing discussions and development of departmental policies regarding the types of scholarship and activities that meet the requirements for tenure and promotion.

SMSU has an Office of Student Success, which addresses issues of retention and this was recently moved so that it shared space and resources with the Academic Commons. Academic Commons provides tutoring and student support. The combined office has been renamed the Student Success and Advising Center.

Civic engagement is a critical mission component and SMSU maintains a Center for Civic Engagement. The center maintains resources for students, such as MustangsVolunteer, that seeks to connect students to volunteer opportunities in the community and service-learning resources for faculty. Faculty include civic engagement components in student classroom experiences. Data from the 2016 Civic Engagement Survey indicates historically, over 40% of SMSU students volunteer in the community and nearly 59% of students have taken coursework that have included community involvement such as volunteer service, community-based learning experiences, one-time service projects, or other service activities.

#### Criterion 4: Assessment.

In the 2014 HLC Comprehensive Evaluation, SMSU “Met With Concern” Criterion 4. This was due in large part to inconsistent assessment practices. Specifically, the reviewers noted that LEP outcome assessment was being performed primarily at the 100-200 level. Also, the reviewers noted concerns that graduate program assessment was inconsistent and missing in the self-study materials for several graduate programs. Therefore, the reviewers recommended that SMSU have a “Focused Visit” on assessment. The “Focused Visit” was rolled into the 2018 Comprehensive Evaluation instead of being performed as a separate site visit.

Since 2014, SMSU has substantially improved its culture of assessment to demonstrate and improve student learning. The following steps were taken to achieve this campus culture.

- SMSU joined the HLC Assessment Academy and developed a project to assess LEP outcomes across academic programs courses. SMSU also has student services programs complete annual assessment reports.
- SMSU worked with graduate programs to accelerate the development and implementation of assessment plans for programs that were needing assistance.
- SMSU developed a Campus Assessment Master Plan (CAMP) that revised assessment procedures and submission dates. The CAMP includes an executive summary template to enhance the share-ability of assessment results and allows academic programs to use these summaries in their program review.
- SMSU has an annual Assessment Day in the spring semester. The day has 3 main goals: 1) provide training and assistance to academic programs 2) provide time for academic programs to perform assessment 3) celebrate assessment success.

SMSU's graduates are successful. SMSU graduates had a 99% employment rate in 2016 with 97% of SMSU graduates reporting being employed in a field related to their major. The majority of those graduates (84%) were working in Minnesota. Data from 2011 to 2016 also indicates the percentage of graduates intending to continue their education ranged from 9-14%.

SMSU uses shared governance in its strategic planning. The Strategic Planning Committee has been combined with the HLC Planning Team. In the past, an HLC team would be constituted in the 2 years prior to an HLC site visit. Combining these two groups into one HLC/Strategic Planning Committee has enhanced communication and linked strategic planning to campus assessment processes. SMSU Key Performance Indicators have been established for student retention. The retention goals for the 2021 Strategic Plan are rates of 70% overall, 75% domestic, and 70% for International students. The degree completion goal, established by the Minnesota State system for the campus is 49.1%. Persistence goals for students to remain in the Minnesota State system is 90%. SMSU's composite retention rate for the 2006 to 2016 cohorts is 67%. The centralized Student Success and Advising Center to house the Office of Student Success, Advising Center, and Academic Commons was born out of strategic planning to help meet campus retention goals.

#### Criterion 5. Resources.

SMSU is required by state statute to submit a balanced budget. State appropriations and largely unchanged tuition rates have made this challenging. Total student enrollment has increased in the last decade but the number of first-year degree seeking students has consistently declined over the same time period. This has required the campus to carefully plan for its resource use and to develop strategies to deal with revenue shortfall. Careful planning has been through the strategic planning process described in Criterion 4. These plans include the Institutional Capacity and Effectiveness, the Comprehensive Facilities Plan, and the Information Technology Strategic Plan. Some of the following revenue generation and expense reduction strategies have been used:

- Deliver academic programs on 2-year campuses in the Twin Cities.
- Continue to be the state leader in concurrent enrollment through College Now
- Offer Board Early Separation Incentives where appropriate
- Enhance resources for marketing and admissions
- Seek grant funding for program start-up and enhancement
- Utilize the state's Leveraged Equipment program to match private donations

SMSU uses shared governance and engagement of constituents in its processes related to fulfilling the mission and improving educational offerings. Several processes are used to achieve this:

- Strategic Planning
- All-University Conversations
- Advisory Council input
- Meet and Confer/Meet and Discuss
- All-University Committees

## Summary.

Several themes run through this executive summary of SMSU's 2018 Assurance Argument. Shared governance is not only appreciated but also is a key practice for the university. In particular, shared governance has helped shape the mission and values of the university and has allowed SMSU to live out its mission. Two key examples include service to the region through Civic Engagement and commitment to student success through undergraduate research. Related to assessment and the "Focused Visit," SMSU has made great improvements in its assessment processes and participation by faculty and student services. In fact, SMSU has implemented the use of the Campus Assessment Master Plan to guide its assessment processes to ensure students are meeting learning outcomes and to enhance student learning.