

EYES ON THE MISSION

When you say the word “accreditation” around a university, people understand. If you’re not accredited, you might as well shut the doors. “If we’re not accredited, we lose Title IV federal funding. Credits won’t transfer to other accredited institutions and students won’t want to graduate from non-accredited programs because they don’t hold the same currency, or weight,” said Lori Baker, the self-study coordinator at SMSU as it prepares for the Oct. 20-22 Higher Learning Commission campus accreditation visit.



JIM
TATE
SMSU

Every 10 years, SMSU goes through the accreditation review process. It is overseen by the Higher Learning Commission. Based in Chicago, it is the accrediting agency for a 20-state Midwest region.

What goes into accreditation? More than the average person will ever know. At the heart of it all, however, is the institution’s self-study, a 200-page-plus document that covers five criteria:

- Mission
- Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct
- Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources and Support
- Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement
- Resources, Planning and Institutional Effectiveness.

“I am the self-study coordinator,” said Baker. “(Provost) Beth (Weatherby) and I co-direct the Steering Committee of 16 members. It’s comprised mostly of directors, administrators and representatives of different (bargaining) units on campus. The Student Association president is also a member.”

Each of the five criteria has a separate team assigned whose charge is

to draft a chapter of the self-study document. Once those are submitted, the editing process begins.

The final self-study document also includes a section on federal compliance. “That’s heavy with worksheets and data,” said Baker. There are some chapters that will lead off the report ? how the university responded to the 2004 review, changes to the university in the last 10 years, etc. ? but the five criteria chapters remain the cornerstone of the document.

“The chapter on Mission is important,” she said. “Writing that was difficult because so much of what’s there will be referenced in other chapters. Everything in the self-study has to relate to the university’s mission. There’s a lot of cross-referencing to that chapter.”

Coordinating such an undertaking takes someone with certain personality traits: an eye for detail, a good writer, a sense of humor and a thorough understanding of the university. “For 13 years before becoming the self-study coordinator I directed the Writing Center on campus. I worked with Student Services and the academic side and worked with groups across campus. I also served on a number of committees, and have a real sense of history of this place.

“I like writing and editing, and I think it’s fun to play with words and incorporate thoughts of many people in the editing process. One thing you have to remember is that you’re writing for people who don’t know SMSU, so you want to give them the information, and details, to understand the university.”

Baker is a Wayne, Neb., native who earned her undergraduate degree in English from the University of Nebraska-Kearney. “I was one of the first tutors in the writing center at Kearney, and had professors encourage me to go to graduate school,” she said. Baker earned a master’s and doctorate in Composition and Rhetoric from Purdue University.

She came to SMSU right out of graduate school, and became interested in the accreditation process when she became friends with Mary Hickerson, the last accreditation co-

ordinator, who was a peer in the English department. She applied for the coordinator position — she’s not sure how many applied, and doesn’t want to know — and has been at it ever since.

She’s working full-time on accreditation this academic year after having transitioned from the classroom to her current duties over the past two years as the self-study process moves toward deadline.

The self-study document will be delivered to the HLC visitation team two months before its visit. That group of anywhere from four to eight individuals will then come on campus and meet with individuals and groups. It will later issue its findings and a report of suggestions to the university.

Each of the HLC visitors in October is called a peer reviewer. SMSU President Dr. Connie J. Gores has been a peer review team member in the past, and her insight has been invaluable in the process, said Baker.

The five draft chapters will be discussed at an all-university meeting and input taken. The first all-university meeting, for the draft chapter on Mission, took place this past Thursday.

“President Gores has shared with me that our open process of putting these chapters online and asking for feedback is not that common at other institutions. It’s not always such a public process, but we want to do that here because we have a lot of people who are invested in the university and who want to be a part of the process.”

Baker and her husband, Larry Magrath, are the parents of three children: Mitchell, 18; Weston, 15; and Daniel, 12.

She’s happy that the process is moving forward, and looks forward to the HLC visit on Oct. 20. “We’ll be ready,” she said.



Baker