

PROGRESS REPORT

TO

THE HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION

A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

June 2007

Southwest Minnesota State University

Institutional Background

Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU), founded in 1965, is located in a rural area in southwestern Minnesota. The institution has been through tumultuous periods in the past but currently is stable with regard to both enrollment and administrative personnel. SMSU enjoys support in the local community and the region as well as legislative support for recent building projects. The 2004 HLC Self-Study Report described the University as “a thriving and responsive institution,” a description which remains accurate in 2007.

SMSU is one of 42 educational institutions governed by the Board of Trustees of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU), and is one of seven state universities in the MnSCU system. Primary funding is provided by the Minnesota state legislature and tuition revenue. The campus enrolls approximately 2,500 full-time students (headcount) annually and is predominantly an undergraduate institution. SMSU has a relatively large part-time headcount enrollment of approximately 2,900 students, primarily enrollment options students and graduate student cohorts. SMSU offers the Associate in Science; Bachelors of Arts, Science, and Applied Science; and two masters-level degrees; along with a number of two-plus-two programs in cooperation with community and technical colleges in Minnesota.

The University requires freshmen to live on campus (as a general rule), but many sophomores, juniors, and seniors commute from nearby towns. Because of the campus’s size and location, SMSU draws a majority of its students from the surrounding region and from among students in urban areas seeking a small campus with a safe and protective

environment. The campus population is also quite diverse and includes international students and students with disabilities.

The 2004 HLC visit

In February 2004, a seven-member Higher Learning Commission review team visited Southwest Minnesota State University to conduct a comprehensive HLC review (a list of the HLC team members is attached to this report). As a result of the visit, the University received continued accreditation, with the next comprehensive visit scheduled for 2013-2014. The rationale for continued accreditation was as follows:

In the past ten years, Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU) has made significant progress in maintaining its mission, improving student enrollment, and managing resources in times of fiscal restraint. From reviewing the Self-Study Report and other supporting documents and from extensive interviews on campus, the Team concludes that SMSU is not only meeting all 24 of the General Institutional Requirements but also fulfilling all five of the Criteria for Accreditation. The weight of evidence in leadership, governance, resource allocation, and planning indicates that SMSU has the institutional processes in place to warrant another ten-year accreditation cycle.

The Need for a Progress Report

Although SMSU was granted 10-year accreditation, follow-up of Criterion Two warranted a progress report due in the HLC office by June 2007. The requirement for the report states that “the University is aware of the limited attention it has given to assessing student academic achievement in General Education. The team recommends that this

deficiency be addressed in its progress report.” The team’s recommendation concerning the progress report is as follows: A progress report on General Education, including articulation of an overarching institutional philosophy of general education, a curriculum aligned with the philosophy and goals, and a plan for assessing student learning outcomes in General Education is due to the Commission Office by June 2007.

A general education redesign process has now been underway for three years and will conclude in 2008-09. As of June 2007, SMSU has adopted the afore-mentioned overarching institutional philosophy of general education and is planning the curriculum. Assessment of specific, measurable student learning will be integrated into the curriculum during the planning stage.

The remainder of this document constitutes the University’s progress report.

The Progress Report

Southwest Minnesota State University began work on redesign immediately after the HLC visit, when the University’s Academic Affairs Committee accepted the task of getting things started. SMSU is fortunate to have a provost who has extensive experience in designing general education curricula and supported conducting a fresh and thorough review of the general education program. Also, through a series of serendipitous coincidences, SMSU was able to take advantage of a connection between the campus and the Center for Inquiry in the Liberal Arts (CILA) at Wabash College in Crawfordsville IN. The following information about CILA is taken from its Website: www.liberalarts.wabash.edu.

The mission of the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts is to explore, test, and promote liberal arts education. The Center seeks to ensure that the nature and value of

liberal arts education is widely understood and to reestablish the central place of the liberal arts in higher education.

The goal of liberal arts education is to create an attitude of intellectual openness, especially to inquiry, discovery, new ideas, and varied perspectives. Liberal arts education should cultivate both the eagerness to grapple with difficult questions and the willingness to develop and enact provisional answers to these questions. Liberal arts education should lead us to carefully examine our own and others' beliefs, actions, and values.

The Center of Inquiry collaborates with researchers, faculty, administrators, and the public to gather high quality evidence on the outcomes of liberal arts education. Although we believe liberal arts education impacts a wide range of important qualities, our research currently focuses on:

- Integration of Learning
- Lifelong Learning
- Effective Reasoning and Problem Solving
- Moral Character
- Intercultural Effectiveness
- Leadership
- Well-being

Along with our core staff, the Center of Inquiry supports and is backed by sabbatical research scholars, Lilly teaching fellows, a national advisory board, and others. We engage in numerous projects and collaborate with various partners to further our mission of exploring, testing, and promoting liberal arts education.

In April 2004, with the support of the provost, the Academic Affairs Committee and CILA scheduled a summer workshop to begin developing objectives for a redesigned general education program or Liberal Arts Curriculum (LAC). In early August 2004,

CILA researchers held a workshop with an *ad hoc* group consisting of Academic Affairs Committee members and other interested faculty and administration. The workshop resulted in a set of eight preliminary objectives for the LAC.

1. Communicate effectively
2. Connect disciplinary perspectives.
3. Understand the physical and social world and responsibilities to both.
4. Realize relationships between individuals, the community, and the cosmos.
5. Value and engage in ways of knowing.
6. Be reflective about moral judgments and able to engage in moral discourse.
7. Be open to the vast range of human experiences.
8. Be critical users of information/possess information literacy.

After classes resumed in Fall 2004, the LAC Transformation Task Force took over the LAC redesign from the Academic Affairs Committee (the latter will receive recommendations from the Task Force and make recommendations to the faculty governing body). Membership of the Task Force included students, faculty, and staff, with extensive interaction with the provost. During the semester, the Task Force developed a timeline for the review/redesign process, revised the list of objectives shown above, and distributed the objectives to the campus community.

The initial timetable for completion of the LAC redesign project follows below.

Phase 1: Design—Deciding what to build—Years 1 and 2

- Draft objectives and outcomes for a new curriculum
- Seek input from the university community about objectives

- Ratify the objectives and outcome statements via the Academic Affairs Committee
- Ratify objectives and outcome statements via the Faculty Assembly
- Send ratified objectives and outcomes to the administration for approval

Phase I: Design—Deciding what to build—Year 3

- Specify individual components of the LAC (NOT courses)
- Seek input from the university community on structure/characteristics of the LAC
- Redefine structure/characteristics based on input
- Ratify structure/characteristics via the Academic Affairs Committee
- Ratify structure/characteristics via the Faculty Assembly
- Send ratified structure/characteristics to the administration for approval.

Phase II—Creating the pieces—Year 4

- Construct the components based on specifications
- Create the assessment plan
- Seek input from the university community
- Refine plans based on input
- Seek ratification by the Curriculum Committee
- Seek ratification by the Faculty Assembly

Phase III—Putting the pieces together—Year 4 and beyond

- Putting together staffing
- Putting the structure in place
- Scheduling initial course offerings
- Doing initial assessment

In January 2005 the Task Force and the campus community used the annual Strategic Planning Day to discuss objectives and to continue the conversation about redesign. At the invitation of the president and the provost, students, faculty, and staff are always active participants in strategic planning sessions, and again this time everyone was encouraged to attend. The day's discussion led to several questions to be addressed for each objective (see page 11).

Following Strategic Planning Day, the Task Force and the provost invited CILA to return to the campus on February 17-18, 2005, to conduct a workshop during which measurable outcomes would be associated with each objective below.

1. Understand the habits of thought and techniques used to acquire knowledge in a variety of academic disciplines
2. Connect disciplinary perspectives to gain insight and seek creative solutions.
3. Be critical thinkers who examine how assumptions and positions are shaped.
4. Evaluate information wisely.
5. Communicate effectively.
6. Understand the physical and social aspects of the world and their place in it.
7. Practice responsible citizenship in their local and global communities.
8. Appreciate the similarities among peoples and celebrate the differences that enrich the human experience.

9. Analyze moral judgments and engage in moral discourse.
10. Engage in life-long learning.

The February workshop began with an All-University Conversation (an hour-long open session scheduled at a time when there are no classes) to which students, faculty, and staff were invited. At the meeting, CILA researchers selected objective # 7 above to serve as an example and assisted in developing outcome statements for that objective. The rest of the afternoon and the next morning were devoted to breakout sessions for each of the remaining nine objectives. Sessions were repeated so that participants had the opportunity to attend two different sessions. Each session was facilitated by a researcher from CILA and one or more members of the LAC Task Force, and results were collected for further consideration and dissemination to the campus community. A “final” draft of the outcomes at that stage of the discussion is included below.

1. Understand the techniques and habits of thought in a variety of academic disciplines, having attained an adequate foundation of knowledge in those disciplines.
2. Communicate effectively.
3. Be creative thinkers able to identify, formulate, and solve problems using interdisciplinary perspectives.
4. Be critical thinkers who evaluate information wisely and examine how assumptions and positions are shaped.
5. Understand both physical and social aspects of the world and their place in it.
6. Embrace the similarities among peoples and appreciate the diversity that enriches the human experience.

7. Analyze moral judgments and engage in moral discourse.
8. Practice responsible citizenship in their local and global communities.
9. Engage in life-long learning.
10. Integrate mind, body, and spirit, the essentials elements of a flourishing life.

The work of the Task Force and the involvement of CILA created energy, interest, and enthusiasm on campus, in part due to the guidance and expertise of the provost. Additionally, the leadership of the Task Force chair, who has taken a thoughtful and deliberate approach to the redesign process, is well respected. After CILA's second visit, the provost invited a student researcher with CILA to spend two years on the campus working on a masters degree and serving as a member of the Task Force. The student researcher accepted the offer and has continued to serve as a member of the Task Force, liaison with student government, and assistant to the Task Force chair. His insight and participation have been a valuable resource to the Task Force.

The provost's energetic guidance has been key to the involvement of faculty, staff, and students in the process. During the first year, the provost addressed faculty, staff, and students at planning meetings, attended Task Force meetings, provided the latest research and information about liberal arts education on the national scene, and worked with the Task Force chair on the schedule and design of the process. During the second year although the provost did not attend Task Force meetings, he remained involved by visiting with the chair and facilitating the work of the Task Force as needed.

In the next academic year, on September 8, 2005, the Task Force held another All-University Conversation to discuss progress to date and to invite students, faculty, and staff to attend a 10-week series of discussions of the objectives developed during

2004-05. At the Conversation, the Task Force presented an overview of the discussion schedule and the goal of the discussions. By this time, the Task Force had also created an LAC Website and an online discussion forum for the purpose of providing additional information to the campus. During the ten-week series, discussions of each objective were held on Tuesday and again on Thursday so that more participants would be able to attend. At the sessions, the following questions suggested during the previous Strategic Planning Day were addressed:

- What types of experiences should SMSU students have related to this outcome?
- What should students be able to do as a result of these experiences?
- How should these experiences change students? How will we know?
- What knowledge and skills do students need before these experiences to get the most out of them?

After each session, the Task Force posted summaries on the LAC Website and invited comments via the online discussion forum. The sessions were completed in Fall Semester 2005.

In January 2006, another Strategic Planning session took place, during which the Task Force sought ideas for further interpretation of the general objectives. This planning session and the others engendered high interest, participation, and enthusiasm, which may be attributed in part to CILA's visits to the campus and to the provost's support of the redesign process. At the January meeting, ideas gathered from previous sessions were examined and ideas related to measurable means of assessing student learning discussed. The day's activities resulted in collection of the following "best ideas" from the conversation about the LAC.

1. The documented potential benefits of a well-executed and supported freshman seminar should be maximized.
2. A package or packages of LAC interdisciplinary cluster options should be provided for both undecided and transfer students.
3. A required freshman year, first-semester class should focus on educating students about the nature and benefits of liberal arts education, informing and exciting them to take control of their college experience.
4. One or more courses for freshman should focus on writing and research skills and be centered around engaging current themes.
5. The LAC should be simplified!
6. First-year experiences for students should involve faculty collaboration.
7. Subject matter should be integrated among classes, with special focus on integrating the LAC and a student's major as early as possible.
8. Appreciation and recognition of both diversity and similarity should be encouraged.
9. Students should be exposed to different ways of "tasting reality," that is, the different and similar approaches to understanding taken by, say, a chemist and a poet.
10. Strong, integrated teaching should be part of topic-based freshman courses.
11. Introductory classes should focus on general qualities and philosophies of a discipline.
12. Faculty should model the good-faith embrace of the LAC expected from students through team-teaching, posting syllabi on central online review area

for consideration by other faculty and students, and visiting other classes to participate in discussion.

13. Community impact of a given subject from the immediate and local to the far-reaching and global should be illuminated.
14. Freshman experiences should include plotting proposed 4-year course choices and progression toward graduation.

Following the Strategic Planning session, the Task Force continued discussing what a transformed LAC might look like. The Task Force used numerous resources in thinking about redesign, including College Learning for the New Global Century, published by AAC&U, and the LEAP report (Liberal Education and America's Promise). AAC&U's "essential learning outcomes" proved to be close parallels to those proposed by the Task Force for adoption by the campus. The LEAP report's guidelines for "remapping liberal education," which differentiate liberal education goals in the 20th century versus those needed in the 21st century, informed the Task Force's discussions with campus constituents and its thinking about design. The Task Force's internal discussions and its discussions with the campus community have led departments to think differently about courses they might propose to address the proposed outcomes, and departments are already anticipating the coming year's discussions of design.

At several Task Force meetings in Spring 2006, various models for the basics of a transformed LAC emerged. One of the plans, nicknamed the "napkin plan" because of its origins, seemed to have the most informal support and is presented below.

Senior Level	LAC capstone
Sophomore/Junior Level	LAC experiences aligned with student's

	program (approx. 20 cr or fewer)
Freshman/Sophomore Level	LAC fundamentals common to all students (approx. 20 cr or fewer)
Freshman	First-year experience program/course

After discussing methods of assessment, the Task Force decided to conduct a pilot assessment in two areas, writing and critical thinking. Approximately 120 students were randomly selected from traditionally freshman courses and predominantly senior courses. The students were given a short essay to read and then asked to write a critical analysis of the essay. Rubrics were designed to assign a numerical score to the students' work on both writing quality and level of critical analysis. Each student's paper was read and scored by two judges. The trial was an attempt to determine how well the method would scale to a larger number of students each year as well as to determine whether the method would yield any useful information. Based on the pilot project, the Task Force found the information useful and the method feasible using a statistically significant number of students.

During Fall Semester 2006, the Task Force refined objectives and adopted more detailed outcomes to send forward through the appropriate approval processes. The LAC objectives and outcomes which will guide development of the LAC are listed below.

Upon completion of the LAC at SMSU students will:

I. Understand the techniques and habits of thought in a variety of liberal arts disciplines, having attained an adequate foundation of knowledge in those disciplines.

1. Summarize major themes and discoveries of these disciplines and understand how new work is created and evaluated.
2. Apply the methods by which practitioners of these disciplines process information and solve problems.

3. Articulate how these disciplines are interconnected and how they relate to the student's major areas of study.

II. Communicate effectively.

1. Determine the nature and extent of information needed to formulate and develop a coherent and unified thesis.
2. Understand and select the best communication methods for achieving a given purpose.
3. Comprehend and synthesize messages conveyed in both oral and written contexts.
4. Recognize and employ various methods of verbal, nonverbal, cultural, and emotional communication.
5. Consider and account for the nature of audiences when presenting written and oral arguments.
6. Present ideas with comfort and confidence in written and oral formats.
7. Develop an appreciation for the significance and aesthetics of language.

III. Be creative thinkers able to identify, formulate, and solve problems using interdisciplinary perspectives.

1. Break a complex issue or task into incremental steps.
2. Comprehend the differences and similarities among fields of study, and how these augment our understanding of important issues.
3. Employ multiple modes of inquiry and analysis to arrive at a range of possible solutions to a problem or task.
4. Apply a range of methods for producing creative results.
5. Exhibit increasing development of characteristics essential to being a creative thinker, including:
 - Curiosity
 - Aesthetic appreciation
 - Desire to make things better
 - Enjoyment of challenge
 - Ability to suspend judgment
 - Acceptance of and willingness to learn from mistakes and failures.

IV. Be critical thinkers who evaluate information wisely and examine how assumptions and positions are shaped.

1. Demonstrate information literacy by accessing, utilizing, formatting, citing, and documenting relevant material accurately and correctly.
2. Interpret arguments by correctly identifying relevant premises, conclusions, and key assumptions.
3. Evaluate the extent to which evidence is reasonable, relevant, accurate, and sufficient to support intended claims.
4. Formulate clear, well-supported arguments.
5. Engage in civil discourse, self-reflection, and consideration of other points of view.

V. Understand both physical and social aspects of the world and their place in it.

1. Demonstrate knowledge of concepts, methods, and theories designed to enhance understanding of the natural world and human society.
2. Demonstrate the ability to access, comprehend, compare, and evaluate contemporary scientific and social literature.
3. Demonstrate an awareness of multiple worldviews, and how each is shaped by the interaction of physical and social factors.
4. Critically consider the ethical and physical ramifications of scientific decisions on society and the environment.

VI. Embrace the similarities among peoples and appreciate the diversity that enriches the human experience.

1. Demonstrate awareness of personal identity as the result of a broad set of influences.
2. Engage in a variety of cross-cultural interactions.
3. View other cultures and social norms from multiple perspectives.
4. Explore one's biases while developing independent attitudes regarding the "difficult differences" in society.
5. Integrate and apply diverse perspectives to increasingly challenging questions and real-world problems.
6. Develop an informed concern for the greater good.

VII. Analyze moral judgments and engage in moral discourse.

1. Demonstrate understanding of the meaning, application, and justification of a number of core ethical values, including, but not restricted to:
 - Individual dignity
 - Human rights
 - Honesty
 - Integrity
 - Justice
 - Compassion
 - Personal and social responsibility
2. Demonstrate understanding of and respect for a variety of ethical viewpoints.
3. Recognize and critically reflect on one's own moral values and their determinants.
4. Recognize and address broad moral issues in a variety of contexts, including coursework, personal life, and global society.

VIII. Practice responsible citizenship in their local and global communities.

1. Develop the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions necessary to make a difference in local and global communities.
2. Recognize themselves as part of a larger social fabric, with public lives and personal ownership of social problems.
3. Explore the nature and use of power and authority in various contexts.
4. Engage in democracy as a life-enhancing, everyday practice of skills such as:
 - Attentiveness to public affairs and current events
 - Regular volunteering
 - Creative use of conflict
 - Active group membership
 - Collective problem solving
5. Express their voices through informed citizenship and participation in civic and political processes.
6. Confidently engage in civic discourse, self-reflection, and consideration of other points of view.

IX. Continue life-long learning.

1. Continuously evaluate their ever-changing environment across multiple dimensions.
2. Engage in self-directed learning with an emphasis on “learning how to learn.”
3. Cultivate curiosity and openness to varied experiences.
4. Integrate prior knowledge with newly obtained information.
5. Pursue formal and informal educational opportunities throughout life.

X. Integrate mind, body, and spirit, the essential elements of a flourishing life.

1. Explore how mind, body, and spirit function in interconnected ways.
2. Reflect on the intellectual, physical, and spiritual factors that shape personal and social identities.
3. Understand their individual wellness from various disciplinary perspectives.
4. Acquire knowledge to pursue their full human potential.

As expected, the timetable for redesign has been changed to reflect progress toward completion, since the original timetable proved too ambitious. The revised timetable more accurately reflects the total time needed to complete the process. In Fall 2006 the Task Force revised the timetable as follows:

Phase I: Design — Deciding what to build—Years 1-4

Draft goals/outcomes of the redesigned LAC

Seek input from university community on goals

Refine goals/outcomes based on input from University community

Ratification of goals/outcomes statements by Academic Affairs Committee

Ratification of goals/outcomes statements by Faculty Assembly

Administrative approval (completed April 2005)

Input from university community regarding student learning experiences necessary for outcome achievement. (Fall 2005)

Investigation of possible structure for LAC (Spring 2006)

Investigation of assessment methods for LAC components (Spring 2006)

Articulation of LAC goals to student learning outcomes (Fall 2006 –
Spring 2007)

Association of LAC goals and outcomes with MTC goals (see below)
(Spring 2007)

Specification of the LAC components for achieving the stated outcomes (Fall
2007)

Input from university community on components

Redefine component specifications based on input

Ratification of components by Academic Affairs Committee

Ratification of components by Faculty Assembly

Administrative approval (May 2008)

Phase II: Development — Creating the pieces—Year 5

Construction of the components based on the specifications (Fall 2008)

Creation of assessment plan

Input from university community

Refinement

Ratification by Curriculum Committee

Ratification by Faculty Assembly

Meet and Confer with units (May 2009)

**Phase III: Implementation — Putting the pieces together at SMSU—Year 6 and
beyond**

Put structure in place

Address staffing

Schedule initial course offerings

Begin initial assessment

Mention of the MTC above refers to the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum, a statewide agreement among MN colleges and universities to accept general education programs that adhere to a set of guidelines. Before SMSU's redesigned LAC is adopted, the University community must ensure that the LAC is aligned with MTC requirements. During 2006-07, the Task Force mapped the LAC objectives and MTC requirements and determined that the LAC objectives and outcomes listed above will fulfill MTC outcomes as well.

On April 26, 2007, at an All-University Conversation, the Task Force presented another progress report and outlined the tasks to be completed in the coming year. In Fall 2007, specification of the LAC components to address the objectives and outcomes will begin and will involve seeking input from the University community, redefining component specifications based on input, and ratifying components via the governance structure. The Task Force will meet during the summer months to prepare for next fall's discussions.

The Task Force is optimistic that the time and energy devoted to the LAC design will lead to a curriculum that reflects the best thinking about the goals of general education and that will suit and benefit SMSU's students. Discussions throughout the process have been enthusiastic and visionary and have reflected determination on the part of faculty, students, and staff that the redesigned LAC will be worthy of the effort that has gone into it. Departments are discussing how they might design courses for inclusion

in the LAC, having recognized the need for change and for well-designed assessment plans. Meanwhile, the provost who has energized the review process will retire this summer. After his departure, the campus will need continued guidance and enthusiasm on the part of the Task Force and the incoming provost during 2007-08 to complete the process and institute the revised LAC.

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