

ADVANCEMENT SECTION

REPORT OF A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION VISIT

TO

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FOR

The Higher Learning Commission

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EVALUATION TEAM

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I. OVERALL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

In the decade since its last comprehensive visit, Iowa State University has made noteworthy progress in positioning itself to respond more effectively to the needs of lowans and to increase its stature within the ranks of Land Grant universities. Chief among these are the appointment of an outstanding president, reallocation of over \$20 million in base resources, restructuring of several academic and administrative units, development of a vibrant strategic plan with extensive input from various university constituents, significant new investments in the physical plant and technology and expanded support for student retention, among others. In addition, the university has had exemplary success in development and fundraising.

II. CONSULTATIONS OF THE TEAM

A. Assessment of Learning Outcomes. Iowa State University recognizes the need to create a “culture of assessment” that will produce a data driven system for continuous improvement of undergraduate and graduate education. The University conducts some assessment activity centrally, but the vast majority of the assessment activity occurs in the Colleges. In the decentralized, college-based organizational system at Iowa State, developing an assessment culture requires a partnership between the university and the academic colleges.

Within the Colleges, most of the assessment activity is at the department level where the curriculum is designed and implemented. Assessment activity and results vary greatly among departments. Colleges and programs subject to professional association accreditation standards typically have identified and measured attainment of key learning outcomes. Among the departments not subject to professional assessment standards, some have implemented excellent assessment programs and can clearly demonstrate curricular improvement as a result of the assessment effort. On the other hand, some departments have only the beginnings of an assessment program.

The review team agrees with the University’s observation that stronger systematic processes are needed to encourage continuous academic improvement based on program and student learning outcomes assessment. Because of the critical nature of this activity and its decentralized context, it is important that strong consistent leadership be provided from the university level. The review team agrees with the university’s initiative to reinforce emphasis on leadership structures at the University and college level to enhance student outcomes assessment efforts at all levels.

The university has resources available to assist departments and faculty in assessment. It provides training opportunities centrally, and at least some of the colleges supplement this training with their own programs. The University might consider providing training on assessment in its new faculty orientation programs, and in its new administrator program. The University might also consider providing incentives to colleges and departments for assessment, for example through small block-grants to Colleges to use for assessment training, to allow faculty to travel to an institution where a similar department has a good assessment system, or for other activity.

In some departments, an incremental approach to assessment might be more practical than a comprehensive approach. A department could improve its assessment program by choosing one or two learning outcomes, developing and implementing measures, and using the results and experience to build a more comprehensive assessment system. The department would then become a resource for other departments in building their assessment systems.

B. New Budget Model. The goal of developing a budget model that better aligns the distribution of resources with actual unit performance and university priorities is, in the opinion of the visiting team, an important undertaking. Given the outlook for budgets in higher education there is value in considering a change from the historic model of incremental budgeting to one that is “more responsive to changes in resources and responsibilities.”

However, as the university considers the move from “incremental budgeting” to a new model—which is yet to be completely defined--it is important that numerous potential impacts of this change be carefully considered. It is also important that all systems and metrics are available to allocate costs, measure performance and provide for common activities that are not revenue generating. Among the important questions that the university may need to carefully consider are the following:

- What will be the impact on interdisciplinary activities? For example, will this new budget model reduce the incentive to participate in interdisciplinary research and instructional programs?
- The budget model is intended to demonstrate effectiveness, but does the university have adequate metrics that will be available to assure fairness and consistency in measuring effectiveness among different units?
- Will the new model help to increase the number of programs that are “among the very best”?
- Will the distribution criteria be able to measure and take account of quality as well as quantity?
- Will the new model provide incentives to increase the dollar amount of research if interdisciplinary activities are reduced?
- If the formulas for distributing revenues and expenses are held constant for 3 to 5 years, will this allow sufficient flexibility in reallocating resources?
- Will increased competition for dollars reduce the high level of collegiality among units that appears to currently exist on campus?
- Will the incentives for supporting “common goods” be as great if units have to pay for such goods/services?

- Will the new budget process ensure continued support for non revenue generating units, e.g student support services, central service functions and others.
- Are the proper support systems in place to handle a “fee for service” model?
- Will the new budget process allow sufficient resources and flexibility for central administration to support new initiatives that are consistent with the strategic plan?

While the visiting team recognizes, in concept, the need for revising the budget model to reflect the strategic plan of the university, we encourage the university to move forward with appropriate consultation as the above and other relevant questions are answered.

C. Faculty Salaries. Excellent faculty and staff are critical to the mission of any university. At Iowa State University, faculty and staff salaries are not keeping up with peer institutions. According to data provided, faculty salaries in 1998 were average for 11 peer institutions. Using 1998 as an index 1.0, that index had declined to an index of 0.95 by 2004-2005. If not corrected, this relative decline in faculty salaries will negatively impact recruitment and retention of excellent faculty.

D. Extension and Outreach. Iowa State University is among the very best institutions in the nation in the application of science and technology in agriculture, engineering, behavioral sciences and related fields. The University and county staff in Extension are one very important link in the application of this knowledge throughout the state.

Ironically, this long tradition of excellence in advancing the land grant mission is threatened by state and federal budget reductions, precisely at a time when the state’s economic future is more dependent on the application of University-generated knowledge than perhaps at any time in the past. From FY02 to FY04 Extension lost more than \$6.1 million to budget cuts, nearly 25% of its total budget.

Extension is supported with funds from county, state and federal governments, but in the past decade the state and federal share of funds have both dropped substantially while the county share has remained stable. From FY95 to FY04, the county share of funding rose from about 16% to slightly over 17%. Meanwhile, the federal support dropped both in dollar terms and as a share of the total, from 19% to 12%. The state share likewise dropped from 39% to about 30%.

Extension has been very aggressive, and very successful, in replacing this lost revenue with funds from user fees, grants and gifts. Gifts, although less than 2% of the FY04 total, come from endowments established in 85 of the state’s 99 counties, another indicator of the strength of Extension’s local support. Grants supported about 20% of extension’s budget in FY04, up from about 14% in FY95. User fees supported about 19% of the budget in FY04, up from about 11% in FY95.

User fees are feasible if an extension program produces a significant economic benefit that is captured by an individual or organization. User fees have less applicability for programs, such as general economic development initiatives, that produce a community-wide benefit. Grants can be a good source of support for new programs but when the grant expires the program will disappear unless there is a private benefit that can be captured through a user fee.

Rural Iowa communities will need to draw on the knowledge generated by the University if they are to maintain a strong economic base through increasingly sophisticated applications of science to agriculture, and by capturing at least a part of the job and income creation potential of the emerging bio-economy. University Extension is a key link for these rural communities and the state should be dramatically increasing funds for this type of extension activity. Extension needs to continue to adapt its programs to address a broader range of societal issues that are critical for the future.

While other academic units within the university are engaged in outreach, the majority of these activities are channeled through Extension faculty and staff. As the university advances its community partnerships to embrace economic, social, and educational challenges, it is encouraged to provide mechanisms to spread its outreach and engagement research, teaching/learning, and service mission more fully throughout the organization. Building upon successful models such as PROSPER, Iowa State University has the capacity to help effect economic development beyond the agricultural sector.

E. Advancement – Graduate Education and Research. Iowa State University has articulated that one of the priorities of its 2005-2010 Strategic Plan is to “increase the number of graduate, professional, and research programs that are among the very best – especially in areas that build on university strengths and address local and global critical needs.”

The University has a strong history of interdisciplinary research and education – which has been manifested in the formation of numerous Centers and Institutes that allow for the close coordination of research from multiple departments. In addition, several departments are co-administered between two colleges, and numerous graduate degree programs are officially coordinated by multiple departments. The state of the applied research, as demonstrated by the success of its Intellectual Property office, is also strong. The plan to build on existing research strengths is commended, especially given current limited resources.

One way that the University has already identified that they may move toward the articulated goal is through recruitment of outstanding graduate students. In order to attract the best graduate students from around the country and the world, competitive support packages might be made available and resources found to fund these packages. For research programs that are often funded through agencies that restrict budgets for tuition support, flexibility might be allowed in the way a support package is put together to maximize the funding that can come from the project's direct costs.

Concern was raised by members of the graduate faculty that the Graduate College had lost an important voice and champion at the upper level of the administration during the reorganization of the Provost's Office. Conversely, it was expressed that, while the Dean of the Graduate College maintains a direct reporting relationship to the Provost, the Academic Deans (and their associate deans) are now more involved with graduate education in the departmental and intra-collegiate graduate programs in their colleges. It is possible that one source of this divergent view point on the strength of the voice of the Dean of the Graduate College comes from the historic organizational chart of the University, which does not appear to place the role of Dean of the Graduate College on par with that of the Academic Deans. Given the important roles of the Associate Provost for Academic Programs, one of which is Dean of the Graduate College, the review team recommends that the organizational structure be reviewed in order to address any relevant concerns that may negatively impact graduate programs.

As graduate programs are primarily administered through departments, the role of the Graduate College at the current time appears to be the coordination of interdepartmental graduate programs (especially during the first year), development of common academic policy (as approved by the Graduate Council), and coordination of support services and professional development opportunities for graduate students. The latter could include teaching assistant training programs, training opportunities in research assurance, grantsmanship, and research ethics. Some of these are already under consideration by the Graduate Council and the Graduate College, and their further development should be encouraged. It is important that the interdepartmental graduate programs not be lost in this administrative reorganization and the anticipated new budgeting system.

One of the land grant missions of Iowa State University is to develop research and educational programs that meet societal needs – particularly those of the state of Iowa itself. The establishment of broad external advisory boards, such as the College of Agriculture Advisory Council, is one mechanism through which these societal needs can be more rapidly identified. Development of new curricula and updating of current curricula based on the input from these broad external advisory boards can be a key factor in meeting the changing needs of society and industry. This is particularly true for graduate programs and distance education programs, including Extension. One example that was provided from the meeting with external constituencies is the fact that Iowans (especially in rural areas) tend to be averse to taking risks – yet Iowa State University has been noted to have a true entrepreneurial spirit. Providing programs that spark and then support the entrepreneurial spirit of native Iowans may be one means of spurring economic development within the state, a goal of the current Strategic Plan.

F. Information Technology and Learning Resources. The provision of information technology (IT) centrally at ISU had been accomplished by diverse and separate units until the recent reorganization and consolidation. Based on a December 2004 IT Study Report to the Provost, a consolidation process of several central IT providers into a single Information Technology Services (ITS) unit under a Chief Information Officer (CIO) has begun. Although this consolidation process

appears to be progressing well, much more still remains to be done. An important unfinished task is the rationalization of an appropriate budget model(s) for ITS.

Student leaders seemed to be knowledgeable about what IT is available in and out of the classrooms and were eager to inform the team of the high level of IT at their disposal. They also had very positive reaction to the provision of IT throughout the campus with one exception: they did not like the use of the student response systems or “clickers”. Possibly this is due to the fact that “clickers” are only single-purpose devices, in sharp contrast to other IT devices they use or have, which are all multi-purpose. Hence, once the student response systems are not useful as clickers in a large classroom (which the students gave anecdotes of), they are useless.

Faculty and academic administrators seem to have a positive disposition with IT in general and with ITS in particular. This should not be discounted, since good working relationships are the foundations for collaborations and partnerships. As the consolidation of ITS progresses, more and more partnerships with the various academic and support units will become necessary in order to align the central provision of IT in ways that meet and exceed the particular learning and teaching needs and expectations in the diverse units.

Non-academic units like facilities also enjoy a good working relationship and communications with the Office of the Provost and ITS.

Advice: Continue the consolidation and development process for ITS, building out the various central IT services needed by the campus as well as, and more importantly, nurturing and growing robust working relationships with the many sundry collaborators and partners (including students) throughout the campus.

As would be expected in a large complex university, learning resources are distributed in various nooks and crannies within the units and in stashes centrally, from the Library to CELT to Extension. Harnessing this smorgasbord of diverse learning resources may prove even more challenging than provisioning central IT services to an eclectic mix of users. It would be unproductive to try to consolidate these distributed learning resources, as Iowa State is consolidating IT central services; neither would eschewing coordination be productive. Perhaps a building out of a virtual environment of distributed learning resources might be a suitable middle ground and a useful way to begin approaching the issue.

Advice: In addition to building up a front-office virtual environment (including WebCT) to deliver online education and support high-quality distance learning, consider whether it might be productive to build out a back-office virtual environment to leverage and harness the diverse distributed learning resources through out the university.

G. Enrollment Management. ISU has an enrollment management program that tactically addresses the student profiles identified in the institution’s strategic plan.

A comprehensive scholarship program has been funded and tailored to enable the admissions office to recruit children of alumni, minority students, high ability students, out-of-state students and international students.

Given the increased graduation rate of ISU students, it is important that the institution insure its retention efforts are strategically implemented to insure it meets its overall enrollment management goals. Further, the university is encouraged to carefully review the differences in graduation rates for minority and majority students and implement strategies to close the gap.

H. Undergraduate Curriculum. The undergraduate curriculum at ISU is college based. A recent university-wide curriculum reform initiative has resulted in the development and implementation of an innovative communication program. The central feature of this program is the integration of written, oral, visual and electronic communication (WOVE) into a foundation course required of all undergraduate students. Within each college, departments are beginning to establish communication learning outcomes appropriate for their majors. It is recommended that ISUComm and CELT assist departmental faculty to develop and implement WOVE into their courses. Full implementation of ISUComm will require a commitment of the requisite human and fiscal resources.

III. RECOGNITION OF SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS, PROGRESS, AND/OR PRACTICES

The review team commends the institution for the following:

- An unswerving commitment to advancing its mission as a land-grant institution.
- A culture of collaboration that permeates the university environment.
- A student-centered learning approach to education.
- Efficient use of limited resources.
- An inclusive strategic planning process integrated with this regional accreditation cycle.
- Faculty, staff, students and administration exhibit deep commitment to the institution.
- Widespread support of the president and the administrative leadership of the institution.
- a nationally-recognized program of learning communities
- an open and consultative administrative team
- highly engaged and articulate student leadership