

ADVANCEMENT SECTION

REPORT OF A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION VISIT

TO

OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY
Stillwater, OK

September 26-28, 2005

FOR

The Higher Learning Commission

A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

EVALUATION TEAM

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I. OVERALL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

Oklahoma State University is a comprehensive, doctoral-granting, land-grant institution with a presence in every county in Oklahoma. The university has made significant advances since the last HLC comprehensive review, including, for example, in fundraising, assessment of student learning, developing partnerships with community colleges, starting and developing the Tulsa campus, and preparing the university's first system-wide strategic plan.

Like most public colleges and universities, OSU experienced state budget reductions during the late 1990s and during the first few years of the current century, requiring the university to hold many faculty positions vacant and to reduce expenditures in others areas. The economy in Oklahoma appears to have improved and some of the university's funding has been restored.

OSU is led by a relatively new president who is both dynamic and effective and the university is poised to make significant advances in several areas, including research and diversity.

II. CONSULTATIONS OF THE TEAM

Diversity

First and foremost, the team urges Oklahoma State University to fully implement its strategic plan which clearly identifies racial/ethnic and gender diversity as a top institutional priority; other more specific recommendations follow. The team believes that the university has the leadership, resources, and commitment to make significant advances in this critical area. Although leadership and oversight from the Office of the Vice President for Institutional Diversity are essential, the responsibility for success in advancing diversity at OSU must be shared by all OSU employees, units, and constituents.

When considering "preparing for the future," the issue of diversity is a major consideration not only for the Oklahoma State University but also for the state of Oklahoma and for the United States of America. The United States is undergoing one of the largest cultural transformations in its history through the demographics and specifically the ethnic and racial composition of its population. The future for the United States will be significantly more multi-culturally diverse than it has ever been in the past. Universities ignore this demographic transition at their peril. Oklahoma will be greatly affected by this transformation. OSU should not only reflect this, but hopefully, be preparing for the future. OSU has the opportunity to be in the vanguard of this movement by being proactive rather than reactive.

In preparing for the future, OSU should take into account projections of demographics for the state. Among the distinctive ethnic and racial groups in the

state, the only ethnic/racial group that has increased significantly is the Hispanic or Latino group, which increased 240% between the last two Censuses. Undoubtedly, OSU's preparation for the future, especially if it is to be "the STATE'S university," must incorporate these projections into all aspects of its operations.

The importance of "diversity" at OSU is expressed in OSU's core values, strategic themes, and strategic priorities (diversity is 1 of 6 values, 1 of 5 strategic themes, and 1 of 9 strategic priorities). It is not, however, reflected in the general education curriculum or the general education assessment program. The team encourages the university to continue its recent effort to align the diversity goals with the general education curriculum and assessment programs.

The Affirmative Action Office is comprised of one person, the Affirmative Action Officer, who is "responsible for all matters related to the university's equal employment opportunity/affirmative action programs" (Self-Study Report, page 33). This office, however, appears to be minimally involved in various relevant and pertinent areas such as in the faculty hiring process. Additionally, grievances and complaints apparently are investigated by the Affirmative Action Office, staff of one. In fact, the team simply had difficulty understanding the scope, role, and responsibilities of this office and wondered if the university is out of compliance with federal regulations. Thus, the team urges OSU to immediately assess and clarify the role, scope, and responsibilities of the Affirmative Action Office to assure itself that, at the minimum, no compliance issues are at stake. In undertaking this assessment and clarification, OSU may wish to examine the structure, responsibilities, and organization of affirmative action offices of peer institutions.

OSU recently mandated a workshop for all faculty and staff regarding gender and sexual harassment. A similar program regarding ethnic and racial discrimination would send a strong message to the community about the importance of the issue and would provide one source of awareness and education about inappropriate behaviors reported to have been experienced by some in the community of color.

In most colleges first year students are required to take a one-credit orientation class. A unit within the course addressing racial, ethnic, and gender issues would send a strong message about the importance of the issue and would provide critical information at an opportune time.

A draft of a recent survey of graduate students by the Graduate and Professional Student Government Association indicated a significant proportion of the students did not agree that OSU was a supportive campus for those with diverse backgrounds. In addition, about 10% of the students reported that they had

experienced acts of discrimination based on race, nationality, gender or religion. Follow-up research by the university to determine the nature and origin of these experiences would help the institution to better target programs to address the relevant issues.

The visiting team recommends that the Multicultural Student Center (MSC) be brought into discussions on meeting the university's diversity goals. The MSC is an untapped resource that could contribute to many, and perhaps all aspects, of OSU's goal of achieving the multicultural diversity that will prepare its students for a global, multicultural future. The staff has many contacts with ethnically and racially diverse students, staff and faculty both on the OSU campus and elsewhere, and they have many good ideas about steps that OSU should take to reach its diversity objectives. The MSC could very well be one of the key catalysts to success in this area for OSU.

The Graduate School is changing the requirements for admission to the graduate faculty, allowing qualified professionals from outside OSU to serve on doctoral committees. Since Oklahoma's 1890 institution, Langston University, is only about 30 minutes from the Stillwater campus (OSU-Tulsa and Langston-Tulsa are even closer), OSU may wish to consider allowing qualified Langston University faculty to participate on such committees and even be appointed as adjunct faculty in relevant departments. This could potentially help increase the number of OSU's graduate students and faculty of color.

Based on what the team heard, the "multicultural floors" in the residential halls may not be functionally effective. The team recommends that the university further investigate and assess this initiative and, based on the information obtained, decide a course of action.

Information Technology

The campus recently went through a substantial reversal of a controversial reorganization of computing services. In the visiting team's judgment, the lingering feelings from those recent events have left university personnel reluctant to talk about what the visiting team identified as an issue warranting attention: insufficient campus-wide coordination of information technology resources. Students, however, did talk about some manifestations of it—a bewildering hodgepodge of email systems and two course management systems. For every college/university there is an appropriate balance of centralization/decentralization of these resources depending upon the missions and needs of the component units. It does not appear that OSU has found that balance. In its absence there is duplication of hardware, software, and human resources with the result that scarce institutional dollars are wasted. Given the recent past, it is unlikely that an internal, campus-based study would produce conclusions that would be widely accepted. Therefore, the campus should

consider selecting an outside consulting firm, one with experience advising clients with the kind of decentralized organizational structure found at a land-grant university. In light of recent campus events, the firm should probably be chosen by a bid-review committee representative of interested parties across the institution; and the study itself should be transparent throughout. Such a study should result in better service for IT users and reduced costs for the University.

Tulsa Campus

Oklahoma State University-Tulsa, an upper-level/graduate campus, appears to have a bright future, although it is time to review relevant demographics and other factors in order to develop a well-based enrollment plan. Morale there is high among faculty, staff, and students. Relationships with OSU-Stillwater, Langston University, Tulsa Community College, other institutions of higher education in Tulsa, and business and civic leaders are all strong and cordial. These relationships will be the key to the future progress of the new campus as it plays what is expected to be a major role in meeting the higher education and economic development needs of the Tulsa metropolitan area. OSU leaders in Stillwater and Tulsa would do well to anticipate and address a variety of relationship issues in advance. There will be issues between the two campuses, particularly as the Tulsa campus grows. For example, a tenure-track faculty member based in Tulsa will not have the same opportunity as a counterpart on the Stillwater campus to become acquainted with and work with departmental colleagues, the department chair, and the dean—which can be a disadvantage when the tenure decision is made. Issues of equal pay for equivalent staff positions on the two campuses are likely to arise. Including a program offered on both campuses in a single professional or specialized accreditation could in some instances be an issue. In the near-term, the issue most needing attention is the relationship with Langston University, an historically black institution, which has undergraduate programs that are “protected” as a result of desegregation decisions in the state a quarter-century ago. OSU-Tulsa’s future growth and the scope of the higher education services it can provide in the future will be significantly constrained if OSU-Tulsa is not authorized to offer curricula in disciplines now reserved to Langston. Community and higher education leaders will need to develop a win-win strategy for the two institutions consistent with the needs of the people of the Tulsa metropolitan area.

Other Recommendation

Library: Faculty, staff and students indicated that the library staff is very helpful and responsive to their needs. Some aspects of the library services, however, create undue difficulty for students and faculty in their research: 1) the library holdings are not at a level that would be expected at a major research university; 2) the lack of secured study carrels for graduate students and faculty in the library creates undue difficulty in their research work, e.g., these users are

unable to leave computers and materials in a safe area while retrieving additional materials in the library; and 3) students expressed frustration with the duplication service and indicated that often the machines do not work or are out of paper at times when the duplication staff office is not open. A strategic plan for the library that is consistent with the university's strategic plan would assist OSU in meeting future needs of the faculty, staff, and students.

Faculty: The university has expended significant resources to attract and hire new faculty. Comprehensive new faculty programs should be implemented to protect that investment and assure the success of these new faculty members as teachers and researchers. The new Institute for Teaching and Learning Excellence will be a valuable university resource for such a program. Complementary programs will be needed at the college level. Exemplary programs exist in some colleges; other colleges will need assistance and guidance.

Assessment: While the assessment program is solid, student involvement in the process is not apparent. The institution should work toward involving students in the assessment process both in terms of development of assessment initiatives and in disseminating the results of assessment to students.

The Academic Ledger is well known and understood across campus. There is a concern, however, at the apparent lack of connection between the reporting required for the ledger and the assessment of student learning outcomes. The team encourages the university to make the connections between the two major assessment efforts more transparent and explicitly demonstrate how the assessment of student learning outcomes supports the assessment of the overall strategic plan.

Graduate Education: A closer working relationship is warranted between the Graduate College and other academic colleges for better coordination of resources and reliable exchange of information.

Recent funding from the state to launch the Graduate Advancement Program (GAP) is another example of the university exploring all options to support graduate education and research. However, additional funds will be needed to address concerns related to graduate student stipends, tuition waivers, the health benefits package, and travel to professional meetings and conferences.

In the efforts to increase graduate assistant stipends, the institution might consider models that would reduce the extent of inequities among stipends of non-grant based assistantships, e.g., establish a limited number of levels of assistantships based on well defined criteria for each level.

Research: OSU has made significant progress in recent years towards their goal of increasing research activity and productivity on the campus. A joint review of the tenure and promotion documents by the provost and the vice president for research would enhance the alignment of the reward system with those goals and would increase awareness, consistency, and transparency of the research expectation in the tenure and promotion process.

Land Grant Mission: OSU should ensure that its land-grant mission is clearly understood and supported. The president and regents clearly recognize and have a strong vision for this mission, as evidenced, for example, by the recent creation of the position of vice president for agricultural programs. However, the land-grant mission does not appear to be well understood or appreciated throughout the university. There was no mention in the self-study report under Criterion Four, for example, of the state-wide research role played by the agricultural experiment stations. These units contribute directly to fulfilling its research and service missions.

OSU Cooperative Extension and OSU Experiment Station are the only components of the state budget system that cannot make up any state funding shortfalls with tuition and fees. The visiting team recommends this issue be studied.

Integrity: The Syllabus Attachment contains important information for students and references the document, "Student Rights and Responsibilities." It is, however, not adequately informative about what the university considers as plagiarism. Students would benefit if the attachment (or alternative form if used by faculty member) included a definition of plagiarism in addition to the reference to the full document.

OSU has a good resource course, "Responsible Conduct of Research," for faculty, staff, and administrators. Graduate assistants, however, have not been systematically exposed to that information or training. Recent action to revise the plan of study form to include participation in a workshop and an agreement to adhere to appropriate procedures in the conduct of research is an important step. Immediate attention needs to be given to establishing some system of assurance that student research does not take place before training.

International Students: The Office of International Students and Scholars has staff expertise with immigration regulations. The process of admission and issuing of the I-20 forms to students might be more efficient if the I-20s were issued by this office.

Planning: While the strategic planning process has been bottom up, with unit strategic plans, and with strong oversight from the president for the campus plan,

additional iterations (although not involving an extensive or lengthy process nor major revisions to the university's strategic plan) might be helpful to fully align the organization from top to bottom. Resource allocations, including additional faculty resources, will undoubtedly improve such alignment in responsive units. While the iterative process is currently on hold, it is advisable to continue improving the strategic plans at the unit level to assure full campus alignment.

The role of University Planning Council as the group to keep OSU "honest" in how it looks at itself through a focus on the data (the ledger) seems inconsistent with the title "Planning." Furthermore, the council seemed unsure of its future direction, other than that its main responsibility at this point was to be a monitoring or watchdog group. The council was in a "mark time" phase waiting "until the ink dried" on the first round of reports. The constituencies of the various members, or the groups they represented, were either unclear or unconventional. The council told the visiting team that one of the weaknesses of the planning activities had been the lack of conducting an "environmental scan." Moreover, the council thought the next major task would be to examine the ledgers for the added staff and other "non-academic" areas.

The visiting team recommends that the responsibilities and functions of the University Planning Council be clarified for the near future and within that clarification, there be an assessment regarding the value of conducting an environmental scan.

While OSU has a plan to provide faculty resources, there is insufficient communication between the administration and the faculty or from the central administration to the department heads/chairs on how this is being accomplished. Such lack of clear communication on the campus results in less than effective support for strategic plans as well as more than palpable distrust of many campus decisions. Thus, the team recommends that the university attempt to be more clear and consistent in its communications.

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

Strategic Plan

OSU, and specifically the president, is to be commended for developing a first-ever, system-wide strategic plan. The plan, developed with broad input from both internal and external constituencies, does an excellent job of identifying OSU's goals and priorities and thus charts a solid course for the university. Additionally, the ledger provides a means to continuously assess progress toward meeting institutional goals as well as transparency and accountability. Although the university should continue to take advantage of unexpected opportunities as they materialize, OSU is strongly encouraged to focus its human

and financial resources as well as its facilities and other relevant assets to realizing the strategic plan. Achieving the plan's goals will result in a stronger, healthier, and more successful university, a university better able to fulfill its comprehensive, land-grant mission.

Tulsa Campus

OSU has done an excellent job of developing the Tulsa campus and of integrating it, as closely, as possible, with the Stillwater campus. The campus is well on its way to becoming a leading higher education provider in the greater Tulsa area.

Leadership

OSU is currently led by a strong president who is committed to moving the university forward on many important fronts. This is demonstrated, for example, in his leading the development of the system's strategic plan and in the effort to resolve the lingering retirement issue. The team found many other examples of the president's dynamic and effective leadership.

The leadership at the Tulsa campus also was noticeable and greatly appreciated by both internal and external constituents.

The creation of two new vice presidential positions, vice president for agricultural programs and vice president for institutional diversity, is clear evidence of the importance placed on the university's land-grant service mission and the institution's need to diversify both its workforce (including faculty) and student body to better fulfill its mission.