

American University Response

Middle States Commission Evaluation Team Report

April 27, 2004

The entire American University community would like to express special thanks to the evaluation team for the serious scrutiny they gave to our institutional self-study, for their openness, and for the thoughtful perspectives they communicated during and after their campus visit. We benefited greatly from their insights, comments and suggestions.

The team's evaluation report agrees with our institutional self-study that AU has made tremendous progress over the past 10 years and that "the institution meets all the accreditation standards set forth in the Characteristics of Excellence" (p.1). Key observations of the report include the following:

- The institution's strategic plan, known as the 15-point Plan, has "become woven into the fabric of institutional culture and implementation is proceeding apace." (p. 2)
- "The financial health of the institution has significantly improved over the past several years." (p. 2)
- The university has launched a \$200 million fund-raising campaign.
- "Governance at American University is open and collegial, with appropriate written policies to outline responsibilities, broad participation on all levels, and a high level of trust. The administration provides strong leadership." (p. 4)
- "... American University faculty members are committed instructors both in and out of the classroom while they pursue impressive research and service agendas. Examples abound of faculty members who are exploring, with the support and encouragement of the University, the interconnections between teaching, research, and service/engagement." (p. 7)
- "American University provides an extensive array of academic support services and student life programs and services. Overall, the staff and faculty involved in Learning Resources and Campus Life are dedicated, innovative and well qualified." (p. 8)
- "The undergraduate curriculum at American University has been designed to reflect its unique goal to foster a distinctive, global university based on academic excellence and creativity." (p. 11)
- "The University has fostered a campus climate with students engaged in the important issues of our time. A diverse curriculum, service learning courses, noteworthy programs allowing for experiential learning around the world and the extensive utilization of the vast resources in the nation's capital all combine to offer students at this University a rare combination of active engagement." (p.11)

Response to Specific Recommendations

1. *That the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Project Team intensify its efforts to oversee the completion and implementation of the Student Learning Outcomes Plan for all undergraduate programs—including General Education as well as those accredited by external agencies. (Chapter 7)*

The work of the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Project Team continues to be an important element in American University's efforts to implement its comprehensive assessment plan. What may not be as apparent as we had assumed is that all academic programs have developed mission statements, learning outcomes, and assessment plans. Units are now in process of revising their plans and implementing assessment activities. (See Attachment "A" for timeline.)

The recommendation conveys an impression that AU has not included General Education or programs accredited by external agencies as part of its assessment plan. This impression is inaccurate. Assessment plans for all undergraduate programs, including those accredited by external agencies, are either complete or in the process of being finalized. The General Education Committee is currently entrusted with the oversight of the General Education Assessment Plan and this plan is proceeding on schedule.

2. *That a plan be developed and implemented for the internal and external evaluation of all undergraduate programs. (Chapter 7)*

The team report correctly states that, "Another strength of the undergraduate curriculum lies in the fact that it has been evaluated internally for overall effectiveness in achieving the University's mission and 15-point plan. Project Teams have terminated six programs, established eight new independent programs along with developing a new joint program in the College of Arts and Sciences and the School of Communication" (p. 8). Internal evaluation is a regular, on-going part of the institution's curriculum review and is part of each unit's annual report. (See *Self-Study*, Chapter 2.)

Many university programs already are reviewed on a regular basis by external accrediting organizations. However, our experience has been that such evaluations work best when experts are brought in on an as-needed basis to assist with specific issues or areas of concern. The *Characteristics of Excellence* do not require an institution to have a regularized schedule of external reviews for each individual undergraduate program.

3. *That the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Project Team intensify its efforts to oversee the completion and implementation of the Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Plan for all graduate programs – even those accredited by external agencies. (Chapter 8)*

The work of the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Project Team entails implementing Assessment Plans for all graduate programs, including those accredited by external agencies. (See Appendix "A" for timeline)

4. *That a plan be developed and implemented for internal and external evaluation of all graduate programs. (Chapter 8)*

The team report observes that, “Most significant at this juncture in the history of graduate education at American University is ongoing program review... After lengthy and somewhat painful deliberation, five doctoral programs and eight master’s degrees were eliminated.” (p. 10). The legacy of ongoing review is chronicled in the *Self-Study Report*. In addition to an extensive review of all graduate programs conducted in 2002-2003, program evaluations include the doctoral program review conducted in 1994-1998 and the Master’s Program Review in 1997-2000. As the *Self-Study Report* explains:

The questions in these reviews have centered on the competitiveness of specific offerings, including such issues as student quality, as measured by standardized test scores; undergraduate GPAs; demand for programs as evidenced by numbers of applications, acceptance rates, and conversion rates; and indicators of student success, as measured by retention rates, completion rates, and the ability of students to obtain employment in their fields of training. Additionally, several reviews have investigated faculty qualifications for graduate teaching, especially at the doctoral level. (Chapter 8, pp. 120-121)

Also, indirect assessment measures such as the graduate campus climate survey and the graduation census are conducted on a regular basis and help to inform program evaluation. As with undergraduate programs, internal evaluation is a regular, on-going part of the institution’s curriculum review and is part of each unit’s annual report.

With respect to external reviews, many graduate programs already are reviewed by external accrediting bodies. In cases where external accreditation does not exist, external evaluators are brought in as needed.

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The institutional self-study and Middle States Commission review process have been very positive for American University. The self-study document will continue to be used long after the Commission’s action is complete. We have already begun to implement many of the visiting team recommendations and we look forward to updating the Commission in our Periodic Review Report.