

The Commission on Higher Education reaffirms SU's vision for the future

By Kathryn Lee

Remember report cards? Those small pieces of paper filled with marks and comments that you dreaded each quarter in grade school? The regular assessment of your academic progress and department?

As a schoolchild you may have imagined—or wished—that by the time you reached adulthood, this sort of measuring device would fade into the background. That's not what happened, of course. Performance reviews, departmental audits, and company-wide assessments are part of everyday life. Done right, these processes can lead to fundamental change for the better. Individuals and institutions can benefit from these opportunities to capitalize on strengths and shore up weaknesses.

So it has been for Syracuse University.

SU's "report card" is issued by the national Commission on Higher Education (CHE) through its Middle States Association (MSA). A passing grade means accreditation or reaccreditation, the essential factor that makes a Syracuse University diploma a meaningful, recognized symbol of an education completed. While no one ever doubted the outcome, we passed—with flying colors. The official word came on July 8 when the CHE reissued the University's accreditation with no reservations.

The Team's Assessment

When a college or university seeks the CHE stamp of approval, a visiting team of faculty and administrators from other accredited institutions is appointed to visit the campus, examine the required documentation, interview representatives of the host institution's constituencies, and issue a report with recommendations. That report forms the basis for the CHE's deliberations and decisions.

Syracuse University's team was led by John DiBiaggio, president of Tufts University, and included representatives from the University of Iowa, the University of Pennsylvania, the National Defense University, George Washington University, the Claremont Graduate University, The American University, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

In its report, the team called SU an institution that is transforming itself into "a vibrant university of accomplishment and distinction." It noted that Syracuse has "a clearly defined sense of purpose; a well-informed and supportive Board of Trustees; a competent and dedicated administration willing to share information openly; talented, hardworking, and committed faculty and staff; (and) enthusiastic and involved students." The report went on to commend SU for its encouraging and nurturing environment for students, faculty, and staff; strategic plan; quality improvement initiative (SUIQ—Syracuse University Improving Quality); broad array of program offerings; and progress toward achieving diversity.

"I am gratified by the Middle States team's endorsement of our work to date," says Chancellor Kenneth A. Shaw. "They could clearly see that our efforts to achieve our vision as the nation's leading student-centered research university have borne fruit. Most of all, though, I am pleased that the team saw what we who love this University know so well—that we are doing this together as a team and that we have the support of our faculty, staff, students, trustees, and alumni."

Vice Chancellor Gershon Vincow agrees. "The report is a validation not only of our successes so far, but also of the leadership role the University has assumed in higher education. We have taken a different, less traditional path toward our vision, one that is reflected in our self-study and in the team's report."

Vincow refers to the decision to forgo the usual approach to a review of this type. CHE and MSA have established 16 criteria for accreditation that institutions commonly focus on as a basis for their self-studies and team visits. These include such measures as appropriate student services, clearly stated admissions policies, and institutional integrity.

Some institutions are permitted to chart a different course, especially when they are experiencing a time of significant transformation. Syracuse clearly fit this category.

Accordingly, the University's self-study was designed to both



chronicle its efforts over the past seven years—the period that began with budget restructuring in response to enrollment declines and financial considerations—and to set forth four key action areas for the next five years.

Associate Vice Chancellor Michael Flusche was chair of the self-study committee and chief author of the exhaustive 100-page report. “The long process of preparing for our Middle States Association visit was a community-wide effort that spanned a two-year period,” he says. “We tapped into the abundant wisdom and expertise on this campus and beyond as we created a picture of a university that has faced major challenges and become far stronger in the process.”

Flusche says the resulting self-study report was accurate and honest and included both successes and frustrations that have materialized along the way. “But even more important,” he says, “was the consensus we reached on the four action areas for the immediate future. This was an important step in the direction of continuous improvement we have set for ourselves.”

The four action areas are:

1. Intensify efforts to become the leading student-centered research university;
2. Support the faculty’s pursuit of the University vision;
3. Support the staff’s pursuit of the University vision;
4. Create a positive campus environment for the education and personal development of undergraduate students.

Each of the action areas described in the self-study includes specific recommendations for implementation. For example, the report calls for greater effort to articulate the distinguishing characteristics of Syracuse as a leading student-centered research institution. This is to be accomplished through ongoing dialogue within the community, dialogue that will elicit the views of all members, from students and alumni to faculty and staff. (The self-study and the MSA team report are on the University’s web page: <http://cwis.syr.edu/WWW-Syr/ISS>.)

The Recommendations

Not surprisingly, the MSA team’s recommendations mirrored the action areas described in the self-study. The team recommends, for instance, that the University take this opportunity to address more fully the goals of the research and graduate components of its vision. It recommends further efforts toward defining for faculty the

expected balance between research and teaching, especially considering the heavier emphasis on the latter in the past few years. It recommends further progress in retaining students through graduation, a critical measure of a truly student-centered research institution and an area already showing great improvement at Syracuse.

The team also strongly recommends a greater emphasis on fundraising. While this, too, is an area of improvement at Syracuse, and while there is every reason to expect successful completion of the \$300-million Commitment to Learning campaign by the year 2000, much more needs to be done to make the University’s vision real. The team suggests that Syracuse intensify its efforts to tell the Syracuse story and to rely more on students and faculty members as spokespeople to the wider community.

Chancellor Shaw agrees. “We must—and we will—attract more resources to this University,” he says. “We must because without sufficient support, progress toward our vision will lag behind the pace we have set. We will because our story is a compelling one, one that has the nation’s attention as a model for higher education in the next century.”

Next Steps

True to its intent to make the self-study and report far more than a reaccreditation exercise, SU is using the experience as a launching pad for further gains. The team report has already been the topic of lengthy discussions at meetings of the department heads as well as of the academic deans and directors. It has been the focus of the Chancellor’s annual retreat for both the administrative and academic cabinets, and of the Chancellor’s annual address to the faculty in September.

Priority areas are emerging: providing strategic support for research and enhanced planning for graduate programs; clarifying the relative weight given to faculty teaching, research, creative activity, and service; increasing faculty and staff compensation; attending to career development; offering a rich array of opportunities for students’ personal development; providing stronger support for the library systems; and continuing progress in enhancing diversity, particularly among the faculty and the senior ranks of the administration.

“I expect much more to come from these documents,” Chancellor Shaw says. “And I know it will, given this community of outstanding individuals whose extraordinary work has brought us to this enviable position and whose continuing efforts will take us further still.”

