EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
of the Higher Learning Commission Self Study

SEPTEMBER 2007
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HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION
The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools is one of six regional accrediting associations in the United States. A peer review process is utilized and based upon the assumption that quality in higher education is best served through a process that “enables peers of the organization, informed by standards best understood and applied by professionals in higher education, to make the comparative judgments essential to quality assurance.” At the heart of the accreditation process is the search for the answers to three essential questions:
1. Does the institution adhere to the core values expressed in its mission statement?
2. Is the university successful in addressing the learning needs of its students?
3. Does the institution have the appropriate resources (financial, human, and physical) to meet future challenges?

In tying accreditation to an institution's self-proclaimed mission and purpose, the Higher Learning Commission requires an organization to document that it is actually doing what it claims that it is committed to doing.

UNIVERSITY MISSION AND STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS
Saint Xavier University's mission and core values define its institutional purpose and stance toward those it serves. Additionally, the University's most recent institutional goals provide an excellent sense of its future directions. These Eight Strategic Directions, the culmination of four months of intensive work and study that began in the fall of 2003 by five Study Teams consisting of more than 60 faculty, staff, and administrators, are understood as a set of interconnected guideposts that define broader horizons for greater excellence and greater institutional recognition in the coming years. Future efforts at all levels of the University's organization will use these strategic initiatives to
guide thinking, discourse, and planning that will move the institution consistently, continuously, and intentionally towards the ultimate vision of becoming a leading comprehensive Catholic university in the Midwest.

HLC SELF-STUDY
Thus, the HLC Self-Study is seen as an ongoing, community-wide, inclusive process that will strengthen and expand the University strategic planning activities formally launched in the fall of 2003. While the strategic plan identifies paths and priorities for institutional action, the Self-Study identifies obstacles and ways to overcome them. While the strategic plan identifies external issues and trends, the Self-Study helps ascertain how the institution should respond to them. While the strategic plan started the process of self-analysis and self-reflection, the Self-Study continues the process with a wider audience and a more in-depth analysis. And while the strategic plan launched institutional unit-level planning and budgeting, the Self-Study findings will inform future planning through its identification of the University’s strengths, challenges, and recommendations for future improvement.

INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHS

Academic Quality. A growing body of evidence indicates that the core academic enterprise of the University is strong. NSSE benchmarks for the level of academic challenge are significantly higher than at Carnegie peers and on par with schools of aspiration. Findings from nationally recognized assessments of student learning (e.g. Collegiate Learning Assessment) show higher than expected levels of performance in critical thinking and writing. The academic profile of entering freshmen has improved steadily since 1998. The institution’s focus on student learning will become stronger in the coming years through the University’s participation in the Higher Learning Commission’s (HLC) Assessment Academy.

An Emerging Presence. The past decade has seen an unprecedented growth in enrollments at both the undergraduate and graduate levels which few not-for-profit institutions in Illinois can match. Since the last HLC Self-Study in 1997, Saint Xavier University has grown from being a small private institution with limited visibility and recognition to a mid-size University of approximately 5700 students with an emerging regional presence. Its position in the annual U.S. News and World Report has moved from a “lower tier” institution in 1997 to the top quarter of master’s universities in the greater Midwest in 2007. It has moved up 10 positions since 2003. Undergraduate and graduate applications are expected to remain strong and continue to grow in the coming years.

Mission-Based Strategic Planning Process. A comprehensive strategic planning process begun in 2003 has articulated a clear strategic vision, eight strategic directions, the institution’s core values, a restatement of our mission, and a philosophy statement and vision of our Catholic identity. A reformulation of institutional leadership consistent with the strategic vision includes creation of a cabinet level leader for University Mission and Heritage, establishment of a Provost position, creation of cabinet leaders for University Relations and Information Resources and Technologies, and the elevation of the Office of University Research, Planning, and Assessment to the cabinet level. Engagement in strategic planning occurs across all sectors and levels of the University.

Recent Achievements in Fundraising and Board Development. President Judith A. Dwyer has led a vigorous resurgence in fundraising activities and board development and planning. Since her appointment in 2003, gifts and grants have exceeded $27 million, the endowment is approximately two times
larger than it was four years ago, alumni giving rates are on the rise, and the number of new donors is growing. Plans for stronger board performance and board recruitment are underway with guidance from representatives of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.

Focus on Full-Time Faculty. The University demonstrates a firm commitment to the role of full-time faculty in sustaining excellence in teaching and learning. Compensation for full-time faculty at Saint Xavier University is relatively high compared with peer institutions, the most recent round of collective bargaining includes course reductions for scholarship and service, and strategic planning goals envision an ideal full-time/part-time mix of no more than 25% part-time faculty assigned to primary lecture course sections. Fall 2006 saw the creation within the University of 14 new faculty lines.

A New General Education Curriculum. In Fall 2007, the University will begin the first pilot phase of a new General Education Program scheduled to commence in 2009. The new program is innovative, interdisciplinary, and developmental in scope. It will include first-year learning cohorts, community-based learning, diversity and global studies, foreign language coursework, and interdisciplinary learning. Undergraduates will participate in a junior-level seminar and receive the benefits of a senior transitions course in preparation for entry into post-baccalaureate life.

Campus Life and Student Services. As the University enrolled more full-time, first-time, and resident students over the past decade, student services and activities evolved to produce a more vibrant campus culture. More students are participating in a growing number of campus events and co-curricular activities, student ratings of campus support are significantly higher than Carnegie peers, new initiatives are underway for residents and commuters, and student retention in residence halls is improving. High performance by several varsity athletic teams in the NAIA is helping to cultivate a stronger and shared sense of school spirit.

Diversity. Saint Xavier University is proud of its high ranking for racial/ethnic diversity by U.S. News and World Report (among the top 10 Midwest comprehensive institutions). As one of the core institutional values articulated at the start of the strategic planning process in 2003, diversity has broad implications about how a university community can be hospitable to people, ideas, and perspectives. In this context, racial and ethnic diversity is an institutional asset that can strengthen the Saint Xavier University experience for students, staff, and faculty alike. There is abundant evidence that SXU students understand that diversity is an important institutional priority. A university-wide Diversity Action Team (DAT) facilitated a model for multicultural organizational development, and every unit across campus plans to advance this model.

Mentoring for Mission and Heritage. The creation of the Office of University Mission and Heritage in 2004 has led to a much stronger community presence and awareness of core values, Catholic identity, and our Sisters of Mercy heritage. New initiatives include mentoring new faculty and staff, a Catholic lecture series, a new student induction and medallion ceremony, an annual staff performance appraisal process linked with core values and strategic vision, among many others. The findings from student exit surveys indicate a growing awareness of mission and core values among both undergraduate and graduate students.

INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

Future Fundraising Goals. Despite recent successes in procuring new donors and external revenue, fundraising goals for the President and Board of Trustees in the coming decade will be quite challenging. A top priority in the coming three years is construction of a new 21st Century library at the Chicago Campus, a project viewed as a gateway to sustained transformational giving for many years to come. At the same time, the University will continue efforts to grow the endowment to much higher levels and reduce dependency on tuition revenue.
SAINT XAVIER UNIVERSITY

New Challenges for Retention and Graduation Outcomes. Unlike past success in retaining and graduating undergraduate students, the University is losing ground on this important institutional indicator. Steady improvements in the academic profile of entering freshmen over the past five years have not translated into the higher levels of retention that were expected. Improvements on this measure are essential for attainment of both the University mission and strategic vision. The University needs to undertake coordinated and comprehensive planning efforts towards this end as well as allocation of more resources.

Academic Support Services. Benchmarking of measures of resource allocation indicate that the University is spending significantly less in this particular category than both our aspirant institutions and our peers. At the same time, the University allocates significantly more of its resources for direct instructional activities than both aspirants and peers. The category of academic support includes the Library, advising, tutoring, and academic computing services. The University will have to find ways to address imbalances in this area without sacrificing quality in other activities related to teaching and learning.

Instructional Facilities and Space. The transformation of the University’s buildings and other physical facilities included in the Campus Master Plan is far from complete. Portions of the Chicago Campus are in need of attention, including the science labs and certain classroom areas. The University must remain committed to the renovation of the existing facilities as well as the addition of new facilities. It must also make more efficient use of existing space at the Chicago Campus and to increase daytime utilization of the Orland Park Campus through comprehensive academic program planning.

Resident Student Housing and Campus Life. The stronger than expected demand for student housing is putting significant strain on existing facilities and placing more students in off-campus residences than desired. Completion of a multi-year student housing plan and the expansion of present capacity are critical in the attainment Strategic Directions 2 and 3. Along with the expansion of housing capacity, the University will have to provide resources for a more active campus life on the weekends as well as weekdays.

Stronger Connections Between Academic Activities and Student Affairs. Although student participation in campus events and activities is on the rise, the NSSE benchmark for Enriching Educational Experiences lags behind both peer and aspirant institutions. Student participation in service learning and community-based projects is particularly low, despite growing opportunities for community-based activities from the Offices of Student Affairs and Campus Ministry. Stronger connections between core academic activities and professionals in student affairs promise to advance student engagement measures towards desired levels.

Full-time Faculty Hiring and Adjunct Mix. The introduction of the new General Education Program, with smaller caps on some first-year courses, will make it more challenging to reach the long-term goal of no more than 25% of the course sections taught by part-time faculty. Plans for new full-time faculty hiring will also be developed in accordance with Diversity Action Plans rolled out in 2007.

Graduate Programs Coordination and Planning. Rapid enrollment growth in a few key graduate programs over the past decade has prompted reflection and review of their future role in longer-term strategic plans. Since Saint Xavier’s graduate population is much larger (proportionately) than aspirants and peers, questions about optimal graduate/undergraduate mix and coordination of graduate programs have entered into institutional conversations. There are presently several different opinions and views on this issue, especially on the possible creation of a new position of graduate director. The University will have to clarify graduate programs size in a multi-year enrollment model, and it will need to gain consensus on the best way to coordinate graduate programs in the near future.

Sustained Connections with the Sisters of Mercy. Future membership in the Sisters of Mercy, as in many other Catholic religious orders, is expected to decline rapidly in the coming decade. In the face of declining numbers, other members of the University community who are not members of this religious order will need to assume greater responsibility for the safekeeping and continuation of their traditions and heritage. Although the University has begun to make progress, much more will need to be done in coming years.
The Deans' Council and department chairs should review the current staff performance evaluation instrument in light of the specific needs of staff supervision in the College of Arts and Sciences and the professional schools.

The University should remain committed to the realization of a campus master plan that includes the addition of new facilities as well as the renovation of existing ones.

The University should develop and communicate a focused academic plan for the Orland Park Campus that fully utilizes the facility.

Student Learning and Effective Teaching

The college, schools, departments, and programs should clearly document and report program changes made as a result of assessment efforts and, when appropriate, share this information with other academic units.

The University should develop a five-year assessment plan to address assessment data collection, analysis, and distribution, expanding its base of information to include transfer, commuter, and adult students.

The University should strongly encourage the scholarship of teaching through faculty and curriculum development incentives in order to promote both the institution's commitment to teaching excellence, new calls for advancements in faculty research, and integrating instructional technologies.

The deans and faculty should review existing course evaluation surveys, their distribution and collection, and their overall effectiveness and use in improving instruction.

The University should enhance professional opportunities for faculty that contribute to the modification of curriculum and instructional practices in response to changing student demographics.

The University should identify and secure funding for a Campus Center to host student life activities and community programming. Additionally, the University should provide enhanced support for study abroad and service learning.
Acquisition, Discovery, and Application of Knowledge

- The University should review current systems of faculty development support—including mentoring of junior faculty, the role of the Center for Educational Practice in faculty development activities, as well as the needs of adjunct faculty members—and implement strategies and incentives that effectively respond to the range of faculty and curricular needs.
- Members of the University administration should more actively share their leadership development with the SXU community.
- Given the significant contribution of study abroad to knowledge concerning diversity and global studies, the University should develop specific strategies and incentives to increase participation of faculty and students in study abroad.
- As scholarly activity increases, the University should review administrative support for and capacities of the Institutional Review Board.
- The Faculty Affairs Committee and the administration should move immediately to come to agreements on policies related to faculty intellectual property rights and include them in the next collective bargaining agreement.
- The University should collect and communicate information about service learning and social action projects that documents how the institution variously embodies its commitments to social justice.

Engagement and Service

- The University should more intentionally collect and distribute information on faculty professional consulting services in order to promote further engagement with external constituents.
- Given the clear benefits experiential learning offers both to student academic progress and to community relations and development, the University should prioritize support for community-based learning, especially in the arts and sciences curriculum where it is least developed.
- The University should review the degree to which the Health Center requires additional expertise related to managing healthcare business activities and develop a continuous improvement plan to evaluate its operations and services.
- The University should establish administrative responsibilities to monitor and document the institution’s service activities. Also, the University should establish criteria for establishing new service programming that align with the University’s academic mission and strategic goals.

LOOKING AHEAD

Fifteen years ago in 1992, Chicago’s oldest college became one of its newest universities. Then during its first two years, Saint Xavier University experienced what may have been its worst financial crisis. In 1997, the year of its last decennial NCA accreditation visit, the University was still emerging from the serious fiscal problems. As this Self-Study indicates, having achieved financial stability through the influence of strong leadership and planning throughout the institution, the University is now more reflective about how it will realize its mission. It is more engaged in measuring progress towards specific goals using benchmarks to assess academic, programmatic, and operational initiatives. It is also more focused on the future while engaged in the process of becoming a more data-informed and mission-driven institution.

Still, as noted by many of the challenges and recommendations listed above, and as detailed in the Self-Study itself, financial tensions remain. Given the low-endowment, tuition-driven nature of the institution, the University will need to generate additional revenues, control and cut costs, and reapportion its resources so that it can realize its vision of becoming a leading comprehensive Catholic university in the Midwest and its stewardship of limited and tuition-generated resources.

Nevertheless, Saint Xavier University is well-positioned to fulfill its mission because of its capacity to build upon its strengths and to respond to its challenges through effective leadership, institutional assessment, and community-based strategic planning, and therefore, requests continuing accreditation by the Higher Learning Commission.