

**Report to the
Faculty, Administration, Trustees, and Students**

Of

Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania

Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania

By

An Evaluation Team Representing the

Commission on Higher Education

Of the Middle States Association

Of Colleges and Universities

Prepared after study of the institution's self-study report
And a visit to the campus on 3 - 6 March, 2001

The members of the team:

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This report represents the views of the evaluation team as interpreted by the Chair. This report is prepared as an educational service, and all comments are made in good faith, in an effort to assist Slippery Rock University. This report is sent directly to the institution before being considered by the Commission, and the institution will distribute the report. The Commission applies its standards in the context of the special goals of each institution.

AT THE TIME OF THE VISIT

Date when instruction began: 1889

First students graduated: 1890

President/CEO: Dr. G. Warren Smith

Chief Academic Officer: Dr. Robert M. Smith

Chair of the Board of Trustees: Dr. Orvan Peterson

INTRODUCTION

For purposes of its evaluation by the Middle States Association, Slippery Rock University chose to do a selected topics self-study. The campus chose four topics: Resources and Planning; Information Literacy and Technology; Student Learning and Development; and Community Responsiveness.

The evaluation team focused its attention on these four topics, but also reviewed the 16 standards of the Middle States Association. Other than those directly linked to the four topics, the evaluation team found no problems or concerns as regards SRU's compliance with the standards.

RESOURCES AND PLANNING

In assessing this selected topic, the visiting team focused on six elements, all of which are discussed in this section of the self-study: Planning; Enrollment Management; Resource Management; Facilities; Administrative Computing; and Alumni Relations and Fundraising.

Planning

Overview

Slippery Rock University (SRU) has been active in planning for the past several years, especially since the arrival of the current president, Dr. G. Warren Smith. On-campus planning has been informed by System planning context and mandates. Significant milestones include:

- Imperatives for the Future: A Plan for Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education (1996)
- SRU Mission Statement (1984)
- Various planning efforts by the University Planning Council (1980s to 1997)
- The Continuous Improvement Coordinating Council (CICC), a broadly representative group with faculty, student, and staff representation, which initiated a number of quality improvement studies and projects, generally consistent with the goals and mission of SRU.
- A conversion of the CICC into the Future Watch Task Force, charged by President Smith to do a 'visioning study' to assess strengths and weaknesses of the institution and to recommend a vision statement for the university. This large task force, consisting of several subcommittees totaling more than 50

members, consulted broadly with several hundred members of the university and external communities. President Smith and his management team synthesized this input into a concise vision statement which, while sounding relatively generic on the surface, does indeed appear to capture the key elements of the president's vision for SRU. This vision is reflective of the university's current strengths, and is suggestive of future directions and mission (e.g., a caring community, international dimension, and a commitment to life-long learning).

- This visioning process culminated in the development of a comprehensive three-year strategic plan, which articulated four goals:
 - Increasing student enrollment;
 - Building financial equilibrium;
 - Enhancing excellence (academic, community service, and technology);
 - Preserving equality.
- SRU has followed up on this planning process with a highly articulated "bottoms up" base budget review process. Departments are invited to document requests for changes in staffing and new operating funds. The budget process is informed by trend data on departmental and unit expenditures by object. Requests must relate to university goals and (where possible) measurable objectives. The departmental requests are reviewed and aggregated at the dean level, who in turn presents divisional budget requests to the provost-with a parallel process in other vice presidential areas. The results are reviewed by a small budget committee comprised of executive staff, and presented to the President for approval and final review by the Cabinet. Budget requests are evaluated in terms of several published criteria, which include consistency with university goals and mandates of the System plan.

Strengths

Based on interviews and document review, it appears that this planning process has resulted in several related outcomes, which collectively testify to the strength and integrity of the planning process itself:

- The vision statement flowed directly from the planning process.
- It has led directly to the recently announced restructuring of academic affairs.
- The international emphasis is both a product of the planning as well as a continuation of longstanding strengths.

- The planning process has spawned several other strategic plans, including enrollment management, a facilities master plan, and a capital campaign plan, and a human resources plan.
- In addition, SRU's planning reflects and reinforces university strengths and values.

Concerns/Suggestions

- SRU's planning process has required an extensive commitment of time and resources from a large number of individuals. Expectations are high. If resources become limiting or the results of the planning are modest, the campus could become cynical about the value of planning and budgeting. SRU will do well continually to assess the cost effectiveness of its planning process, to simplify or streamline the process wherever possible, to institutionalize planning at the university, and to increase efforts to inform the campus of the objectives and results of university planning.
- The SRU planning process appears to be becoming more top down. The CICC committee has resumed its useful work in quality improvement initiatives, but it does not appear to be charged with continuing or sustaining the strategic planning process. We understand that CICC will be redirected into another Future Watch Task Force periodically (i.e., every three or four years). However, we could not identify any single university committee or body representative of the faculty and staff that is charged with the ongoing custodianship of planning at SRU.
- Perhaps as a result, there appears to be some confusion or lack of knowledge among the groups we interviewed regarding the nature and extent of the planning process and the responsibility for continued planning in the future. In effect, there may need to be clearer ownership and buy-in for planning, particularly among those faculty and staff less involved in the planning process to date.

Enrollment Management

Overview

Enrollment management is a critical function for SRU, given its steady decline over the past decade. (Enrollment declined from 6,961 FTES in 1990-91 to 6,307 in 1999-2000, a loss of 654 FTES, or 9%. Undergraduate enrollment has stabilized, with some modest growth over the past three semesters. This growth is offset, however, by continued decline in graduate enrollment.) The current administration has been proactive in recognizing and addressing this problem.

An Enrollment Management Plan was developed during the 1998-99 academic year. Among other things, it emphasizes the need to improve marketing, recruitment, and retention, as well as to seek new markets and modes of delivery. The campus is working actively to expand distance learning, it has established an off-campus site near Pittsburgh, it is focusing on continuing education, and it has worked aggressively to expand articulation agreements with community colleges and technical schools in the region. Transfer students are becoming a more important element of the overall enrollment goals.

Strengths

- A motivated and professional Admissions and Financial Aid staff.
- New leadership in the form of the recruitment (now underway) of an Associate Provost for Enrollment Management.
- A new March orientation program, intended to reduce the 'melt' of accepted and deposited admits, 400 of whom failed to enroll in Fall 2000.
- A proactive transfer admissions program with expanded articulation agreements.
- An upgraded marketing program, including more advertising in the Pittsburgh metropolitan area.
- Enrollment management is gradually becoming recognized as a campus-wide responsibility.

Concerns/Recommendations

- Demographic trends in western Pennsylvania are leading to a decline in the number of high school graduates, suggesting that further declines in traditional undergraduate enrollment at SRU are very possible. Freshman applications for Fall 2001 are running behind the number for Fall 2000 at this point in the cycle.
- There is increasing competition for students among more than 30 colleges and universities in the region.
- The current state policy on non-resident tuition severely limits SRU price competitiveness beyond Pennsylvania.
- Although privately funded scholarships have increased nearly five-fold since 1992 (\$406,000 awarded to 345 students in 2000-01), this sum is modest relative to the need to be competitive for the higher profile high school students. This issue is being addressed in the forthcoming Capital Campaign.

- The current freshman acceptance rate of 83% is rather high, leaving little room for improving student quality.

Resource Management

Overview

The Middle States review team was impressed by the very professional and skilled finance and management staff of Slippery Rock University. SRU has successfully accommodated a 9% enrollment decline over the past decade without resorting to dramatic reductions in programs or personnel.

Over 80% of the SRU operating budget is directly or indirectly tied to enrollment. In 1999-2000, the state appropriation represented 41% of operating revenue, and tuition and fees represented 39% of operating revenue. Auxiliaries, the third largest revenue sources, are also highly enrollment dependent.

From 1990 to 1999, FFEF declined from 322 to 300, or 7%--roughly comparable to the decline in F'FES. As a consequence, the SFR remained almost constant at 21:1.

During the same period, the total number of full and part time employees at SRU remained stable at or near 830 employees, with the 7% decline in faculty positions offset by increase in professional, technical, and other skilled employee categories. The fact that SRU was able to maintain its workforce in the face of enrollment driven budget pressures is testimony to the able and sustained resource management conducted during this period.

Strengths

Based on the SRU annual financial reports, the university has maintained its financial viability. The university evaluates its financial statements in terms of several ratios of financial flexibility and viability. Many of these ratios have comparative benchmarks within the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, or derived from comparative data on a national level. In its most recent report, SRU met or exceeded these comparative standards for virtually every measure.

The university has managed financial adversity by employing several budgetary measures:

- A relatively conservative budgeting strategy;
- Careful management of personnel costs through attrition and normal turnover savings; and
- Savings in operating costs.

The university has been able to generate reserves of up to 5% of its operating budget, which has served as a contingency for budget or enrollment shortfalls, or as a pool of resources for strategic investments in facilities improvement, academic programs, and other one-time programmatic initiatives.

Concerns/Recommendations

- Collective bargaining contractual costs, including salary adjustments, are not funded directly by the state, and must therefore be borne by the university's operating budget.
- The complexity of the human resources environment with seven bargaining unit contracts, and with a relatively constrained structure, limits flexibility in the deployment of staff and the utilization of personnel resources.
- Personnel costs account for 80% of university operating costs.
- Tenure rates are in the 70% range.
- Aging facilities and infrastructure will place significant resource demands for the foreseeable future.
- Given the university's budgetary dependence on enrollment, enrollment management will be the single most critical factor determining the longer term financial health and viability of this institution.

Facilities

Overview

Slippery Rock University has invested more than \$50 million in facilities during the past 10 years. SRU has also commissioned a comprehensive facilities master plan, conducted by a professional facilities firm. This plan assessed the condition of SRU's facilities, and devised a master plan for the construction of new buildings, and the renovation and ongoing maintenance of existing buildings and grounds. The master plan also addresses related problems of campus layout and design, pedestrian and vehicular circulation, and a plan both for better integrating the upper and lower campus and for enhancing the historic and aesthetic value of the older buildings.

Strengths

- It is encouraging to note that this plan appears to be directly influenced by and reflective of the programmatic and curricular objectives of the university's strategic plan.

- It is also apparent that the new facilities built and planned have been consistent with this master plan. It provides a valuable guide to facilities development over the next five to 10 year period and beyond.
- In general, the university's facilities appear to be well maintained.
- The master plan also attempts to address problems of classroom space and offices as well as student services functions. For example, the \$1million renovation of North Hall provided a 'one-stop" area for student services in records, financial aid, billing, etc. The planned construction of a multimillion dollar Science Center, the pending Physical Therapy Building, and other academic facilities are very positive, and the new Recreation Center is a showcase for the campus.

Concerns/Recommendations

Several of the university's academic buildings are more than 75 years old, and a number of others were built during the growth years of the 1960s and 1970s. The relative age of these buildings presents challenges for maintenance and repair, especially for utility systems and infrastructure, well into the future.

Administrative Computing

Overview

Slippery Rock University has developed fairly sophisticated information systems for business and financial systems, as well as student information processing. At the same time, these systems are reported "home grown", and are highly dependent on university programming staff for maintenance and updating.

Concerns/Recommendations

- SRU may need further to enhance its Web applications in such areas as admissions and other services related to student retention.
- We understand that there is some uncertainty at the present time regarding any campus-based or System-wide solutions to administrative software systems. Such systems are expensive in terms of acquisition costs, staff time, and modifications of campus business practices and policies, and they require enormous planning and lead-time. Nonetheless, failure to update or replace its administrative data systems could become a growing liability for the university in the future, and we urge some proactive and timely decisions in this area.

Alumni Relations and Fundraising

Overview

The Alumni Relations office has a new director (9 months in office) after two years of interim directors. With a clear mandate from the president, the Alumni Relations office, now housed in Academic Affairs, is developing lifelong learning programs in cooperation with other offices on campus. These programs for the 35,000 active alumni have the potential to be national models. The alumni director has a clear vision of what he wants his program to be and he has the support of the alumni association's board of directors. Concomitantly, the development office can build on these programs to increase alumni giving to above the current rate of 17%.

Strengths

The \$11 million capital campaign has completed its quiet phase with \$6.6million pledged or raised. The campaign categories are tied to the university's mission and vision statements, as well as the strategic plan. University Advancement has a focused approach to the campaign and clear quantitative goals. The campaign is realistic for SRU at its current time and place.

INFORMATION LITERACY AND TECHNOLOGY

Overview

Slippery Rock University has made important strides in terms of infrastructure and equipment. Residence halls are fully wired, and each hall has a resident student technology expert. There are numerous student labs on campus. Some 35 classrooms are equipped with multimedia carts that include PCs, Web access, and projections systems. There are six 'smart' classrooms, each with approximately 30 student workstations and an instructor's station. Every faculty member has a PC on his or her desktop, and an Internet connection. A major infrastructure upgrade to fiber optical cable is funded and in progress.

Strengths

- Faculty were generous with their praise for the staff who provide support for telecommunications and hardware.
- SRU offers several fully virtual degree or certificate programs, including a masters in park and resource management, and an R.N. to B.S. completion program. A recent survey indicates that more than 100 faculty use the Web in a significant way in teaching.

- Computer Science 100 produces computer literate students, and a number of other courses contain elements of computer literacy.
- An Information Literacy Task Force has been formed. The library faculty have developed and piloted a one-credit course designed to teach information literacy skills. The task force's work continues, as does the effort to develop a method for outcomes assessment.
- Faculty support one another in the use of technology for teaching. Faculty who have voluntarily affiliated themselves with the Teaching and Learning Technology Roundtable (TLTR) are amazingly generous toward their colleagues with their time and expertise.
- SRU has standardized on a single electronic learning platform (Blackboard).
- The library faculty's efforts to spearhead an information literacy program are praiseworthy.

Concerns/Recommendations

- The absence of dial-in capability to the campus network from off campus is a serious impediment to the utilization of the Web for instruction, especially considering the fact that 60% of SRU students live off campus.
- The lack of IT leadership (the vice provost position is again vacant), and any clear plan, is worrisome. Faculty, librarians, and staff all expressed anxiety regarding this issue.
- Equally worrisome is the absence of any formal support for faculty training and development in Web-based instruction, or any articulated plan or schedule for introducing such training.
- There is no formal equipment replacement program or schedule. Some faculty are unable to do their work on their desktop computers because they are too old or underequipped. (Faculty generally are given computers which have been recycled from student labs.) The campus has been spending between \$500,000 and \$1,000,000 annually on personal computers, with some \$200,000 for personal computers within Academic Affairs, a rate at which the university believes compensates for a formal replacement program. Nevertheless, in the face of faculty concerns about the quality of their workstations, we advise SRU to develop a comprehensive technology plan which articulates pathways for obtaining equipment, equipment replacement cycles, recommended equipment configurations for faculty and students, and so forth. The campus community should be actively involved in developing such a plan.

- There is no requirement for student computer literacy, and no plans for outcomes assessment for those students who do take Computer Science 100.
- Library faculty are key players in building an information literacy program, but they are concerned about their level of involvement to classroom faculty in the design of an information literacy program, in part because of some confusion regarding the reporting relationships of the library. Their role in information literacy design and the nature and scope of their interaction with classroom faculty both need to be clarified.
- The TLTR has done good work, but, according to its members, it lacks any formal standing or reporting relationship. A campus advisory group for information technology, involving both faculty and staff, and with a direct reporting line into the administration, is advisable. The TLTR could be such a group, if their role is clarified and formalized.

STUDENT LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

This selected topic includes five of the 10 goals emanating from the strategic plan, and two of the four categories of the campus vision: 'A Caring Community' and 'A Community of Lifelong Learners.'

Overview

Slippery Rock University has developed a number of programs to assist first year students, and to provide assistance for students experiencing academic difficulty or insufficiency. SRU also has a robust series of co-curricular programs. In addition, the campus has taken on the challenging task of assessing instructional effectiveness, and it has made diversity an identified goal.

Strengths

- While it is too soon to be certain that SRU's goal of improving the retention rate for first year students is being met by the various efforts and initiatives of the First Year Studies (FYRST), early assessment indicates that the program is on the right track. Student participants in the program are making greater use of campus services than are non-participants. At the same time, it is clear that the faculty involved in the program are enthusiastic about the educational goals of the program including their impact on student adjustment, their appropriateness for the SRU student, and their contribution to the development of a greater sense of community.
- The Integrated Learning Community Clusters (a three-course block schedule) have met with large-scale acceptance on campus. Although an assessment plan is in place, it is too early to judge the impact of the clusters on student

learning or retention. However, it is clear that the faculty participants are pleased with the program's development and operation.

- It is clear that that the faculty and staff are deeply committed to the students of SRU and to the institution. They care about what they do and pride themselves on having created a nurturing and caring environment. Students believe that if they take advantage of what SRU has to offer, they will be very happy with their experiences at the institution. They spoke of the willingness of faculty to help them with both academic and personal difficulties, and noted that faculty were even willing to give their home telephone numbers to the students. The students also reported that even uninvolved students would make generally positive statements about the university.
- The faculty and staff seem comfortable with the goals and future directions of SRU as stated in the university's vision and mission statements. They seem to have bought into it fully, and support its objectives. They acknowledged that some who have not been as involved in the Middle States Self Study and/or assessment processes, might feel somewhat differently, but they believed that in general, most people at SRU would support the actions of the administration.
- The campus has embraced the issue of assessment and it is embedded into the responsibilities of the student affairs area. It is clear that the faculty and staff have tied these efforts to the campus goals and are making every effort to use assessment as part of the student learning and development process. Assessment has led to greater collaboration among and between areas, most notably Academic Affairs and Student Life. The expectation expressed by one member of the community is that everyone will become better at what they do and that assessment will simply be "something we do as an integral part of our life here."

Concerns/Suggestions

- Students report that although it is clear the campus is working to improve technology, some felt it is, at best, "adequate but struggling."
- A review of departmental assessment reports indicates that some few departments have not committed fully to an appropriate assessment plan. It is anticipated that assessment efforts will continue, and that the next Middle States review will include extensive reporting on the application of findings resulting from assessment. It is essential that progress continue such that a complete institutional assessment is put in place, allowing systematic reflection and action to occur.
- Although the campus seems very well attuned to the needs of international students, several of those interviewed spoke of the need to be more sensitive

to American students of color. They felt that not much attention was made to the recruitment of a diverse faculty, staff, or student body, and that the environment, especially external to the campus, was not hospitable or open. Students and others expressed the need for ongoing programs and training that would make members of the campus more sensitive and caring to those different from them. We recommend that SRU make the same deep commitment to the inclusion of diverse populations of American students and faculty as it has to the inclusion of international students.

- Members of the Student Government Association spoke of a lack of communication with the administration. Their comments related to a perceived lack of trust on the part of members of the administration. They noted that although they have regular meetings with the administration, they are listened to but not heard. The students feel that they are merely placated and given things to do that will “keep them busy and away from the important things.” Student leaders also said that the president and members of his cabinet are not very visible to the students, outside of Old Main. We recommend that the administration make every effort to communicate more effectively with student leaders, and to find ways that make them feel included in the operations of the campus.

COMMUNITY RESPONSIVENESS

Overview

A delineation of goals for community responsiveness is found in SRU's Strategic Plan. Specifically, the goals are listed under the strategic planning initiative, *Goals for a Caring Community*. There are two goals, each with several objectives.

Goal 1. Identify, promote, and assess those values, services, best practices, and experiences that result in superior individual growth and achievement.

- A. SRU will provide quality advising to all students.
- B. SRU will be a place for the holistic educational development of the learner.
- C. SRU will excel as a place where students develop social responsibility and civic mindedness
- D. SRU will excel in its commitment to service learning.

Goal 2. Identify, promote, and assess those values, services, best practices, and experiences which result in diversity among faculty, students, administrators, staff, and other constituents.

- A. SRU will increase minority enrollment.
- B. SRU will increase the number of minority faculty and staff employed.
- C. SRU will be a safe and encouraging environment for women.

- D. SRU will increase the understanding and value of a diverse society.
- E. SRU will be in compliance with Title IX.

Goal 2, relating to diversity, was discussed in the previous section. Discussion in this section will relate to Goal 1.

Strengths

- Faculty and students appear to be enthusiastic about the opportunities for their personal growth and development. Faculty, for example, note that there is a difference between volunteering and service learning--the opportunity for, and requirement of, reflection is emblematic of the latter. Moreover, some members of the faculty believe that the service learning experiences provided to student can lead to opportunities to do action research, and that, in turn, can lead to tenure and promotion.
- The relationship between the university and the immediate community appears to be amicable, although it exhibits some of the usual tension that exists when a university is larger than the surrounding town. However, if SRU makes a concerted effort through formal structures to maintain a strong dialogue with elected officials, this tension will probably be reduced. An existing community responsiveness project is the town and gown revitalization effort. The university's capital campaign has \$400,000 earmarked as part of its goal to support that project. Clearly, SRU is committed to the success of this joint project through its fundraising efforts.
- Care Break, the program in which students and faculty spend break time working in communities here and abroad, is both remarkable and highly commendable.

Concerns/Recommendations

- SRU's community responsiveness is extensive in a number of areas, including the arts, working with children and seniors, and economic development. Currently, these efforts are the work of many departments and individuals. A concern raised by SRU's community members is that these programs are not coordinated, nor are they communicated broadly. The number and novelty of programs sometimes surprises even those who are knowledgeable campus leaders.
- Although community responsiveness constitutes a major dimension of SRU's Strategic Plan, the level of funding and staffing is surprisingly modest. While an academic-year clerical position was added in 1998 to assist the director, who is a faculty member on released time, the operating budget for the Community Service Learning Institute is only \$25,000 annually.

- SRU should consider the establishment of an office, under the direction of an administrator whose responsibility it is to coordinate and to publicize the total range of university efforts in the area of community responsiveness. SRU should ensure that its efforts are fully recognized for their impact and that duplication does not become a problem.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The visiting team found Slippery Rock University to be an engaged and caring campus. Its primary problems and issues are external and only partially under the control of the institution. Internally, the campus appears to be functioning very well, testimony to the effectiveness of administrative and faculty leadership. A continuation and implementation of the plans now largely in place will undoubtedly make SRU a far stronger campus in the future.

The major challenges seem to be enrollment management, support for the effective use of instructional technology, and increasing the diversity of the students, staff, and faculty. The visiting team is confident that Slippery Rock University will have successfully met these challenges by the time the next Middle States team visits the campus.