

## *Summary*



President's Home



# Summary

Auburn University undertook its Self Study between spring 2001 and fall 2002, during one of the more turbulent periods in the institution's recent history. These months were marked by the contention stemming from the Board's demotion of President William V. Muse in February 2001 (detailed in **Section 4.8.8**) and the Governor's subsequent appointment of two new members to the Board of Trustees. Tensions were exacerbated by the possibility of immediate budget cuts during FY2000-01. In spite of the low morale of the faculty and staff, evident in the results of the SACS Surveys conducted during fall 2001, the Steering Committee, whose members reflect different positions at the institution and bring different and sometimes opposing views on the issues, has made an honest attempt to conduct an in-depth self study that presents the strengths on which to build and the areas in which to improve.

## Strengths

During the previous 10 years, *U.S. News and World Report* has consistently ranked Auburn University among the top 50 public universities in the country. Underlying these rankings are several variables, including academic reputation, student selectivity, faculty resources, financial resources, retention and graduation, value added, and alumni giving. Some of these indicators have been referenced in this Self Study as strengths of Auburn University. In particular, the Self Study points out the strength of the institution's faculty, students, and alumni.

- According to the analysis in **Section 4.8.2.2**, Auburn University's faculty is highly qualified, with 93% of its full-time faculty members holding the terminal degree in their fields. Only 9.3% are employed part-time.
- Likewise, the institution is able to attract and retain highly qualified students. For example, the entering class of Fall Semester 2001 ranked among the top 45 nationally among public institutions in the nation, whether measured in terms of high-school GPA, class rank, or average ACT score. Once they arrive at the University, these bright students persist in their courses of study. As outlined in **Sections 4.2.1** and **4.2.5**, the institution's first-to-second year retention rate is currently 81.3%. Its six-year graduation rate is 68%. This graduation rate compares favorably to the national average of 54.1% and to the average of 66.5% for highly selective institutions. The University also attracts highly qualified applicants to its many graduate programs and especially to its 40 doctoral programs. In **Section 6.2**, it has also been noted that "Auburn's strong student market position in the Southeast" is one of the four strengths cited by Moody's in assessing the institution's financial strength.
- Auburn's alumni base is also one of its strengths. As noted in **Section 4.2.1**, 95% of those responding to the survey of the 1995-96 and 1996-97 graduating classes said that, if they could start all over again, they would still attend college and still choose Auburn University. This loyalty to the institution is also reflected in the discussion of Alumni Affairs (**Section 6.2.1**), where it is noted that the Auburn Alumni Association ranks in the Top 10 in participation, and it ranks in the Top 20 Alumni Associations in America.

Besides the strength of its people, the Self Study also identifies the Auburn University Libraries as one of the institution's assets. A member of the Association of Research Libraries since 1992, the Libraries is an active participant in many of the initiatives undertaken by the institution. Besides providing introductory bibliographic and research skills instruction for orientation classes and English Composition II, the library faculty have played a key role in faculty development programs related to the incorporation of instructional technology into the curriculum (**Section 5.3**). The Libraries also provides appropriate specialized information support for the University's research programs, including the Peaks of Excellence (**Section 5.1.1**).

While leadership changes and issues of University governance have been the focus of much recent concern, the Self Study also points to clear strengths in the area of administrative processes. For example, in spite of the declining financial support from the state of Alabama, the institution is in solid financial condition resulting from the implementation of the Strategic Plan outlined in detail in



**Section 6.3.** Despite financial constraints, this Plan has allowed the administration to address long-recognized needs in deferred maintenance and faculty compensation. The upgrading of the institution's bond rating from A1 to Aa3 has been cited as an important indicator of its strong financial standing (**Section 6.3.1**).

## Areas Requiring Improvements

During the Self Study process, the Steering Committee has concluded that the University is currently in non-compliance with 11 **must** statements and has made recommendations to address the issues. In addition, the Steering Committee has compiled 90 suggestions either to enhance compliance with the *Criteria for Accreditation* or to improve the institution in ways that go well beyond those basic standards. In general, the Self Study identifies three broad areas — mission statement, system of planning and evaluation, and governance — that need further attention. While the Steering Committee did not find the institution in non-compliance with any of the Commission's criteria in these areas, such important areas obviously require the University's best work.

Although the institution does have Vision and Mission Statements approved most recently by the Board of Trustees in March 1997, the Self Study has identified a degree of misalignment between the Mission Statement's emphasis on undergraduate education and the University's evident and significant involvement in research and in graduate and professional education. The Self Study suggests minor rewording that would permit the Mission Statement to reflect the fact that Auburn is the only public institution in the state to offer professional degrees in Architecture, Pharmacy, and Veterinary Medicine and that the institution's graduate and professional programs are an integral part of its research mission. Further, in order to maintain a consistent statement, the Steering Committee suggests that there be a process to review the Vision and Mission Statements on a regular cycle.

In **Section III**, the Self Study discusses two components of the University's planning and evaluation system, AUCUPS (Auburn University Comprehensive University Planning System) and API (Assessment and Program Improvement). AUCUPS focuses on progress toward institutional goals through initiatives at the Department or unit level and at the College or School level, whereas API focuses on student learning outcomes at the degree program level and on the quality of programs and services provided by the administrative and educational support units. Although the Self Study in general finds the institution in compliance with the **must** statements of **Section III**, the Steering Committee has identified several areas in which there is a need for a better understanding of the relationship between these planning and evaluation processes and has provided several suggestions. For example, the Self Study has identified a need for greater participation in unit-level planning and assessment on the part of administrative and educational support units. In other Sections of the Self Study, however, such as **Section 4.2.5** (Academic Advising of Undergraduate Students) and **Section 5.1** (Libraries and Other Learning Resources), it is clear that assessment has become an integral part of the decision-making process in certain areas of the campus.

Even though governance issues are not a major focus of the *Criteria for Accreditation*, questions of shared governance have been a major concern of members of the institution's community during the preparation of this Self Study as discussed in the **Preface**, in **Section 4.8.6**, and elsewhere. In **Sections 4.2, 4.3, and 4.8**, the Self Study illustrates the primary role that faculty plays in implementing and monitoring every aspect of the University's educational program from the admissions standards and degree requirements to the hiring, promotion, and tenure of faculty. The only example cited of possible usurpation of the faculty's role by the governing board is the development of an academic forgiveness policy for undergraduates, discussed in **Section 6.1**, where some believe that the governing board not only set broad policies for the institution but insisted on a particular form of implementation. Otherwise, the Self Study focuses on governance issues primarily related to the working relationship between the President and the Board of Trustees. Based on the evidence available, the Steering Committee has determined that the institution is in compliance with all **must** statements related to University governance, although there are some members of the University community who continue to voice concern. Concurrent with the completion of the Self Study and with the consent of both SACS and Auburn University, the United States District Court in Atlanta appointed an independent investigator to review the University's compliance in three areas of

concern, namely those in **Sections 1.4, 5.3, and 6.1**. As cited in **Section 1** of the Self Study, the President has publicly stated that the institution will address any legitimate issues that are identified as part of that process. In addition, first steps to improve the environment for governance have been taken through the creation of a non-voting, ex-officio faculty position to the Board and the appointment of faculty members to all Board committees except the Executive Committee. Given the events of the previous two years, the Steering Committee has provided several additional suggestions to improve the working environment for effective institutional governance.

As part of the Self Study process, the President has established a working group to be coordinated by the institution's accreditation liaison to SACS. Prior to the visit by the Reaffirmation Committee in April, this working group will prepare a report on the University's plans to correct areas of non-compliance discovered by the Self Study and to review the Steering Committee's suggestions for improvement to determine which require immediate attention. This information will be available for the site team at the time of the scheduled visit (March 31, 2003-April 3, 2003).

#### **Source of Information**

##### **Website**

"AU Remains No. 1 State School in National Magazine Survey"

[http://www.auburn.edu/administration/univrel/news/archive/09\\_02news/09\\_02usnews.html](http://www.auburn.edu/administration/univrel/news/archive/09_02news/09_02usnews.html)