Executive Summary

The University at Albany (UAlbany) is one of four University Centers within the State University of New York (SUNY). Located on three campuses in two contiguous New York counties, UAlbany enrolled 18,126 students in fall 2008, of whom 13,243 were undergraduates and 4,883 were graduate students. The institution employed 658 full-time faculty in fall 2008, of whom 64.9% held continuing appointment (tenure). UAlbany offers a comprehensive and rich program of undergraduate and graduate education, as well as graduate certificates and certificates of advanced study.

In the past few decades, The University at Albany has evolved rapidly, transforming itself from a distinguished college for teachers into a high-quality research university with an internationally recognized and highly productive faculty, an accomplished student body, and nationally recognized academic programs. Its traditional missions of undergraduate and graduate teaching, research, and service are distinctively integrated to produce an intellectual and programmatic synergy that defines the University. Today, the University (“UAlbany”) is distinguished by excellence within distinctive disciplines and professions, and by extensive scholarship and teaching across disciplines, including many combined accelerated degree options that meld knowledge and application. At the undergraduate level, UAlbany strives to offer an undergraduate curriculum enriched by its research environment, as well as a student body that is among the most ethnically, culturally, and geographically diverse within SUNY. In recent years, the University’s stature and achievements have also been greatly accelerated through increased capital investment, upgrades to create a Division I athletics program, and increased outreach and advancement efforts.

To a large degree, the self-study decade has been one marked by a considerable number of senior leadership transitions, particularly at the presidential and vice presidential/provostial level. While UAlbany began the decade of the 2000s with relative stability at the senior levels of its administration, the University has been served by six presidents, interim presidents or officers in charge, and five provosts or interim provosts from 2004 through 2009. Arguably, one factor contributing to UAlbany’s senior leadership transitions during the 2004 to 2009 period was a similar period of transition at the State University of New York system level, where the position of SUNY Chancellor has been filled by five different individuals during this time period. It should also be noted that, with the possible exception of two years (2005-2007), this has been a time of significant fiscal difficulty in New York State’s public sector. While frequent senior leadership transitions have provided some challenges to meeting Middle States standards, the degree to which they have influenced achievement varies by standard. Indeed, as demonstrated in all chapters of the self-study, the organizational structures, long standing administrative processes, and initiatives established by each subsequent administration have in fact strengthened UAlbany’s case for reaccreditation. Furthermore, as documented in the self-study, each successive administration, for the most part, has built upon the initiatives, goals, and priorities of prior administrations to help ensure that UAlbany continuously would meet its overarching goals and objectives. For example, UAlbany’s capacity to assess student learning outcomes and institutional effectiveness, which began in the early 2000s under President Hitchcock, has consistently been nurtured and strengthened by each successive administration.
Because UAlbany recognized that the self-study would be conducted during a time of transition, the re-accreditation process was very much welcomed as a powerful opportunity to demonstrate the evidence behind the University’s continuing ascent to the upper echelons of American higher education. A decision was therefore made to conduct a comprehensive self-study, since this design would best serve the University’s interests at this time. In conducting the self-study, some accreditation standards were grouped together in the formal self-study design, resulting in nine working subcommittees: Mission and Goals - Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal; Institutional Resources; Leadership, Governance and Administration (including the Libraries and ITS); Institutional Assessment and Assessment of Student Learning; Student Admissions and Retention; Student Support Services; Faculty; Educational Offerings and General Education; and Related Educational Activities. Integrity, and evidence that UAlbany meets this standard, was infused throughout the nine chapters.

The specific goals and objectives of the self-study, as outlined in the self-study design, were:

1. To examine and assess the state of the institution’s current mission, goals, policies, procedures, structures, educational and related offerings and activities, research, teaching, assessment mechanisms, and resources.

2. To empower a broad University constituency to participate in all aspects of the self-study process, ensuring the maximum representation of various constituencies within the University, as well as ownership of the process, its contents, and resulting recommendations.

3. To identify the institution’s strengths and weaknesses relative to each of the accreditation standards, in light of the University’s mission and goals.

4. To make specific recommendations for improvement, particularly in assessment, planning, and resource allocation processes.

Using careful, evidence-based analyses, the self-study process highlighted a number of strengths of the university as well as challenges we face at this time. While some of the challenges we face are typical of universities around the country, others are unique to UAlbany’s particular circumstances. Overall, the willingness of the campus to engage in an open and honest assessment of the previous decade led to a number of recommendations that will be useful to the campus over the next decade.

Focusing first on strengths, we note that despite leadership transitions over the course of the self-study period, the University at Albany has remained focused on and further developed a number of key areas of strength, which undergird its ability to achieve the standards of accreditation. In particular, UAlbany’s nationally ranked and world-class academic programs; significant capital investments and infrastructure improvements; a strong collegial faculty and staff; a strong emphasis on and refocused commitment to undergraduate student success; and academically driven athletic success are noted as areas of strength in this self-study document. Perhaps the most distinctive strength of UAlbany is its collection of academic programs. Across the University, a rich learning and research environment is marked by a highly accomplished faculty who have been essential to delivering high quality academic programs. The faculty members who have been recruited to the campus since its transformation into a major research
university are dedicated teachers and internationally visible and respected researchers who are active and productive scholars in their respective fields. Indeed, UAlbany now offers an array of 63 undergraduate and 38 Ph.D. programs, comparable to the breadth at much larger flagship universities. Many of these programs are already ranked among the very best in the country. In addition, 23 graduate certificates and certificates of advanced study and 77 professional and traditional master’s programs prepare students for successful careers in a broad range of fields.

Built upon UAlbany’s academic offerings, the University’s research portfolio has grown considerably over the self-study period and is recognized as a strength that extends into the classroom. UAlbany faculty are now responsible for nearly $350 million in externally generated research activity; the University now boasts five federally funded research centers. In addition, there are more than 50 research centers, institutes, and specialized labs that are funded from other sources.

The 1998 Master Plan largely set the stage for the capital investment and infrastructure developments that have taken place in this decade, and each of UAlbany’s leadership teams has pursued significant infrastructure improvements that successive administrations have advanced and brought to fruition. The past decade has seen the building of the Boor Sculpture Studio and the Life Sciences Research Building, as well as significant expansion of the Fuller Road campus, which houses the College of Nanoscale Science and Engineering; and development of the East Campus, home to the School of Public Health and Cancer Research Center. In addition, a multi-million dollar signage and entry-way improvement project has significantly enhanced the University’s ability to attract and retain high quality faculty and students.

The self-study period also saw important growth in our campus athletics programs. With eight America East conference championships and five teams in NCAA Tournament appearances, the 2006-07 season was UAlbany athletics’ most celebrated since the University moved to NCAA Division I level in 1999. In that season, UAlbany boasted 53 all-conference selections, while 46 student-athletes were named to conference all-academic teams. The following year, 64 student athletes were all-conference selections, and 62 were honored as such in 2008-09. In the most recently completed academic year at time of this writing, 2008-09, UAlbany won seven conference titles and placed two teams in NCAA tournaments. Most importantly, UAlbany’s NCAA Academic Progress Rate (APR) across the 2004-05, 2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08 academic years, has consistently been in the high 900s for its Division I sports offerings.

In the area of student support services, the self-study found much evidence of UAlbany’s consistently strong commitment to providing needed services for its students. From residence hall programming to the services provided by the Advisement Services Center, the Office of Academic Support Services and the Educational Opportunities Program (EOP), a variety of measures, such as the SUNY Student Opinion Survey (SOS), indicate that students perceive the support mechanisms they receive at UAlbany to be carefully designed and delivered to support student needs.
Nevertheless, the University has faced a number of challenges over the past decade, as well as some issues the campus knows it needs to address as UAlbany moves into the next decade. First and foremost is the need to update the Mission Statement, which was originally developed in 1992. Similarly, as we undertook the self-study, it was evident that University needed to develop a new strategic plan, one that would recognize UAlbany’s accomplishments and achievements over the past decade, and focus its efforts for the years to come. Over the past few years, as several individual units and University-wide committees (e.g., Information Technology Services, the Office of International Education, and the Steering Committee on Community Engagement) have developed focused strategic plans, the campus has become increasingly aware of the need for these plans to be integrated into a larger campus plan. Indeed, on October 15, 2009, at the fall faculty meeting, President Philip announced the initiation of just such a process.
Another general challenge confronting the University is the need to build upon current efforts to enhance assessment practices. While considerable progress has been made over recent years to promote a culture of assessment on campus, especially with respect to teaching and learning, assessment activities are uneven and inconsistent. Assessment of administrative units has not been conducted in systematic and regular ways, due in part to the frequent turnover in senior leadership.

An additional critical theme that emerges consistently in the chapters of the self-study is the need for better communication among the various stakeholders at the University. The self-study notes that decision-making processes by senior administrators pertaining to budgets and the allocation of resources have not always been made clear to faculty, staff, and students in a timely fashion. Frequent transitions in senior leadership have impeded the development of the kinds of trust and mutual expectations that facilitate effective, shared governance. Many in the University are largely unaware of the activities of key governing bodies, such as the SUNY-wide Senate, the SUNY Board of Trustees, and the University Council.

A final, more overarching challenge to the University is the need to foster a stronger sense of community. Analyses conducted for the self-study reveal many strengths and reasons for pride in UAlbany. Nevertheless, these analyses also suggest that the University is not doing as well as it could in recruiting and retaining high-performing students and outstanding faculty. Moreover, other research conducted by various units indicates that the University has not done a good job of publicizing its accomplishments; as a result, many faculty, staff, current students and UAlbany alumni, as well as members of the Capital Region community, are unaware of many of the accomplishments of the “UAlbany family.”

Overall, the self-study process provided a perfect opportunity to examine the University as a whole, to identify its strengths and weaknesses, and to give the campus an opportunity to make suggestions based on the findings of the study’s analyses. The University at Albany is currently at an important point of transition, and it is expected that this self-study will provide a strong foundation for the current Strategic Planning process as well as for other planning initiatives that the University will undertake over coming years.