Chapter 11: Epilogue

Introduction

As noted in Chapter 1, UAlbany began this self-study process with a goal of producing a document that would be seen as a comprehensive and forthright reflection on the current state of the University. It was also commenced with the expectation that the process, as well as the resulting document and recommendations, would strengthen the unity of the campus community and provide insights and renewed purpose for carrying out the institution’s mission in the years ahead. While acknowledging that the decade of self-study has been frequently characterized in terms of faculty and staff concern over the number of leadership transitions UAlbany has experienced, the University was aware that this process placed a renewed focus on the many positive changes which also have occurred during this time period. Indeed, one of the resounding themes that surfaced during a variety of recent planning processes, ranging from the University’s branding initiative to the Steering Committee on Community Engagement’s “Action Plan to Advance Community Engagement at UAlbany,” is that the University has not done enough to publicize its accomplishments and that, even on campus, UAlbany remains a “best kept secret.”

The self-study process thus 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 goal of this final, brief chapter is to review the overall self-study process and to provide a concise assessment of the committees’ efforts with respect to the goals laid out in the Self-Study Design.

The Self-Study Design presented specific goals and objectives as follows:

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 to ensure the maximum representation of various constituencies within the University and 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

Assessment of Goal Accomplishment

Goals #1 and #3 above focus specifically on examining the University’s current mission, goals, policies, procedures, structures, educational and related offerings and activities, research, teaching, assessment mechanisms, and resources, as they relate to the accreditation standards. They also aim at identifying UAlbany’s strengths and weaknesses relative to these standards, and in light of the University’s missions and goals. The self-study’s ability to accomplish these goals
has depended heavily on the ability to engage the campus in a conversation and to come to some level of consensus about these issues.

While there was no expectation that a campus with more than 5,000 faculty and staff and 18,000 students would come to complete agreement on all analyses and recommendations, the self-study process was designed to allow for maximal input and consideration of different perspectives. It began with a call for participation, sent to the campus in May 2008 through the faculty/staff listserv, and a request to student governance bodies. More than 100 people responded, providing first, second and, in some cases, third choices for specific committee participation. In all but a handful of cases, individuals’ requests were accommodated. Interestingly, most subcommittees drew individuals from across the campus, and none was dominated by individuals with expertise in that particular area — a feature that, as many people noted, was both an advantage and a disadvantage for the subcommittees’ work. That is, many noticed that although it took most members quite a bit of time to familiarize themselves with the units and processes they were studying, the self-study process benefited from having individuals who could look at the issues being raised with a “fresh set of eyes.”

The Steering Committee was assembled by examining the lists of individuals who had volunteered for the different committees as well as a list of individuals nominated by the University Senate; similar to the individual subcommittees, the Steering Committee included individuals from across the campus with a range of organizational positions. In June 2008, then Interim President George Philip met with the Steering Committee and charged its members to look carefully at all aspects of the University. He noted that committee members should not think of the self-study report as a report for the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, but instead as a report for a variety of audiences, most notably the University community; he urged Steering Committee members to work with their subcommittee members to produce a comprehensive document that would be open, honest, and candid in its assessment of the University’s strengths and weaknesses. At the time, it was assumed that this report would be a document to help orient a new president to the campus. Interim President Philip emphasized that this self-study should be a document of the entire campus, rather than a document crafted by upper-level administrators. He underscored the notion that by committee members taking a critical look at their institution, they would be more likely to develop constructive recommendations having both short-term and long-term impact on the University community.

The process of writing the self-study was designed to be iterative, allowing for appropriate input along the way. That is, the initial timeline identified several points where drafts would be made available to various groups, a process that was facilitated by the development of a wiki site to allow easy access to the various documents. During the spring 2009 semester, initial drafts were reviewed by the co-chairs to ensure that the subcommittees were appropriately focusing on the self-study design questions and that the analyses used to assess performance against accreditation standards and the resulting recommendations were evidence based. Later that semester, all members of all subcommittees were asked to review drafts of chapters of other subcommittees and to identify gaps or overlaps in coverage of the charge questions. During the summer, campus administrators were given access to the drafts of the nine chapters addressing the accreditation standards, and their feedback was shared with the various subcommittees. A complete draft report was then made available to the full campus in November 2009, and, while all faculty, staff
and students had the opportunity to comment on any chapter, each council of the University Senate was asked for feedback on one or more specific chapters based on their area of interest. In addition, two open forums were held in order solicit in-person feedback on the self-study document. Attendance at these public events was low, but a count of “hits” on the self-study Website shows that the draft self-study document was visited over 10,700 times during the open comment period, suggesting that the document was indeed widely viewed. All of the feedback received from individuals and Senate councils was transmitted to the subcommittees for their consideration in preparation of the final version of the document.

In the end, a report was developed that the University believes is open and honest, and reflects a wide variety of perspectives from a broad array of campus constituents, consistent with Goal #4 enumerated above. Perhaps most importantly, from an assessment perspective, the report reflects that the subcommittees took seriously their charge to develop evidence-based recommendations to address areas in need of improvement. In some cases, subcommittees found strong evidence pointing to a need to address a particular issue; clear recommendations are provided. In other cases, subcommittees found that the evidence could be interpreted in a variety of ways, and, so, the report reflects a need for further reflection on the part of those closest to the particular issue. Finally, in still other cases, subcommittees found a need for additional data collection and analysis and thus made recommendations for more regular assessments with specific campus units.

It should be noted that while the list of specific recommendations grew rather lengthy, as summarized in the appendices to each chapter, a number of common themes cut across many of these proposals. The themes include: the need for more effective communication about key decision-making processes and for greater transparency surrounding them, especially with respect to decisions pertaining to resource allocation; the need to revisit longstanding practices that might be fostering a stifling institutional inertia; the need to encourage more widespread participation across the range of governance structures and on the part of the diverse constituencies of the University community; and the need to expand and formalize rigorous assessments of programs, units, and policies, and to disseminate widely the results of such assessments to inform planning. The formulation and compilation of the detailed and specific recommendations contained in the self-study document should serve the University well as it moves forward under new leadership.

Conclusion

This self-study concludes with a very basic idea, but one that is most important to keep at the forefront of our thinking — a reminder that the self-study report provides only a snapshot of a vast array of dynamic and constantly evolving processes. In the final months of writing and editing, as new activities and events emerged, it became increasingly difficult to put closure on the document — to refrain from including yet “one more important development.” Perhaps foremost among these developments is the Strategic Planning Process that was initiated this past fall. While the University’s Strategic Planning Process is already well underway, it has not been possible to track its initial progress in this document.

Nevertheless, by following then-Interim President Philip’s advice to develop a document that is not seen simply as the fulfillment of a mandate for the accrediting institution, but rather as a tool
to serve the broader needs of the campus, the University can be confident that this self-study is one that will benefit UAlbany in many ways going forward. That includes providing a strong foundation for the current Strategic Planning process as well as for other planning initiatives that will emerge over the coming years.