

**Southern Oregon University  
Self-Study Report 2007**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Since the last visit of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities in October 1997, Southern Oregon University has dedicated a great amount of energy and thought to our mission and our collective vision for what the institution is, as well as what it should be. As of the evaluation year (2005–2006), SOU has operated under two mission statements that have superseded that which was in effect in 1997.

This self-study has been a complex process. We have changed university leadership (presidential) three times since the last accreditation visit. We have joined the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC). We have seen dramatic changes in personnel and in the viewpoint of the Oregon State Board of Higher Education. Another challenge is familiar for us: deciding whether we are a regional comprehensive university of the Oregon University System or Oregon's premier undergraduate liberal arts college. In fact, we have attempted to be both. It is not only our membership in COPLAC that keeps us thinking about a role as the premier public liberal arts institution in the state, it is also the volatile economic environment of the state that leads the Oregon State Board of Higher Education to vacillate between unique missions and comprehensive accessibility to the state public institutions.

As a member of the Oregon University System, we are not free agent to assess ourselves from an internal university perspective. We must follow system-level performance indicators in order to place ourselves at best financial advantage with respect to state funds. To add to the complexity, the performance indicators have changed during the past ten years, and our mission-driven efforts have had to come into alignment with system-level goals.

Nevertheless, Southern Oregon University needs to do a better job of defining, monitoring, and assessing mission-driven goals and objectives in the context of rapidly changing demographics and fiscal realities. We had seen a 10-percent reduction in student enrollment (and in corresponding revenue) since 1999—without a corresponding reduction in expenses. A very real and pressing challenge is to become more market-savvy and flexible in our planning and budgeting. This planning reflects a real shift in culture for us and must be approached expediently, thoughtfully, and with transparency. This must begin with a careful look at our mission as we become more market-savvy and fiscally flexible.

In Academic Affairs—and, frankly, in all other operational areas of the university—we need to create a more formalized and systematic process for *integrated* institutional data creation, management, and assessment, with an eye toward continuous program improvement and accountability. This includes better student outcomes assessment. Our record here is uneven; some departments and programs are doing excellent work in the

assessment, while others are not. We have created a Faculty Senate committee—the University Assessment Committee—as a means of putting a more formal structure around the task. In any case, we have not to date approached academic assessment at anything resembling an institutional level, with the exception of the first-year experience (formerly called the University Colloquium, now known as the University Seminar or USEM).

As a result of this self-study, we are now better-prepared to analyze and initiate stronger program design, implementation, and evaluation than ever before. Each academic department has created a matrix of desired student outcomes (skills, knowledge, dispositions) for their graduates. As part of that process, the departments have identified where and how in their programs the skills, knowledge, and dispositions will be developed. They have also looked at their midlevel and capstone experiences as tools to gauge how well their programs are developing the desired results. Again, we recognize the goal: mechanisms for continuous program improvement and accountability.

As part of this process, we have also identified the need to look *institutionally* at continuous program improvement and accountability in general education outside the USEM. This is also an immediate goal and task for the University Assessment Committee. We also know that we have much work to do in our graduate programs. A decentralized structure (implemented at the time of the last accreditation visit) and changing definitions of what is permissible for a regional university of the Oregon University System have led us to a place where we do not understand the nature, efficiencies, or efficacies of our graduate programs very well. This has become quite clear to us as a result of this self-study, and we are grateful as a result.

It is clear that we need even greater integration between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs at SOU. We know our student enrollment decline since 1999 is largely due to a lack of fiscal elasticity on the part of the population served in southern and southwestern Oregon. Knowing that, both recruitment and retention become substantive issues for us. We simply cannot afford to lose students who represent a great deal of hard work in recruitment. Our recently hired vice president for student affairs has brought a substantial background, enormous energy, and great commitment to the process. Our faculty members have responded well to the present initiatives, but more work is needed.

We know there is work to be done to support the growth of our faculty. Our evaluation practice for probationary faculty is solid—even though there is always room for improvement in our promotion and tenure processes, and we continue to grapple with the structure of teaching, research, and service as an evolving institution. We have an evaluation process for tenured faculty; it appears to be well-understood but somewhat unevenly practiced. A big issue at the moment has to do with the development and evaluation of our adjunct faculty. At this point, those practices are uneven across the campus. We recognize it and are working on an institution-level approach to the questions of adjunct development and evaluation. Adequate faculty salary, benefits, and resources for the work of the faculty also continue to be challenges.

Our library and campuswide information technology structure—like many other areas—are in need of more coherent planning and budgeting processes, integrated into a university-wide process that is aligned with the university mission. As a result of budget retrenchments over the past several years, both areas have been hard hit. The library is under additional pressure as a result of the public library closures in Jackson County. Although the library’s physical plant is in excellent shape, the periodical holdings and staffing levels are not. The Information Technology Department has both staffing and infrastructure needs. In fact, the entire campus is at some risk with respect to deferred maintenance. Continuing maintenance is also an issue as a result of staffing cuts. The recently hired associate vice president of facilities management and planning has had great success with energy cost-cutting across the campus and has worked diligently and creatively with his staff to address continuing campus operations during a very difficult period.

Strategic budgeting in the context of a proactive strategic planning process is imperative for the long-term viability of Southern Oregon University. The old model, with its emphasis solely on expense authority at the department/program level, has not worked well for SOU for the past half-decade. We intend to move toward a zero-based approach that transparently ties revenues to student enrollment—from which comes the majority of our funds (tuition, fees). Our department/program fund managers will need to manage their expenses as a fraction of their revenues. We are working on this issue now; it is as important a task as any we have before us.

Another important task will be the maintenance—and indeed the positive, proactive development—of our institutional integrity. It is important to us, and we put a great deal of energy towards it. The key issue for SOU is the focus and coherence of our efforts in this area. Our collective bargaining agreements, codes of conduct statements, and affirmative action and sexual harassment policies are clear examples of an institution that takes institutional integrity very seriously. Our biggest concern is the clarity of some of our policies and procedures; we are not clear with respect to a policy on policies. There are questions about what constitutes a policy (as opposed to a procedure or a set of guidelines), who has authority to promulgate a policy, where policies are found and how they are described, and how they are evaluated and changed as needed. We are aware of the issues here and are working on their resolution.

We know that we have issues to address. Some will require a cultural sea change. However, even with the challenges of recent years, we remain dedicated to the premise that we value this community and our relationships with each another. To address our problems and accomplish change, we need as much clarity and transparency within our change processes as we are able to muster. With a new president and (soon-to-be) new provost, hope abides. We aim to strengthen the trust we have in one another. We work here because we believe this a special university; we live here because we know it is.