

Self-Study Summary

The University of South Alabama has conducted a conscientious and thorough self-study. Starting in spring 2000 with the direct participation of over 118 faculty and administrators and the indirect involvement of the entire University, USA has systematically evaluated the extent to which it meets 597 SACS/COC **must** and **should** criteria and other imperatives. Each SACS criterion and the University response has been evaluated, revised and approved at four levels. The first level of evaluation was conducted by one of ten, ten-member Principal Committees composed of faculty and members of the administration representative of the entire University. The Principal Committees researched each criterion and authored the reports.

The second level of evaluation was conducted by a twelve-member Steering Committee composed of faculty and administrators who reviewed, discussed, evaluated and approved the Principal Committee response to each SACS criterion.

The third level of evaluation was conducted by an Executive Committee composed of senior University administrators. In addition to providing oversight for the entire self-study process, the Executive Committee reviewed, evaluated and approved the Principal Committee's responses to each criterion.

Finally, the fourth level of review and approval was conducted by the entire institution. The *Self-Study Report, Volumes I, 2 and 3* were placed on a web page and its presence publicized. Feedback and corrections were solicited from throughout the institution. This fourth level of review ensured both the accuracy of the *Report* and contributed to wide-spread institutional involvement in the self-study process. The large

number of participants and four levels of review serve to strengthen the credibility of the *Report*.

What has the University learned from its complex, labor-intensive and thorough self-study? First and foremost, USA is pleased to learn that its own academic community has judged it to be in compliance with 96.5 % of SACS criteria. Numerous institutional strengths were highlighted by the self-study. Both students and faculty felt that USA was meeting its educational mission by providing quality educational and personal growth experiences for students. It was also noted that USA's research programs have achieved national and international recognition and that there has been a steady increase in external funding. Self-Study committees also reported that USA's health care education and service programs have made major contributions to the community and the region. It was also observed that USA's faculty have a long-standing reputation for leadership in professional academic associations and have made numerous service contributions to the local community.

Other evidence of USA's success in achieving its mission can be found in the large number of academic programs which have achieved national accreditation by their respective professional accrediting and certifying associations.

The self-study also highlighted USA's success in fulfilling its mission as measured by the success of its graduates. Follow-ups of graduates both by the institution and individual departments document a high rate of success for USA graduates on professional licensing examinations, admission to graduate and professional schools, success in professions, and service to society.

In summary, the self-study documented USA's success in achieving the most important aspects of its educational mission.

The self-study also identified areas in which the USA community judged itself to be in partial or non-compliance with SACS criteria. USA's critical and analytic evaluation of each SACS criterion resulted in twenty-one Recommendations and an additional 36 Proposals for Excellence. Together, these calls for action serve as a basis for program improvement and planning. These areas have been examined in detail and brought to the attention of the entire University. Areas of partial and non-compliance have been assigned a high priority in ongoing program improvement initiatives and future planning. As an example, one area of concern was the need to develop a more comprehensive, fully integrated institutional effectiveness and planning system. The system was found to be highly centralized, and consisting of an incomplete system of formal assessment of its research, service, and administrative functions, with limited faculty involvement. Although some steps have been taken to strengthen these areas and plans for further progress have been developed, USA's institutional effectiveness efforts and strategic planning are not yet sufficiently integrated to enable USA to fully realize the benefits of performance-based assessments and planning.

As an initial step in improving this process, USA now requires each academic and service department to submit annual statements of mission, goals, objectives, multiple assessment measures, timelines for achievement, and a regular system for integrating the results of assessment into the program improvement and planning process. Each academic department is also required to submit its record of assessment results annually. The data for each college along with a comprehensive report from the dean are

submitted to the Office of Academic Affairs where they are reviewed, and an assessment of each college's report is provided the academic deans. The deans relay this information to the departments who use the feedback to improve their departmental effectiveness models. The data are also provided to the University Long Range Planning Committee, which can use the information gleaned from departmental effectiveness assessments to develop and prioritize institutional long-range objectives. Once this accountability system has had time to fully mature, USA will possess a comprehensive system of planning and evaluation for all major aspects of the University.

A second area of concern for USA is financial resources. Most institutions feel they could provide better services if they had increased funds. USA is no exception. Fully 28.5 % of the SACS criteria judged to be partially compliant relate to the need for increased financial resources. This concern was a recurrent theme throughout the self-study, and was expressed in Principal Committee reports, departmental self-studies and institutional surveys. The administration is well aware of the need to ensure adequate financial resources for USA's growing educational, research, health care and service programs. To ensure that funding will keep pace with growth, the administration has achieved a great deal of success in achieving parity with other state-supported institutions in obtaining its fair share of state appropriations. Furthermore, USA has been a leader in the state in working to increase funding for higher education. USA has also worked through the courts to increase its funding allocation by the USA Foundation, Inc. Further, by disposing of unneeded and costly real estate, yachts and other holdings, USA has decreased operating costs and increased capital for student services. Through these and other cost-cutting and revenue enhancing measures, USA is aggressively working to

ensure that adequate financial resources will continue to be available to enable it to fulfill its educational mission.

In summary, USA has realized both short and long term benefits from the self-study in terms of identifying problems that can be readily remedied and those that will take more time to resolve. The self-study has also provided a mechanism for continuous examination and improvement of the University. The *Self-Study Report, Volume 4* will describe how USA has responded to the Recommendations and Proposals of the Principal Committees. USA's responses to the issues identified by the self-study will further demonstrate its commitment to the principle of continuous improvement.