Reaffirmation of Accreditation Recommendation
for
University of St. Francis
Joliet, IL
of the 2010-11
Academic Quality improvement Program
Review Panel on Reaffirmation

The Higher Learning Commission
A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

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Contents

I. Context and Nature of Review ........................................................................................................3
   A. Review Purpose, Process, and Materials ..................................................................................3
   B. Organizational Context ...........................................................................................................3
   C. Organizational Scope and Structure (including extended physical or distance education
      operations) ..............................................................................................................................4
   D. Notification of Quality Checkup Visit and Solicitation of Third-Party Comment ............5
   E. Compliance with Federal Requirements ................................................................................5
   F. Evidence of the Organization’s Responsiveness to Previous Commission Concerns
      regarding fulfillment of the Criteria for Accreditation ..........................................................5

II. Fulfillment of the Criteria for Accreditation .............................................................................5
    Criterion One: Mission and Integrity .........................................................................................5
    Criterion Two: Preparing for the Future ......................................................................................6
    Criterion Three: Student Learning and Effective Teaching .......................................................7
    Criterion Four: Acquisition, Discovery, and Application of Knowledge .................................9
    Criterion Five: Engagement and Service ....................................................................................9

   Summary of panel recommendations regarding fulfillment of the Criteria for Accreditation
   ..................................................................................................................................................10

III. Participation in the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) .................................10
    A. Comments and counsel on AQIP action projects .................................................................10
    B. Comments and counsel on the AQIP categories .................................................................11
    C. Comments and counsel on the AQIP principles of high performance organizations and
       the institution’s quality program or infrastructure ............................................................11

   Summary of panel counsel about the organization’s commitment to continuous
   quality improvement and its participation in AQIP ..............................................................12
I. Context and Nature of Review

A. Review Purpose, Process, and Materials

AQIP Reaffirmation of Accreditation reviews are scheduled seven years in advance, when an institution first joins the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) or when an institution already participating in AQIP is reaffirmed via the AQIP Reaffirmation of Accreditation process.

In conducting these reviews, the AQIP Reaffirmation of review panel examines the following materials for each institution:

- Current Commission History file of institutional actions
- Current Commission Statement of Affiliation Status
- Current official Commission Organizational Profile
- Annual Updates of year’s Action Projects
- AQIP Review Panel Report(s) on Institutional Status Change Requests
- Focused visit report(s) and action letter(s)
- Institutional websites
- Key correspondence between the institution and the Commission
- Last Comprehensive PEAQ Evaluation team report, institutional response, and Commission action letter
- Quality Checkup report(s)
- Summary of Action Projects attempted
- Summary Update (Quality Highlights) of institutional activity and dynamics since the last Quality Checkup, provided by the institution on September 1 of the review year
- Systems Appraisal Feedback Report(s)
- Systems Portfolio Index(es) (to compliance with the Criteria for Accreditation)
- Systems Portfolio(s), including update provided by the institution on September 1 of the review year
- Any other major reports or documents that are part of the institution’s permanent Commission files

Two lead panelists from the AQIP Reaffirmation of Accreditation draft a recommendation that is reviewed and approved by the entire panel before it is forwarded to the Institutional Actions Council.

B. Organizational Context

The institution was first accredited by the Commission on January 1, 1938, having been admitted to Candidacy for Accreditation in 1935-36.

The institution was admitted to AQIP on September 26, 2003.

Since admission to AQIP the institution has officially declared and attempted 11 individual Action Projects and has provided AQIP with Annual Updates of ongoing projects and received Annual Update Feedback Reports on these.


The institution proposed a change in its relationship with the Commission that was reviewed by an AQIP Review Panel and approved on June 13, 2005. The change permitted the institution to offer through distance delivery the Bachelor of Science in Health Care Leadership, the Bachelor of Science in Organizational Leadership, and the Bachelor of Science in Applied Organizational Management degree completion programs, and to remove the stipulation regarding programs offered via distance delivery.

The institution proposed a change in its relationship with the Commission that was reviewed by an AQIP Review Panel and approved on February 9, 2009. The change permitted the institution to offer the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP).

AQIP conducted a Quality Checkup visit to the institution on November 11-13, 2009, and provided a report of the findings of the visiting team on December 17, 2009.

C. Organizational Scope and Structure (including extended physical or distance education operations)

University of St. Francis is a faith-based, private, co-educational, not-for-profit institution governed by a Board of Trustees. The college offers undergraduate, undergraduate degree completion, master’s and doctoral level programs.

University of St. Francis (USF) was founded in 1920 by the Congregation of the Third Order of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate for the education of its own members. The University first accepted women outside of the congregation into Assisi Junior College in 1925. Assisi Junior College became the College of St. Francis with the adoption of a senior college curriculum in 1930. In 1971 the College became coeducational and in 1972 began offering off campus degree completion programs serving diploma school nurses and associate degree health care professionals. In 1980, the first master’s program, in Health Service Administrations, was initiated. During the early 1990s, the University began offering additional graduate programs. In 1997, the College of St. Francis affiliated with the Provena Saint Joseph College of Nursing, which had evolved from a diploma nursing school founded in 1920 to a baccalaureate level institution awarding the BS in Nursing degree. In 1998, the College of St. Francis became the University of St. Francis. In February 2009 the University was approved for its first doctoral program, a Doctor of Nursing Practice Program beginning fall 2009 to be delivered online and accessible to students throughout the country.

The main campus is located in Joliet, IL. Until 2004 the University and the congregation shared the campus. In 2003, the University purchased a wing of the Motherhouse from the Congregation and in 2004 purchased the remaining square feet and the Tower Hall, the main academic building and all of the land upon which the University sits. In August 2005, the College of Nursing and Allied Health relocated to occupy one wing of the former Motherhouse. The University is completing the renovation of the remaining areas of the Motherhouse in stages with completion of the final phase in 2010. The College of Education operates a professional
development center in leased space two miles from campus. A facility in Albuquerque, New Mexico, houses the Physician Assistant program. The Visual Arts Department is housed in the Rialto Square Building.

D. Notification of Quality Checkup Visit and Solicitation of Third-Party Comment

A Quality Checkup site visit to the institution was conducted on November 11-13, 2009. In compliance with Commission requirements, the institution notified its constituencies and the public of this visit, solicited third-party comment to be sent directly to the Commission. The Commission shared all comments received with the institution and the team, and the team discussed both the comments with the institution and reviewed evidence of the institution’s compliance with Commission’s notification and third-party comment requirements.

E. Compliance with Federal Requirements

The Quality Checkup team that conducted a site visit to the institution on November 11-13, 2009, examined evidence provided by the institution of its compliance with the Commission’s federal compliance program. The Quality Checkup site visit team concluded that University of St. Francis was compliant with all federal requirements.

F. Evidence of the Organization’s Responsiveness to Previous Commission Concerns Regarding Fulfillment of the Criteria for Accreditation

The team that reviewed the 2007 Systems Portfolio found two accreditation issues regarding Criterion Three: student learning and effective teaching. The Quality Checkup Team indicated that in the 2009 Systems Portfolio, USF demonstrated that it has made significant progress in the assessment of student learning and has detailed information about quality control at off-campus sites. The observations of the Quality Checkup Team illustrate that USF is responsive to previous commission concerns and is taking appropriate actions to address concerns.

II. Fulfillment of the Criteria for Accreditation

CRITERION ONE: MISSION AND INTEGRITY. The organization operates with integrity to ensure the fulfillment of its mission through structures and processes that involve the board, administration, faculty, staff, and students.

A. Evidence that Core Components are met.

The mission statement of St. Francis is: As a Catholic university rooted in the liberal arts, we are a welcoming community of learners challenged by Franciscan values and charisma, engaged in a continuous pursuit of knowledge, faith, wisdom, and justice, and ever mindful of a tradition that emphasizes reverence for creation, compassion and peacemaking. We strive for academic excellence in all programs, preparing women and men to contribute to the world through service and leadership (https://www.stfrancis.edu/about/mission/).

The 2006-2011 vision statement ties the mission of St. Francis to its vision and presents integrated operational guidelines for the institution: At the completion of 2011 the University of St. Francis will be a premier Franciscan University offering undergraduate, degree completion and graduate programs of the highest quality. Building on our heritage,
the University will educate and graduate students of diverse background, preparing them to
serve the world (SP 2009, p. 1).

The development of the current vision statement presents an integration of mission and
vision and more stakeholder involvement in the process of development. The University has
also aligned its mission, vision, and strategic goals (SP 2009, p.9).

The goals for student learning reinforce the mission with a focus on ethics and integrity
reflecting the religious foundations of USF, mastery of the discipline, active participation in a
diverse and pluralistic world, ability to communicate complex ideas, intellectual
competencies that foster pursuit of knowledge and independent thought, and intellectual
agility and ability to adapt and manage change (SP 2009, p. 3)

It is an expectation of all student and administrative support services that their focus is on
encouraging and supporting student success in light of the University’s vision, mission and
core values of respect, service, integrity, and compassion (SP 2009, p. 3).

B. Evidence that one or more specified Core Components need organizational attention,
but no specific Commission monitoring or reporting.
None.

C. Evidence that one or more specified Core Components require institutional attention
and that actions taken and improvements achieved be described in the institution’s
Systems Portfolio before its next scheduled Systems Appraisal, to permit Commission
follow-up.
None.

D. Evidence that one or more specified Core Components require Commission follow-up
via declaration of a specific Action Project(s) and the submission of Annual Updates.
None.

Recommendation of the Panel:
The Criterion is met, and no Commission follow-up is recommended.

CRITERION TWO: PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE. The organization’s allocation of
resources and its processes for evaluation and planning demonstrate its capacity to fulfill its
mission, improve the quality of its education, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.

A. Evidence that Core Components are met.
The Systems Appraisal Team found that USF identified KPI’ for internal and external
decision making and for the measurement of performance relative to the university’s strategic
plan (SA, p. 36).

USF developed a strategic plan through a process that included data input and trend analysis,
internal and external environmental scans, with oversight from cross-institutional team that
will align unit plans with strategic plans and institutional priorities (SA, pp. 39-40).
The Budget and Planning Committee recommends funding on the basis of priorities shaped by the strategic plan (SA, p. 40).

USF uses a vision statement to guide planning to realistically prepare for its future and this process in goals that align with the university’s mission and vision (SA, p. 39).

USF uses a program approval process that requires a statement of learning needs, a description of how the program will meet those needs, and an estimation of the potential student market. Proposals include required resources ensuring the university has the resources to support the new program (SA, p. 17).

B. Evidence that one or more specified Core Components need organizational attention, but no specific Commission monitoring or reporting.

The Quality Checkup Team indicated that “because USF has a small endowment and its revenue is largely tuition driven, the team suggests that USF focus on its financial viability…Prudent institutions perform an objective review and analysis of their particular situation in regards to risk assessment and contingency planning.” To ensure USF is able to continue to meet Core Component 2b (The organization’s resource base supports its educational programs and its plans for maintaining and strengthening their quality in the future) it is recommended that USF continues to review and analyze their financial position and continue to develop contingency plans (QCU, p.5).

C. Evidence that one or more specified Core Components require institutional attention and that actions taken and improvements achieved be described in the institution’s Systems Portfolio before its next scheduled Systems Appraisal, to permit Commission follow-up.

None.

D. Evidence that one or more specified Core Components require Commission follow-up via declaration of a specific Action Project(s) and the submission of Annual Updates.

None.

Recommendation of the Panel:

The Criterion is met, and no Commission follow-up is recommended

CRITERION THREE: STUDENT LEARNING AND EFFECTIVE TEACHING. The organization provides evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness that demonstrates it is fulfilling its educational mission.

A. Evidence that Core Components are met.

USF offers 35 undergraduate majors and four undergraduate degree completion programs for adult learners. The University offers 15 Master’s programs in the fields of business, education, social work, and nursing. In 2009 the University was approved to offer a Doctor of Nursing Practice program. Programs are offered both online and face to face to meet the needs of the student population. (SP 2009, pp. 2-3)
The University has defined a structure for student and administrative support service processes based on the five broad categories of the 2006-2011 strategic plan. The department and functional areas have been grouped by service categories which help support student learning and the strategic plan strategies. (SP 2009, p. 3-4).

The Systems Appraisal team identified two accreditation issues for Criterion Three. They found that the Systems Portfolio did not provide sufficient information for the appraisal team to properly assess how effectively the University was meeting Criterion Three. (SA, pp. 8-9) They also identified a concern about how USF documents its quality control of instructional delivery systems and student learning outcomes at off campus sites (SA, p. 9). The Quality Checkup team found that with the revisions to the Systems Portfolio (SP 2009) USF had significantly improved the quality of its portfolio by providing more, and more detailed information in all areas of the portfolio (QC, p. 3). The Quality Checkup team also found that “USF met this goal by providing additional evidence in the areas of the assessment of student learning, the status of current AQIP Action projects, strategic planning, and the financial condition of the institution” (QC, p. 3).

In the 2009 Systems Portfolio, the University acknowledged that two program identities existed, the “national” programs and the “local” programs. The University reorganized the academic and admission areas while focusing on becoming more data driven and the institutional vision became more integrated. The vision for the 2006-2011 strategic plan recognizes that the national is also local and provides an integrated vision for the future (SP, p. 2).

The University has engaged in several Action Projects focused on improving student learning. The Systems Appraisal Team and Quality Check-up teams identified a need to focus on assessment processes. Action Projects include: assessment of general education learning outcomes (retired), and developing a portfolio process to assess university wide outcomes. In January 2010 the University selected three new Action Projects. A General Education Curriculum Revision teams has been formed to review and revise the Core classes (QS, p. 1).

B. Evidence that one or more specified Core Components need organizational attention, but no specific Commission monitoring or reporting.

None.

C. Evidence that one or more specified Core Components require institutional attention and that actions taken and improvements achieved be described in the institution’s Systems Portfolio before its next scheduled Systems Appraisal, to permit Commission follow-up.

None.

D. Evidence that one or more specified Core Components require Commission follow-up via declaration of a specific Action Project(s) and the submission of Annual Updates.

None.

Recommendation of the Panel:
The Criterion is met, and no Commission follow-up is recommended.
CRITERION FOUR: ACQUISITION, DISCOVERY, AND APPLICATION OF KNOWLEDGE. The organization promotes a life of learning for its faculty, administration, staff, and students by fostering and supporting inquiry, creativity, practice, and social responsibility in ways consistent with its mission.

A. Evidence that Core Components are met.

USF has a range of employee development opportunities related to its mission, use of technology and customer service (SA, p. 28).

The university has an evaluation process for administrators and a tenure process that include professional competency, accomplishment of annual goals, support of the university’s mission, professional development, and community service (SA, p. 28).

USF has a process to assess the preparation of its graduates based on multiple measures, both cognitive and affective (SA, p. 19).

USF collects a variety of internal, external, direct and indirect methods of student performance to analyze on a regular basis (SA, p. 19).

B. Evidence that one or more specified Core Components need organizational attention, but no specific Commission monitoring or reporting.

None.

C. Evidence that one or more specified Core Components require institutional attention and that actions taken and improvements achieved be described in the institution’s Systems Portfolio before its next scheduled Systems Appraisal, to permit Commission follow-up.

None.

D. Evidence that one or more specified Core Components require Commission follow-up via declaration of a specific Action Project(s) and the submission of Annual Updates.

None.

Recommendation of the Panel:

The Criterion is met, and no Commission follow-up is recommended.

CRITERION FIVE: ENGAGEMENT AND SERVICE. As called for by its mission, the organization identifies its constituencies and serves them in ways both value.

A. Evidence that Core Components are met.

The Systems Appraisal team found that “USF has an opportunity to improve its non-student stakeholder and collaborative relationships”. They found that the University lacked processes to identify and respond to the changing needs of other stakeholder groups (SA, p. 10). The University has defined all categories of stakeholders and identified requirements and expectations of each group (SP 2009, p. 5).
In January 2010 the University instituted an Action Project titled “Quantify USF’s Current Partners and Resources Necessary to Maintain Them”. The goal of this Action Project is to compile a list of the current university partnerships (service, sponsorship, business) and academic partnerships, and the direct and indirect costs of maintaining the partnerships. The intent is that this project will help maximize USF resources and their ability to serve the community (QH, p. 2).

USF has developed a wide-range of collaborative relationships related to education processes and support, specific needs, shared governance, community and service partnerships, and Catholic organizations (SA, p. 42). The University has developed partnerships and collaborations with school districts and businesses which provide a variety of opportunities for students to enhance learning (SP 2009, pp. 13-14)

B. Evidence that one or more specified Core Components need organizational attention, but no specific Commission monitoring or reporting.

None.

C. Evidence that one or more specified Core Components require institutional attention and that actions taken and improvements achieved be described in the institution’s Systems Portfolio before its next scheduled Systems Appraisal, to permit Commission follow-up.

None.

D. Evidence that one or more specified Core Components require Commission follow-up via declaration of a specific Action Project(s) and the submission of Annual Updates.

None.

Recommendation of the Panel:
The Criterion is met, and no Commission follow-up is recommended.

Summary of panel recommendations regarding fulfillment of the Criteria for Accreditation:

St. Francis University fulfills the Criteria for Accreditation. The Systems Appraisal Team indicated two accreditation issues both relating to Criterion Three: student learning and effective teaching and quality control for off-campus sites. The Quality Checkup Team indicated that progress has been made relative to these accreditation issues. This panel recommends that no Commission follow-up is needed, but in subsequent reviews team members should monitor progress around the concerns outlined in the Systems Appraisal.

III. Participation in the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP)

A. Comments and counsel on specific improvement projects
USF has used Action Projects to improve key processes. They have completed six projects and are currently working on 5. The Action Projects have resulted in enhanced performance management, improved assessment of general education learning outcomes, addressed student retention, and examined the admission’s process. USF is using Action Projects to improve areas that were identified as strategic or accreditation concerns and opportunities for improvement in the Systems Portfolio. The Quality Checkup Team indicated that “USF seems to have received the feedback from the Systems Appraisal in an open-minded manner. They have either acted upon or are in the process of acting on the recommendations of the Strategic Issues Analysis of the last Systems Appraisal” (QCU, p. 4). USF is encouraged to continue to use Action Projects to address opportunities indicated in the Systems Appraisal.

USF defines the scope and outcomes expected from their Action Projects. Current projects for Developing a Portfolio Process to Assess University Wide Outcomes and Recognizing Value of Employees Through Fair and Competitive seem complex and somewhat ambiguous, but the synopsis provided in the Quality Improvement Summary demonstrates that these projects have goals and outcomes such as rubrics, graduation requirements, and benchmarking. Continued application of this approach will ensure USF uses Action Projects to drive improved performance.

B. Comments and counsel on key institutional processes and systems

The Systems Appraisal team noted that the lack of information provided in the Systems Portfolio impacted their ability to provide feedback on many key institutional processes and systems. The Systems Appraisal team identified seven strategic areas for improvement while also noting that “it will be important for USF to emphasize systematic, data-driven approaches with benchmarks, comparative results, and targets for improvement” (SA, p. 3).

USF has devoted much time and energy to revising the Systems Portfolio in 2009 to provide a more accurate picture of the key institutional processes and systems. The Quality Checkup team believed that the University had received the feedback from the Systems Appraisal in an open-minded manner and that the University had acted upon, or was in the process of acting on the recommendations of the Strategic Issues Analysis (QC, p. 4).

The Systems Appraisal team also found that USF has an opportunity to increase its institutional commitment to the AQIP process. Again, USF has responded well to this feedback. The Quality Checkup team found that “USF has learned much since its last System Appraisal regarding AQIP, its principles and the expectations of HLC, and also the value of the process to the institution” (QC, p. 4). The revised Systems Portfolio and the Quality Summaries show that the University is maturing in its journey as an AQIP institution.

C. Comments and counsel on the institution’s culture of quality and its quality program or infrastructure.

The Systems Appraisal team found that USF has an opportunity to improve its systems and processes for quality improvement (SA, p.10). The Quality Checkup Team found that USF is making strides to incorporate a culture of continuous improvement (QCU, p. 4) and that USF has increased sophistication in the use of AQIP processes (QCU, p. 4). USF needs to build on this momentum to evolve the necessary culture that drives continuous improvement. The Quality Checkup team indicated that the president and his team have demonstrated strong focus and commitment to AQIP and continuous improvement.
In addition to the items listed above, the Quality Improvement Summary indicates that USF reorganized the structure of its quality teams to have each team focus on one of the nine AQIP categories. USF also engaged the Quality Council in updating its Systems Portfolio. The Quality Improvement Summary goes on to state that “The task of creating an institutional climate of continuous quality improvement is now a paramount project” (QIS, p. 4). The culture of quality is evolving at USF and the university demonstrated improvement from the submission of the Systems Portfolio to the Quality Checkup in developing a culture of quality and implementation of a quality infrastructure.

Summary of panel comments and counsel about the organization’s commitment to continuous quality improvement and its participation in AQIP:

USF is utilizing feedback from the Systems Appraisal Report to develop Action Projects, implementing Action Projects to address strategic issues, improving and restructuring its quality infrastructure these actions demonstrate commitment to the AQIP processes and philosophy of continued improvement. The panel recommends continued participation in AQIP.