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HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION
ACCREDITATION REPORT AT IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

Action Requested: Receive the Higher Learning Commission accreditation report at Iowa State University.

Executive Summary: Iowa State University (1) engaged in a two-year self-study process that addressed the criteria for accreditation defined by the accrediting body; and (2) had an on-site visit by peer reviewers. The University was accredited for the maximum 10-year period allowed by the accrediting body without interim reports or monitoring visits required. This accreditation report addresses the Board of Regents Strategic Plan priority to provide “educational excellence and impact.”

Background:

- ◇ **Description.** In the United States, colleges voluntarily seek accreditation from nongovernmental bodies. There are two types of educational accreditation – institutional and specialized. Institutional accreditation is provided by regional and national associations of schools and colleges recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. An institutional accrediting agency evaluates an entire educational organization in terms of its mission and the agency’s standards or criteria and accredits the organization as a whole. Specialized accreditation, also called program accreditation, evaluates particular units, schools, or programs within an organization.
- ◇ **Accrediting Agency.** The institutional accrediting body is the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association. HLC offers three pathways for maintaining accredited status – Standard; Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP); and Open; all three pathways are focused on quality assurance and institutional improvement. The Standard Pathway follows a 10-year cycle. AQIP has an added emphasis on helping institutions achieve continuous quality improvement; it follows an eight-year cycle. The Open Pathway follows a 10-year cycle and is unique because its improvement component, the Quality Initiative, gives institutions the independence to pursue improvement projects that are geared toward their current needs and aspirations. Iowa State University chose to participate in the Open Pathway for its reaccreditation process.
- ◇ **Review Process.** The self-study prepared by the University addressed the five major criteria for accreditation – mission; integrity – ethical and responsible conduct; teaching and learning – quality, resources, and support; teaching and learning – evaluation and improvement; and resources, planning and institutional effectiveness. Other components of the review process included the following: (1) Responses to the requirements for federal compliance; (2) Progress report on the Quality Initiative required for the Open Pathway accreditation option; and (3) Input from students on a student survey administered by HLC through a third-party comment process.
- ◇ **Purpose of Accreditation.** An institution that is accredited by an accrediting body that is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education is eligible to participate in Title IV programs and to offer accredited programs, such as engineering and business. Furthermore, accreditation is also intended to protect the interests of students, benefit the public, and improve the quality of teaching, learning, research, and professional practice.

◇ On-Site Team Report. In November 2015, the visiting team determined that the University met all the criteria required for accreditation without the need for interim reports or monitoring.

◇ Evaluation report provided by the Visiting Team.

Criterion One – Mission.

“Discussions with administrators, faculty, and student leaders confirmed that the land grant mission of ISU is broadly understood and guides its operations. The strategic plan, which includes the mission and vision statements, is developed through a public and inclusive process that balances multiple roles, responsibilities, and priorities, and reflects a strong institutional commitment to diversity. The strategic plan is articulated publically and reflects the land grant values of public education, scholarship, basic and applied research and outreach and extension for the public good. Evidence provided documents that the strategic plan is used to set university priorities and to guide university planning and budgeting.”

Criterion Two – Integrity – Ethical and Responsible Conduct

“ISU operates with a high level of integrity and has established and made readily available numerous policies and processes to guide its multiple functions. Education and training for faculty, staff, and students in support of ethical behavior and integrity are also readily available and often required. There are many options available for reporting and addressing misconduct or violations of policy. Employee performance is reviewed annually.

The university strives for transparency and faculty representation of itself through the wide array of information made available on its website and elsewhere. Examples include the Fact Book, Catalog, Policy Manual, and information about student admissions requirements, tuition and fees, campus crime statistics, and its governing entities (e.g., Board of Regents, Faculty Senate).

Freedom of expression is highly valued and upheld by the institution. Declarations of that commitment appear consistently in university policies and manuals, and in open discourse events on campus.

The Board of Regents is dedicated to providing a high-quality, accessible education for ISU’s students, as well as support for the research, scholarship, and creative activity of its faculty, staff, and students. The Board’s recent initiatives to identify efficiencies, transform the delivery of higher education, and efforts to move to a state general education funding model based on performance metrics are evidence of a strong commitment to its financial stewardship responsibilities.”

Criterion Three – Teaching and Learning – Quality, Resources, and Support.

“The faculty, staff and administration are committed to providing a high quality student-centered education across modalities of instruction and for curricular and co-curricular initiatives. Faculty are conscientious about ensuring that the learning goals for on-campus and online course offerings are consistent and value faculty-student interaction. The faculty places a premium on college level responsibility for the delivery of academic programs and deeply values the ability to embed learning goals into the disciplinary and professional curriculum.

The faculty also actively engages in scholarly pursuits that contribute to the creation of knowledge and impact the larger society. Student affairs and academic affairs staff provide quality programs and services that are utilized and well received by the student body. The entirety of the campus takes pride in ISU's approach to providing comprehensive student-centered education at the undergraduate and graduate levels."

Criterion Four – Teaching and Learning – Evaluation and Improvement.

"Iowa State University clearly demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs, learning environments, and support services. The university has a rigorous program review process, and reviews result in programmatic decisions that lead to program improvements. Policies to monitor and facilitate continued quality are consistently enacted to support success of its students. The institution affirms a deep commitment to student learning in academic and co-curricular educational experiences through effective processes of assessment and monitoring of achievement. Quality instruction through program improvement remains central to its mission through ongoing attention to retention, persistence, and completion rates in its degree and certificate programs."

Criterion Five – Resources, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness.

"The strong financial position of the University and a pattern of consistent enrollment growth have provided the resources to support quality educational programs and services. ISU's planning, budgeting and financial management systems are well developed and well understood by users. The university is rapidly building and renovating facilities to meet growing needs and its infrastructure technology is fully capable of supporting the teaching and research missions. The university is accountable to a knowledgeable board and is well practiced in shared governance internally. Stakeholders are actively involved in governance. Continuous improvement is evident and experienced in all facets of the university's operations. From enrollment forecasting to use of key progress indicators, evidence of concern for improvement abounds. The University has the resources, administrative structures, and planning processes in place to respond to new challenges and opportunities."

Conclusion.

"The team would like to commend ISU for being responsive to requests associated with the site visit, from ensuring that the team could meet with a broad array of knowledgeable institutional representatives, to providing additional materials, ad hoc meetings, and answering hundreds of questions asked. The openness and integrity of the institution was apparent in their receptivity and responsiveness to the process."

The team noted, in discussion after discussion, the pride with which members of this community speak of the university's interest in, and care for, its students. Everyone with whom the team met was able to speak of the distinct "brand", which revolves around "providing an outstanding student experience." The team was impressed by the unanimity of this perspective, but also concerned. The university has been growing, and as Statewide resource allocation continues to evolve, ISU's ability to maintain that emphasis will depend on ensuring that all aspects of the university's connection with students – and in particular, units that serve, support, teach, and nurture them – are adequately staffed and resourced. The team saw ample evidence of the commitment to planning for a future with more students, and for including among those plans attention to preserving that outstanding experience. As the institution scales up, careful planning will be essential, since human needs usually do not scale smoothly. (Indeed, scaling up many student services – like mental health services – can be frustratingly "lumpy.") Many of the committees, procedures, and processes discussed in the team's report reveal that a good foundation exists for this future.

The team has verified that ISU meets and exceeds the standards for accreditation, and has confirmed that the university is dedicated to continuous improvement. ISU has the self-reflective capacity to ask of itself difficult questions; to identify appropriate sources of information and to obtain data from them; and to use this information to guide decision-making and planning for the future. For these reasons, the team recommends that ISU be afforded the opportunity and responsibility of selecting the accreditation pathway best suited to its next review."

- ◇ Institution's implemented or planned changes. HLC found no concerns that require interim reports or monitoring. In the spirit of continuous improvement, the Visiting Team report identified opportunities for the university to explore, which the university will undertake through existing committees and offices.
 - ☑ "Continuing to monitor enrollment growth/capacity issues as they relate to academic quality, faculty/student ratios, etc.
 - ☑ Continuing efforts to refine student learning outcomes and assessments for graduate programs across the University.
 - ☑ Enhancing/clarifying information available for distance education courses (such as expectations of student-faculty interactions, expectations for outcomes compared to on-campus sections, and the student credit hour policy.
 - ☑ Continuing to proactively address diversity and inclusion efforts on campus (including graduation gaps and supporting efforts of the new VP for Diversity and Inclusion).
 - ☑ Reviewing/enhancing processes for documenting qualifications of all instructors (regarding HLC's increased emphasis on Faculty Qualifications in future reviews)."

- ◇ Accreditation Status. In February 2016, the Higher Learning Commission awarded continued accreditation to Iowa State University for the maximum period of 10 years without required interim reports or monitoring visits. Under the Open Pathway accreditation process, ISU will submit an updated Assurance Argument for review in four years; the University's next comprehensive review is scheduled for 2025-2026.