

## Chapter 10: Conclusion and Request for Reaccreditation

The purpose of a self study is to stimulate analysis and reflection within the University regarding its conformance to quality and viability expectations as expressed in the criteria of the Higher Learning Commission. The self study should also lead the institution to define its key priorities for continuing improvement. The self-study process at VCSU has accomplished these goals, and it has engaged all faculty and staff, as well as many students and community representatives, in doing so.

Through the decade of transformation, Valley City State University has demonstrated that it has the shared vision, will, and capacity to play a leading role in defining high quality technology-enriched teaching and learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In sharp contrast to ten years ago, VCSU now has universal computing and Internet access, faculty who know how to use technology effectively in the classroom, and a rapidly growing number of faculty with skills in flexible, online, and distance delivery. Student satisfaction with these developments is high, often well into the 90 percent range as documented by classroom and student opinion research. Through hybrid courses, technology education, and enhanced student services, the University is in the process of making the concept of customized learning a reality, with a commitment to delivering convenient, effective, and efficient instruction.

The University's culture is strongly learner-centered, and this focus has remained clear throughout the transformation process. Student surveys show very strong satisfaction levels. Furthermore, the faculty have directed the transformation of teaching and learning. The administration has provided tools in the form of equipment, infrastructure, and professional development, but it has relied entirely on the faculty, individually and collectively, to find and pursue their best uses. The administration is entirely comfortable with a stance that some at the national level decry – that there is no need to include the use of technology as a specific component of faculty evaluation. If that changes in time, it will be at the initiative of the faculty. Innovative, technology-enriched teaching and learning is the trajectory that the University accepted in its charge from the State Board of Higher Education in 1990, as expressed further in the mission, vision, and purposes. National recognition in the form of publications, awards, and invitations to make presentations confirms that the University's achievements have substantial credibility in the world of higher education.

Enrollment and financial conditions have remained stable despite serious state economic and demographic pressures. The people of North Dakota have affirmed their support for all public institutions of higher education through a Constitutional referendum. The only negative at the state level other than long-term financial stress is the lack of a modern, high-capacity information system that can support transaction services and provide management information to campus personnel. The project has been undertaken twice in the last decade without success and is now in its third attempt. In the meanwhile, all NDUS campuses are at severe disadvantage in terms of information technology services to support ebusiness and analytical purposes.

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The University's physical plant is well maintained and adequate for the University's mission. Major state-funded improvements in McFarland Hall, the University's main building, signal pride in the University's traditions and key functions. Major improvements funded primarily with private dollars have increased the safety and functionality of student sports facilities. The University's information technology equipment and infrastructure provide students and faculty with world-class access and capabilities. Nevertheless, the University's deferred maintenance list is daunting. The state is expected to continue funding the most essential major maintenance needs, but any improvements in functionality, capacity, or aesthetics are likely to continue to require non-state funding sources. Upgrading the residence halls is a substantial need that affects both the quality of student life and the ability of the institution to attract future students. Identifying ways to achieve those upgrades is an important objective in the University's strategic plan.

During the 1990s, the University restructured the VCSU Foundation to coordinate all support groups, ensure professional staffing, and begin to focus more deliberately on major gifts and planned giving. The athletic facility improvement projects represent the University's first efforts to solicit private funds for anything except student scholarships. Prior to the 1990s, the University had received very few bequests, and none of them had been cultivated. Now, staff have secured a minimum of \$1.5 million in planned gifts.

Throughout the decade, the State Board of Higher Education has increased its leadership role in defining a strategic plan for the North Dakota University System. Valley City State University has consistently made significant contributions to help the Board realize its plan, and the University has consistently anticipated directions the Board has chosen to pursue. The most recent exercise, the Roundtable report, dovetailed so well with the University's existing strategic plan that the University's response to the Roundtable became its revised strategic plan. The Roundtable process has brought flexibility with accountability to all campuses in the University System. As the rhythm of the accountability process becomes established with annual reports and as the Board establishes its routine for reviewing campus strategic plans, VCSU needs to modify and routinize its planning and assessment processes to ensure integration throughout the institution at all levels, and to ensure continuing improvements based on data. The University also needs to revisit its general curricular purposes and develop institutional purposes that reflect its current and intended reality.

Salary levels remain Valley City State University's most fundamental and pressing concern. The University has consistently exceeded state funding levels for salary increases throughout the decade, yet they remain inadequate to attract substantial pools of applicants when vacancies occur. The University has been exceptionally fortunate in finding talented and hard-working individuals who appreciate the quality of small town life and other special features at VCSU, but it needs to maintain or even increase its special commitment to increased salary levels for faculty and staff. It also needs to ensure that new faculty and staff are oriented well to the institution and their roles.

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Community members and University personnel alike are enthusiastic about their relationships with each other, including participation in theatrical and arts ventures, the historical museum, Medicine Wheel Park, civic activities, and sports events. In addition, both community leaders and University personnel have pledged themselves to a long-term economic development strategy that bodes well for both. The new Regional Technology Center is a symbol and vehicle for that commitment. Without generous contributions of University expertise, the community would not have made rapid progress toward the IT infrastructure the new economy requires. The University in turn is depending on the area's success with the new economy to generate tax revenues, jobs, internships, and additional expertise that will help both the institution and many students. Getting to know each other and finding mutually beneficial projects have been thoroughly positive hallmarks of the last decade.

The single greatest opportunity and challenge facing the University is enrollment development. With no anticipated improvements in state funding for the foreseeable future, the University cannot afford enrollment shortfalls and will benefit directly to the extent it is able to realize enrollment increases. The University has positioned itself to attract resident students through its excellent reputation in teacher education, business, and liberal arts; an unusual, even unique, information technology niche; strategic advantages in personal service to students from highly qualified faculty and staff; and a very reasonable cost to students. It has developed considerable expertise through hybrid courses that positions the University well for online distance delivery in selected areas. The institution has developed and used increasingly effective marketing tools in recent years. Given the exceptionally scarce resources, the University has made extraordinary progress in positioning itself for the decade of demographic decline in North Dakota. The current commitment to increased recruitment out of state and internationally is timely but may not yield results soon enough to prevent some level of enrollment decline in the near future.

The University's assessment program has developed well beyond the 1996 level, with particular strengths in terms of widespread, long-term faculty involvement in developing the conceptual and measurement bases for the program. The resulting approach illustrates the value of spending a good deal of time planning so that implementation is smooth, speedy, and coordinated. Not only are faculty fully engaged, but also students. The University perceives itself to rate a reasonably solid level two rating on the commission's chart, with some areas that need to be shored up as well as some points of pride.

It is both highly likely and essential that assessment data now bloom throughout the curriculum. The 2002 portfolio requirement is a built-in deadline. As this occurs, the University must capture the data and channel it into a process of organizational learning and continuous improvement. An assessment coordinator is central to achieving the next step in the assessment process. An early task is to refine and develop the operating procedures that will ensure timely, appropriate, assessment-driven improvements throughout the University.

The University has a strategic niche in its technology education program due to the strength of teacher education generally at VCSU, the long-standing quality of

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its technology education faculty, the extensive technology experience of all its faculty, the critical national need for technology educators, and the program's support from state and national leaders in the field. A major grant has allowed its development as a premier online distance program of national stature with significant support from the State Board for Vocational-Technical Education and the International Technology Education Association.

Valley City State University concludes its decade of transformation as a dynamic, innovative institution with solid foundations. Its traditional programs continue to attract students and earn high ratings from students, alumni, and employers. Results of the Student Opinion Survey are consistently high across the board. Faculty and staff are well-qualified, hard-working, and loyal. Governance processes are highly participative and collegial while also enabling the University to be decisive and take risks. The University has strategic comparative advantages in its unyielding learner-centered focus and its remarkably advanced information technology environment and expertise. Innovative and extensive partnerships with businesses, career focus for programs, flexible instructional delivery options, and an emerging world-class online program all bode well for the future.

The University now faces serious demographic and economic challenges. The challenges have no element of surprise - their roots were evident ten years ago. Seeing the challenges on the horizon has been a powerful motivator for the transformations of the last decade. The youth of North Dakota have been disappearing. The state's economic diversification has been too slow to compensate for losses in agriculture and productive adults of working age.

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The University understands its potential to make major contributions to addressing these challenges for North Dakota and, in so doing, to improve its own resource base. The University is focusing its efforts on recruiting full-time resident students from North Dakota, out of state, and internationally. Their tuition dollars are the only source of potential real increase for the University's operating budget, and their other expenditures will help make it possible to renovate residence halls, maintain other facilities, and sustain the local economy. The University is also focusing on increasing its revenues from non-state sources. Due to a new state funding model, University leaders are in the process of learning a new set of dynamics and alternatives that bear more resemblance to private-sector institutions than public.

Thus, the next ten years are likely to bring the maturation of a number of innovative developments, but few new ones. The University spent the last decade of the last century ensuring that it would be well-positioned to meet the learning needs of people in the new century. While maintaining that commitment, the University now embarks on fundamental initiatives to consolidate and enhance its enrollments and finances.

**Request for Reaccreditation**

Valley City State University meets the General Institutional Requirements and the evaluative criteria as set forth by the NCA and demonstrated by strong patterns of

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evidence documented in this self study. Therefore, Valley City State University requests continuing accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission for the institution, and also approval to deliver programs off campus via distance learning technologies.

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