

Response to the Middle States Evaluation Team's Analysis of Onondaga's Periodic Review Report

September 1, 2013

Dr. Elizabeth H. Sibolski, President
Middle States Commission on Higher Education
3624 Market Street
Philadelphia, PA 19204

Dear Dr. Sibolski,

On behalf of Onondaga Community College, I would like to thank Dr. Joan E. Brookshire and Dr. Sandra F. Dunnington for their thoughtful review of our Periodic Review Report. The College worked collaboratively to produce an all-inclusive report, with supporting evidence demonstrating the College's commitment to continuous improvement. We appreciate the reviewers' recognition of the College for its implementation of improvements targeted to the findings of our Self-Study process, and for its comprehensive and system-wide approach to institutional effectiveness in response to a Visiting Team recommendation. We continue to benefit from the inherent, creative energy of all college stakeholders – students, faculty, staff, alumni, employers, and community members-to advance the College's mission.

Onondaga Community College is fully committed to our assessment process. In a very short time, and with broad-based participation across the College, we achieved an institutional transformation and significant shift in College operations. We fully embrace the recommendation offered by our reviewers to continue this effort. We also appreciate all of the reviewers' suggestions and will formally consider each one.

Sincerely,

Casey Crabill, Ed.D.
President

Report to Faculty, Administrators, Trustees, Students
of
Onondaga Community College
Syracuse, NY 13215-4585

Prepared following analysis of the institution's
Periodic Review Report

First Reviewer:
Dr. Joan E. Brookshire
Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs
Montgomery County Community College

Second Reviewer
Dr. Sandra F. Dunnington
Vice President Academic Affairs
Prince George's Community College

August 6, 2013

I. Introduction

Onondaga Community College, a college of the State University of New York, was established in 1961. Located in Onondaga County, it is the second-largest undergraduate institution in Central New York, serving nearly half-million residents of the county with a wide variety of programs and services. The College also draws students from neighboring counties, particularly Oswego, Oneida, and Madison counties.

The Periodic Review Report (PRR) provides the readers with a comprehensive overview of the institutional progress since the College's decennial self-study and team visit in 2008 and its progress letter in 2010. The PRR also incorporated progress specific to the selected topics model used to conduct its Self-Study and to the accompanying *Document Roadmap* that addressed the College's compliance with the *Standards of Excellence*. The College used the selected topics model to "critically examine the degree to which the College was fulfilling its core 'promise of self-discovery' to students."

The PRR reflects the significant commitment and efforts made by the College to address the concerns identified by the Self-Study Visiting Team, the Generalist Evaluators, and by the College community itself during the self-study process. The College should be commended for the scope, depth, and immediacy of implementation of improvements targeted to the findings of the self-study process. It should be noted that part of this work was accomplished under a transition in leadership as Dr. Debbie Sydow, the then President of Onondaga Community College, left the College in July 1, 2012 and Ms. Margaret O'Connell was appointed Interim President. On July 1, 2013, Dr. Casey Crabill assumed the position as President.

II. Responses to Recommendations from the Previous Decennial Evaluation

The PRR reflects progress made to date in the three areas identified by the Self-Study Visiting Team, followed up in the March 2010 progress report, and acknowledged in the Self-Study Report: Institutional Effectiveness, Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes, and Student Advising.

Institutional Effectiveness

Self-Study Visiting Team Recommendation: The development and implementation of a comprehensive, organized, and sustained process for the assessment of institutional effectiveness with evidence that assessment results are used for improvement in all areas (Standard 7).

In response, the PRR describes how the College has addressed this recommendation by 1) creating a system and process for tracking and monitoring outcomes, analyzing assessment results, and using these results in a cycle of continuous quality improvement; 2) re-framing the College's governance structure and administrative responsibilities to better support the newly developed assessment structure; and 3) building the College's capacity through the addition of new positions and increased faculty and staff participation in assessment and project management activities, thereby effectively supporting the assessment of institutional effectiveness.

As described in the PRR, the College utilized its strategic plan, [A Framework of Success: 2011-2016](#), which includes measurable outcomes and key indicators, to build a firm base for assessment of institutional effectiveness. Supporting documentation in the PRR provided evidence that the three major improvements noted above were working to effectively assess the College's five (5) major goals and targeted outcomes as well as the nine (9) attendant strategic initiatives developed to support the major goals. To ensure transparency of the progress made to date on institutional effectiveness, data-driven

quarterly reports are made available to the campus on goal attainment and success on targets identified in the strategic initiatives.

The readers commend Onondaga Community College for its comprehensive and system-wide approach to addressing this recommendation. They also **suggest** the College consider adding benchmarks from peer institutions as a next step in assessing institutional effectiveness. Providing a broader context for success factors would further enhance the assessment process.

Assessment of Student Learning

Self-Study Visiting Team Recommendation: The development of a comprehensive, organized, and sustained assessment process to evaluate and improve student learning. (Standard 14)

As described in the PRR, the College has made significant improvement in assessing student learning through the following activities: the implementation of an improved assessment framework with software to track and report assessment results, including improvements in student learning; additional faculty development activities, including an Assessment Fellowship Program; and the strategic re-assignment of responsibilities for assessment. The major changes noted in improving the assessment of institutional effectiveness also were in evidence in the improvements made to assessment of student learning outcomes.

The PRR reports that all academic programs now have assessment plans in place and have reported on at least one outcome in 2012. Curriculum maps have also been developed for each program linking institutional learning outcomes to each respective program outcome. The accompanying support documentation shows that program assessment, using the College's formal review process, continues to yield assessment results that leads to program improvements and also strategically links institutional effectiveness and assessment of student learning outcomes. However, the relative newness of the process and reporting structure for the assessment of student learning and the use of the assessment software, has not allowed for sufficient time to show evidence that assessment efforts have led to improvement of student learning across the curriculum.

The readers **recommend** that the College, while continuing to support the assessment process that has been articulated in the PRR, begin an increased focus on closing the loop, reporting on how assessment results have led to improvement in student learning.

Student Advising

Self-Study Visiting Team Recommendation: The development and implementation of a comprehensive student advising system. (Standard 9)

The PRR documents the College's progress in implementing a comprehensive student-advising model. To date, the previous group advising process with a focus on course scheduling, has been replaced with a holistic, student development model that is centered around individual student career and educational goals as the basis for course scheduling. To support this re-definition of advising, the college has added comprehensive training for advisors, a common new student experience with improved orientation, and 24/7 e-support for advisors and students. In addition, the Center for Advising and First-Year Students opened in fall 2012, providing a physical structure with added staff to support the new advising model. Student learning outcomes were also identified specific to advising.

Implemented as a pilot, the new advising model, including student learning outcomes, has been assessed and a detailed data-driven report on assessment findings and next steps was provided to the college

community and included in the PRR documentation. While the report identifies next steps--most importantly the need to adopt a College-wide advising model--timelines and benchmarks for completion were not available.

The readers **suggest** that College develop a project plan with target dates and outcomes for the next steps identified both in the PRR narrative and in the 2012 Advisement Assessment and Analysis.

In addition to the three recommendations made by the Self-Study Visiting Team, the College reported on progress made to the following self-identified areas in need of improvement discussed in the Self-Study document.

Access to Student Services

As a result of assessing current services, a number of new services have been added in order to enhance the student experience: use of technology for recruitment, submission of information critical to financial aid, quick access to resources, expanded use of the College Smartcard, discounts to bus passes, and extended hours for financial aid office.

Student Space

In response to demands, the college opened its fourth residence hall in August 2012. Space has been re-designed and/or re-allocated to better meet student needs and additional rooms fitted as smart classrooms--bringing the total to 85%.

Educational Experience

As a result of conducting a formal program credit analysis, the College reduced the number of credits required in degree programs, capping the A.S. and A.S. at 63 credits and the A.A.S. at 64. The College expects that this will accelerate completion rates as well as reduce students' tuition costs. Assessment of other services resulted in extended hours and website enhancements as well as recommendations for future improvements.

III. Major Challenges and/or Opportunities

As part of a year-long strategic planning process that engaged the college community as well as members the local community, the College developed its 2011-2016 Strategic Plan. The key challenges and opportunities, described below, were developed through that planning process and are directly related to the five goals and targeted outcomes of the current strategic plan. The PRR addresses the strategies identified to address the noted challenges and opportunities and progress made to date on each.

Challenges:

1. Changing demographics and implications for enrollment and retention, program portfolio and delivery methods.

The PRR provides an analysis of enrollment trends and highlights progress to date on increasing enrollment in the face of an expected continuing decline of traditional age students. Of noted were targeted recruitment efforts and support for the adult student, including special services to veterans and their dependents and expanded daycare opportunities. The report also documents the special attention that continues to be paid to retaining current students by strengthening support services and amending policies that were identified as blocks to student success and completion. Early college programs were also added in order to support the academic readiness of high school students and thereby help support enrollment.

The PRR also reports on the success to date of using the results of the planning process to better connect the College's academic portfolio of programs with employer needs. This connection was identified as essential in order to support enrollment and retention efforts.

2. The "new normal" resulting from declining public funding streams, rising costs, and the implications for the fiscal viability of the College.

The PRR indicates that the College recognized that cost efficiencies alone would not bridge the gap in expected revenues. In response, the College has both prioritized strategic cost-cutting as well as created new revenue streams. Among the initiatives noted in the PRR that were put in place to achieve both goals were the creation of a new administrative model charged with leveraging assets and non-profit entities, the stabilization of its non-profit affiliate corporations, implementation of recruitment and degree completion strategies previously mentioned, and the completion of a successful capital campaign.

Opportunities:

As part of the planning process, described in the PRR, the College identified five (5) strategic goals leading to (9) new opportunities or strategic initiatives for program support and development. The PRR and supporting documentation provide examples of how the opportunities identified under six of the initiatives are currently being addressed through the work of college-wide work groups. While each group is at different stages of project development, the PRR provides evidences that all have conducted extensive research and identified next action steps. Several have already resulted in program implementations. Progress on each is monitored through assessment of the strategic initiatives and reported out to the college community. Examples of the progress made to date as indicated in the PRR are listed below.

Under Goal 1 (Standard 8), Student Success, two projects were identified by the High School Pre-College strategic work group and a grant awarded by the College Board will provide the funds for development of five new high school partnerships where the ACCUPLACER Placement exam will be administered in order to determine students' readiness for college. New locations are being identified to support the development of a more strategically placed extension site.

Under Goal 2, College Readiness (Standards 8 and 11), the strategic work group on Developmental Education has completed its Developmental Education-Re-design report, complete with action items. In addition, the newly developed "Summer Success Academy" for entering first year students has shown promise with program completers all passing their developmental courses. The college was also selected to participate in Carnegie Foundation's Quantway Initiative for developmental math. These re-designed courses were planned for 2012-2013 implementation.

Under Goal 3, Seamless Transfer (Standard 8 and 11), the strategic work on Seamless Transfer completed its plan with action items. As a result, policy changes already noted in this report on credits for graduation have been implemented, the number of transfer articulation agreements expanded, online offering and support expanded, and a seamless educational pathway for students in development developed.

Under Goal 4, Career Pathways (Standard 11), partnerships with local business, have been expanded, new programs have been developed and implemented in response to business needs, partnerships with local colleges have been developed through shared program offerings, and a \$1.2 million grant from the Department of Labor is being used to expand training and jobs in manufacturing.

Under Goal 5, Long-Term Sustainability, through its College-Affiliated Enterprises and Asset Management Division, the College has developed a number of practices that have increased funding

and/or saved on expenses. The College notes in the PRR that the division identified a combination of revenue increases and cost savings totaling \$4 million.

The readers commend the Onondaga Community College for using the strategic planning process and the 2011-2016 Strategic Plan as the basis of monitoring both emerging challenges and opportunities while also monitoring achievement of the goals and outcomes currently being addressed under both categories.

IV. Enrollment and Finance Trends and Projections

Based on an analysis of the enrollment challenges noted in Section III of this report, initiatives already in place and those still in planning stages, the College projects a modest increase in enrollment through 2016. As the previous section details, the College is well aware of the enrollment and fiscal challenges ahead and has addressed each in its Strategic Plan.

The PRR provides specific examples of progress-made to date on enrollment targets overall by student type and on the strategies designed to achieve each target. For example, although student head-count has dropped off over the last two years, new initiatives have led to increases in average annual full-time equivalent enrollment, a result largely of an increase in non-traditional students. Also noted are some initiatives that were developed to better support student success but have ultimately reduced enrollment. Target enrollment numbers are identified in the 2011-2016 Strategic Plan and are monitored in relation to the budget on an annual basis, with adjustments made where needed to ensure a balanced budget.

The College has prepared a forecast of revenues and expenditures through 2015/16, with the goal of realizing a balanced budget or surplus each year. A budget development plan is in place that requires that all departments use a zero-based budgeting model. The PRR concludes that the “College has strong internal controls in place” and that “Overall, the College is fiscally sound.” Its operating budget for FY2013 exceeded \$75 million in annual revenues and expenditures—which reflects a 31% increase in the operating budget from FY 2008 to FY2013-- and its unrestricted fund balances grew from \$2.99 million in FY2008 to \$3.97 million in FY2012.

V. Assessment Processes and Plans

As discussed in Section II of the PRR, the College has used its strategic plan, [A Framework for Success: 2011-2016](#), to focus the campus on ongoing planning and the assessment of institutional effectiveness and student learning outcomes—as well as to assure that the results of these assessment are used for continuous improvement in support of the College’s mission. The College’s Institutional Effectiveness Plan, included in the supporting documentation and summarized in the PRR, provides a road map of this process and includes a diagram of the College’s assessment cycle, with links to accreditation, budgeting, and the overall planning process highlighted.

Also noted in Section II of this report and in the PRR, the College in response to its findings from the self-study process and those identified by the Self-Study Visiting Team, has created a system and process for tracking and monitoring outcomes, analyzing assessment results, and using these results in a cycle of continuous quality improvement; amended the College’s governance structure and administrative responsibilities to better support the newly developed assessment structure; and increased the College’s capacity through the addition of new positions and increased faculty and staff participation in assessment, and project management activities. In Section V of the PRR, the College provides specific examples of how these new processes have contributed to the assessment of both institutional effectiveness and student learning outcomes and where the results of assessment have been used for improvements specific to findings of the 2008 Self-Study process.

In regard to institutional effectiveness, the PRR highlighted the College's efforts to address issues raised in the self-study process, including assessment of Board of Trustee effectiveness and building the institution's capacity to "collaborate effectively in support of student success." Improvements surrounding the Board of Trustees include sustained board development, including orientation of new members and the inclusion of members of the Board on various governance task forces and ad hoc committees. The PRR cites the College's changes to the governance structure as a major way it continues to ensure that the whole college campus is actively engaged with student success, as outlined in the current Strategic Plan. For example, replacing the President's Cabinet with a College Leadership Council has created a central vehicle through which other governance structures are connected to overall planning and assessment. The PRR also provides several examples of results of office-level assessments, noting that assessment is required of all college units.

Regarding assessment of student learning, the PRR provides examples of changes made at both course and program-levels as a result of ongoing assessment of student performance in respective courses and programs. All academic programs have assessment plans in place and have reported on at least one outcome. It is not clear, however, at this stage of the implementation the new assessment system, articulated in the PRR, what percentage of the programs have followed up on the changes to assess their effectiveness.

The PRR noted that work continues on the assessment of student learning outcomes in the SUNY General Education categories with some evidence of specific improvement made as a result of assessment interventions. It also notes that although improvements have been made--especially in communication, data collection, and analysis, and reporting processes-- several challenges still remain. For example, the College identified challenges with the use of different measures and different targets within the same General Education category. To resolve this, modifications to the Gen Ed template and addition of new directions on assessment were implemented in spring 2013.

In addition, the College notes that there is "little documentation of the extent to which these competencies, Critical Thinking and Information Management, are infused throughout the curriculum", with 96% of program not directly measuring or reporting on Critical Thinking and even less measuring or reporting on Information Management. The PRR reports that a greater degree of compliance was reported in the review of the College's institutional learning outcomes, especially on the two that align with the two noted SUNY competencies, suggesting that assessment may only need to be reported for one outcome. The College has been working on a resolution of this issue, including the addition of a required course on Critical Thinking, which was taught for the first time in 2012.

The readers **suggest** that the research conducted by the Board committee on ways to assessing Board effectiveness be utilized and results of this assessment shared with the college campus as part of college-wide reporting. The readers also **suggest** that work continue on findings ways to link General Education outcomes to Institutional Learning outcomes as a way of streamlining the assessment process, but more importantly as a way of making assessment results more meaningful, thereby assuring their use by faculty in improving student learning.

VI. Linked Institutional Planning and Budgeting Processes

The PRR describes an interconnected planning and budgeting process that is inextricably linked to the Onondaga Community College's strategic plan, *A Framework for Success: 2011-2016*. The PRR describes a planning process that "begins at the institutional level with input from all internal and external constituents, then flows to divisional and departmental levels, where financial resources are allocated in

support of institutional goals and priorities.” Planning precedes budgeting submission, assuring that resources are appropriately allocated to the College’s strategic goals and initiatives.

While the PRR notes that the budget is prepared in accordance with operating procedures set by the State University of New York (SUNY) and given final approval by SUNY, the budget itself is developed with input from each college department based on the goals and objectives from the strategic plan. However, the PRR does not indicate how budget decisions are communicated back to the college community.

The readers **suggest** that, if not already in place, an additional step be added to the planning and budgeting process that describes the mechanism to communicate budget decisions to the college community.

VII. Conclusion

As presented in its PRR and supporting documentation, Onondaga Community College continues to build on the improvements recommended both by the college community and the Self-Study visiting team. Most notably the College has developed a comprehensive strategic plan which serves not only as a road map for meeting its mission but clearly provides the specific indicators used to assess how well the College is fulfilling its core “promise of self-discovery”. The College should be proud of the progress it has made to date, especially during these challenging economic times.

The following **suggestions** are made to the College in the spirit of collegiality.

1. It is suggested that the College consider adding benchmarks from peer institutions as a next step in assessing institutional effectiveness. Providing a broader context for success factors would further enhance the assessment process.
2. The College may find it helpful to develop a project plan with target dates and outcomes for the next steps identified in the PRR regarding advisement and in the 2012 Advisement Assessment and Analysis report.
3. The College is encouraged to utilize the research conducted by the Board committee on ways to assess Board effectiveness and to share it with the college campus as part of college-wide reporting on assessment.
4. The College is encouraged to continue its work on finding ways to link General Education outcomes to Institutional Learning outcomes as a way to streamline the assessment process, but more importantly as a way of making assessment results more meaningful, thereby assuring their use by faculty in improving student learning.
5. If not already in place, the College should consider adding a step to the planning and budgeting process that describes the mechanism to communicate budget decisions to the college community.

The readers **recommend** the following:

1. The readers recommend that the College continue to support the assessment process that has been articulated in the PRR and begin to focus on closing the loop, reporting on how assessment results have led to improvement in student learning.

