Introduction

In preparation for our Quality Checkup Visit, scheduled for October 23-25, 2013, Southern Arkansas University has prepared the following Quality Summary Report. This report includes a brief description of the University, a description of our quality improvement journey, and an update on our continuous improvement initiatives.

The Institution

Southern Arkansas University (SAU) is a comprehensive, regional university located in Magnolia, Arkansas. The University is situated on approximately 1,400 acres, which include the core academic and administrative buildings plus a 1,219-acre model farm and agriculture laboratory. SAU primarily serves the southwest quarter of Arkansas, from which the University draws over half of its undergraduate students. In spring 2013, SAU had a total enrollment of 3,014 students. There were 2,565 students in undergraduate programs and 449 students in graduate programs. Of these, 182 were non-degree seeking students. With its mission-driven focus on student learning, the University is committed to providing quality academic programs, services, and opportunities to help students reach their educational goals and professional future.

SAU provides quality four-year undergraduate baccalaureate degrees, including more than sixty majors in four distinct colleges. The University also provides associate degrees in six fields. Graduate study is offered through all four colleges with master’s degrees in thirteen different programs. Southern Arkansas University offers the majority of its classes on the main campus in Magnolia. Off-campus classes are offered through the College of Education in De Queen, Camden, Hope, Mena, and El Dorado. In recent years, the University has increased the number of classes and programs offered through distance education. As reported in the Systems Portfolio, SAU offered 358 online courses in 2011-2012. The University continues to view online courses and programs as a growth area that meets the needs of many students. In 2012-2013, SAU offered 387 online courses, with much of the increase associated with additional summer offerings. The University also provides a limited number of concurrent enrollment classes at seven regional high schools.

SAU’s Quality Improvement Journey

Southern Arkansas University’s quality improvement journey began with a change from the PEAQ comprehensive evaluation pathway to the AQIP pathway in June 2010. The University’s last PEAQ evaluation occurred in 2002-2003 and would have reoccurred in 2012-2013 if SAU had remained on the PEAQ pathway. With the transition to AQIP in 2010, however, the HLC proposed a new timeline for Reaffirmation of Accreditation—a timeline which, of necessity, has been significantly modified.

When admitted to the AQIP pathway in June 2010, SAU quickly began to build teams to learn more about the AQIP processes. In September 2010, the University hosted an AQIP professional development workshop for faculty, staff, and administrators that was facilitated by a consultant experienced in transitioning to the AQIP pathway. In February 2011, SAU attended our first Strategy Forum, which was very productive and provided the framework for our first three action projects. Following the timelines provided by the HLC, the University developed working plans (1) to submit our first Systems Portfolio by June 2014, followed by a Systems Appraisal, (2) to complete our first Quality Checkup visit in 2016-2017, and (3) to be evaluated for Reaffirmation of Accreditation in 2017-2018.

These dates framed the work of the University until May 2, 2012, when SAU received notice of a significant schedule adjustment from the Commission. In a letter from the HLC, notice was given of the Commission’s discovery of a problem in the application of certain AQIP institutions regarding the
Commission’s policy on the ten-year period for which accreditation is reaffirmed. By their admission, this most unusual circumstance was the impetus for the Commission’s imposing a significant schedule change. According to the May 2, 2012, letter, SAU’s reaffirmation had to be completed before December 31, 2012, which would have required completion of the Systems Portfolio, Systems Appraisal, and the Quality Checkup before September 30, 2012, so that the Reaffirmation Panel could recommend Reaffirmation of Accreditation to the Institutional Actions Council (IAC) during the fall of 2012. This was obviously a nearly impossible proposal, requiring the Systems Portfolio to be written within a three-month period – two full years earlier than originally scheduled. In hindsight, the only good aspect of that proposal was that the reaffirmation would have been completed before the newly revised Criteria became effective on January 1, 2013.

On May 31, 2012, the University received a follow-up letter from HLC President Sylvia Manning providing some relief from the schedule described on May 2. President Manning stated that the IAC, at its meeting on May 23, 2012, voted to extend the reaffirmation date to 2013-2014. In addition, the IAC adjusted the required AQIP pathway activities to align with this new reaffirmation date. Based on these adjusted requirements, our first Systems Portfolio was to be submitted by June 1, 2013; the Systems Appraisal should be received in early September 2013; the Quality Checkup is scheduled for October 23-25, 2013, and Reaffirmation of Accreditation is to be completed during 2013-2014. While the revised scheduling provided additional time to complete the necessary steps, submission of the Systems Portfolio after January 2013 required the University to follow the newly revised Criteria. All of our work on the Systems Portfolio up to this date had been based on the old criteria; this caused a significant change in the work needed to complete the Systems Portfolio.

The above narrative provides the background leading up to Southern Arkansas University’s first Systems Portfolio submission and Quality Checkup. SAU’s AQIP team worked diligently to adapt to the new Systems Portfolio guidelines and to incorporate the newly revised Criteria, which included an embedded crosswalk between the nine AQIP categories and the five criteria for accreditation. Embedding the criteria provided the University with an opportunity to critically evaluate our processes and to recognize the progress we have made in transitioning to a healthy, effective culture for quality improvement.

On May 31, 2013, Southern Arkansas University submitted our first Systems Portfolio. In the three months that followed, the University has already begun to address the issues that we self-identified as opportunities for improvement. The University received our first Systems Appraisal on September 6, 2013, and has just begun to study the feedback provided.

**Structure of the Quality Teams**

The University’s transition to a focus on continuous quality improvement was based on a campus-wide review of the process of accreditation and the decision by all campus constituencies to focus on continuous improvement. The AQIP Executive Council, AQIP coordinating team, and the AQIP Quality Council provide the coordinating structure for continuous improvement initiatives. Work on the Systems Portfolio and action projects is coordinated by teams of faculty and staff members. The Strategic Planning Council provides the link between continuous improvement and budgeting.

The **AQIP Executive Council (EC)** includes the president, administrators, leaders from the Faculty Senate, Staff Senate, and Board of Trustees, and the AQIP coordinating team. The EC meets on a monthly basis, providing a forum for administrative review and discussion about the Systems Portfolio, annual reports for active action projects, proposed quality initiatives, and budget requests to support continuous improvement. The EC approves leadership for the AQIP Coordinating Team, Quality Council, and Action Project teams. The EC approves the Systems Portfolio, Federal Compliance Report, and the Quality Summary Report that are submitted to the HLC.
The AQIP Coordinating Team (CT) includes the Vice President for Academic Affairs, the director of institutional effectiveness, and a senior faculty member. The CT coordinates meetings of the EC, oversees all action projects and related annual reporting, oversees preparation and submission of the Systems Portfolio, and oversees preparation and submission of the Federal Compliance Report and Quality Summary Report. The CT also coordinates the University’s Quality Council and presents regular reports at faculty and staff meetings.

The Quality Council (QC) is the backbone of the University’s quality improvement process. In 2010, the president appointed the University’s first AQIP Quality Council—a strong, diverse group of faculty, staff, and administrators to assume responsibility for SAU’s participation in the AQIP pathway. The Quality Council continues to mature, as members have grown in understanding and appreciation for the impact quality initiatives can have on University processes. The QC now consists of 35 faculty, staff, and administrators, including 27 faculty and staff members who chair teams for each of the nine AQIP categories and who chair the three active action projects. Each team also includes an administrative liaison. The QC meets each month during the academic year, under the leadership of the AQIP Coordinating Team. The QC provides members the opportunity to share progress reports and to discuss HLC reporting and feedback.

Recent improvement: The University recognizes the need to improve diversity within faculty, staff, and administration. As one step in meeting that need, the EC recommended increasing the number of minority co-chairs on the QC for fall 2013.

Planning for continuous quality improvement begins with the University’s Quality Council. Opportunities for continuous quality improvement are proposed by faculty and staff members through the QC. Opportunities for broad, campus-wide improvement are presented to the EC, which reviews initiatives for alignment with the University mission and selects three or four initiatives as Action Projects for the following year. Other continuous quality improvement initiatives are implemented at the unit-level and are reported through the SAU SPUR system, our local initiative for Sharing Progress, Unitig Resources.

The University’s Strategic Planning Council (SPC) helps link continuous improvement to the University’s strategic plan and budget. In 2012, the president appointed the University’s new SPC—another strong, diverse group of faculty, staff, administrators, and other key stakeholders—to assume responsibility for the University’s strategic planning process. The SPC also includes representatives from the AQIP Quality Council to ensure integration between the strategic plan and continuous quality improvement. With a renewed focus on continuous quality improvement, the SPC has transitioned from the former 5-year model for strategic planning to a rolling 3-year model. Coordination of planning processes occurs through communication between constituencies, the QC, and the SPC. Strategic initiatives are set by the SPC and communicated to the colleges, departments, and support units. In response, units identify action steps to support University goals.

Action Project Summary

During the last two years, Southern Arkansas University has undertaken a number of quality improvement initiatives in the form of AQIP action projects. These projects are listed below and discussed in the sections that follow:

- Identification and Review of General Education Assessment: Completed December 2012
- First-Year Student Retention: Completed October 2012
- Faculty-Staff Needs Assessment for Professional Development: Completed October 2012
- Implementation of Infrastructure for Faculty/Staff Development: Ongoing
- Improving the Effectiveness of Faculty Evaluations: Ongoing
- Improving Academic Advising: Ongoing
**General Education Assessment.** The general education action project was started in September 2011 and completed in December 2012. This action project resulted in two significant accomplishments: (1) approval of new University learning goals and (2) implementation of a systematic process for assessment of the general education curriculum. The team was particularly encouraged by feedback received from the HLC reviewer following the 2011 annual update: “This project has involved many members of the campus community. The use of pilots allowed for strategic development and communication opportunities. The continued expansion of the project pilots to include more faculty and classes appears to be an effective strategy to gain faculty support. The team used communication strategies very effectively.”

Phase one of the general education action project resulted in approval of new University learning goals. The action project team worked with the University’s General Education Committee (GEC) to develop the new learning goals, which merged previous versions of University learning goals and general education learning goals. Based on recommendations from the action project team, the GEC initiated a review of the University’s Goals for General Education. Prior to this review, the University had both University Learning Goals and General Education Learning Goals. The GEC identified disconnects and redundancies between these separate lists of learning goals. In spring 2012, the GEC recommended a unification of the learning goals coupled with programmatic assessment of the general education components. Following approval by the governance system, new University Learning Goals were approved in fall 2012.

Phase two of the general education action project resulted in the development and implementation of a new process for assessing student learning outcomes within general education. The new process includes better mapping for the general education curriculum, identification of assessment points within general education, and annual review of assessment results related to general education. Faculty members are well engaged in this new process, which is capturing and analyzing data through the LiveText® solution platform. These changes are viewed as a significant improvement that should improve linkages between assessment of student learning and content within the general education curriculum.

The action project team worked with the General Education Committee and the Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) to develop and implement the new assessment process. The team pilot tested the process in summer 2012, expanded to a larger pilot process in fall 2012, and implemented the process through the General Education Committee in spring 2013. The OIE continues to provide implementation support for the process, while the General Education Committee reviews assessment results and provides feedback to faculty.

During 2012-2013,—the first full year of collecting assessment data for general education—faculty collected over 2,000 separate assessments using AAC&U Rubrics and LiveText®. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) compiled data using a LiveText® project, which can be shared with faculty, administrators, and others interested in studying student learning outcomes. During the pilot, general education faculty met to evaluate the outcomes and to discuss ways to improve student learning. Results of these discussions are also included in the project documents. All assessment data related to general education student outcomes are available in SAU’s **General Education Assessment Project**, which can be accessed by logging into www.livetext.com and entering with the following visitor’s passcode: FAA0FFEE.

**Recent improvement:** SAU’s action project for building a general education assessment system has been completed; management of the process has now been entrusted to the General Education Committee and to the OIE. To support this process and to effectively collect and analyze assessment data, the University recently approved campus-wide implementation of the LiveText® solution platform. Beginning in fall 2013 all students will have LiveText accounts and all general
education faculty will now be able to collect students’ key assignments, assess student learning using online rubrics, and access analysis of assessment data.

During the fall training sessions for general education faculty, the OIE has shared the above link to the General Education Assessment Project. This is allowing faculty to track assessment results over time and is providing context for faculty discussion related to improving student learning. The project will also be shared with the General Education Committee for their review and discussion.

**Student Retention.** The first-year student retention action project was started in May 2011 and completed in October 2012. This action project resulted in two significant accomplishments: (1) implementation of a comprehensive redesigned developmental studies curriculum to improve retention and completion in developmental reading, writing, and math and (2) implementation of an improved Early Intervention process to identify at-risk students. As noted by HLC reviewers on the 2011 annual report, “Results of this important work have been astounding.”

The retention action project has resulted in a far-reaching impact on students, thanks to the redesign of our transitional studies program. Students in our region often come to college underprepared. Faculty, staff, and administrators have not been satisfied with the retention and completion rates for students in developmental courses. Demonstrating the University’s commitment to this project, SAU hired a program director to coordinate redesign of transitional coursework and departments worked together to design a better program. The SAU website includes information about the curriculum redesign and two videos, which highlight the significant increase in student success following the redesign and explain why it is especially important to help students in developmental classes.

In summary, the transitional math, writing, and composition classes were redesigned for instruction on an intensive seven-week schedule, which allows students to complete up to two levels within the traditional semester. The table below summarizes the passage rates for students enrolled in transitional math classes in fall 2011 compared to the prior semester. These results document the significant improvement in student success in these math classes -- success which continues to improve.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transition Course</th>
<th>Passage Rate Prior to Redesign</th>
<th>Passage Rate After Redesign</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transitional Fundamentals of Math</td>
<td>37% passed one level</td>
<td>75% passed at least one level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitional Algebra</td>
<td>57% passed one level</td>
<td>74% passed at least one level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitional College Algebra</td>
<td>52% passed one level</td>
<td>96% passed by end of 16 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>78% passed by end of 7 weeks</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Similarly, completion results for transitional writing and composition indicate significant improvement. Following the redesign, the completion rate for developmental writing increased 37 percent and the completion rate for transitional composition increased 27 percent.

Improvements in the Early Intervention process are also indicating promising results. As a result of the action project, these services were centralized, and the University hired a director of early intervention services. The Early Alert system allows faculty to communicate their concerns about at-risk students to the director, who then works to intervene and help students resolve issues that are inhibiting course completion and retention. The University continues to monitor retention rates to measure the impact of this system.
**Professional Development.** The first action project for improving faculty and staff professional development was launched in May 2011. Phase One of the project, which was completed in September 2012, related to assessing current practices and identifying the professional development needs of faculty and staff. During phase one, the action project team surveyed faculty and staff to determine their satisfaction with the University’s professional development programs. As expected, results indicated improvements are needed and respondents provided suggestions for improving the current system. As a result of this action project, the University has implemented several new on-campus development programs. Beginning in August 2012, the Vice President for Academic Affairs initiated two new processes to support newly hired faculty: a mentoring program for new hires and a new faculty consortium series, with topics of interest to all new hires. The SAU Faculty Colloquium is another new initiative related to professional development. Co-sponsored by Magale Library and the Vice President for Academic Affairs, the faculty colloquiums feature the current research of faculty members and improve communication on campus.

The action project related to professional development is ongoing. Phase two was launched in September 2012. During the last year, the team has developed a better system for communicating professional development opportunities that are available on campus. Working with other departments, the team developed a tracking system for on-campus professional development opportunities and created a webpage for the Faculty and Staff Development Calendar. To support online teaching, the Library now provides access to the Teaching Online: Professional Development Library. The team continues to work on improving communication about development opportunities.

**Faculty Evaluation.** In January 2013, the University launched a new action project to improve the effectiveness of the faculty evaluation process. During the first months, this team has begun researching technology options for collecting and compiling course evaluations, which are an element of the faculty evaluation process.

**Academic Advising.** In January 2013, the University launched a new action project to improve academic student advising. During the first months, this team surveyed academic advisors; results of this survey indicated that faculty advisors need more training and would benefit from an advising handbook. The team also identified an immediate need to improve the process for handling transcripts for incoming transfer students. In response, the University has already realigned resources for a new transfer credit coordinator and committed resources to purchase a software program that helps in transcript evaluation (TES). During the first months, the team also surveyed over 500 students about their experiences with the advising process. Results of the student surveys will be analyzed in the fall.

**Other Continuous Improvement Initiatives**

Other continuous quality improvement initiatives are implemented at the unit-level and are reported through the SAU SPUR system, our local initiative for Sharing Progress, Uniting Resources. Continuous quality improvement is a campus-wide endeavor. Since submitting of the University’s Systems Portfolio on May 31, several significant quality improvements have been completed.

One of the institution’s strategic focus areas continues to be improving program assessment. As noted in the Systems Portfolio, program assessment has matured at different levels across different disciplines. Therefore, the OIE worked closely with program leaders and department chairs during the summer to assist them in implementing better assessment plans. As a result of summer meetings and work, program leaders and department chairs have completed the tasks below:
• Realigned their program goals and objectives to better articulate with the University’s learning goals.
• Redesigned their assessment plan to incorporate all five learning goals within a two-year rolling assessment cycle.
• Identified measurement points (classes) for collecting assessment data, and
• Set targets for measuring results.

The OIE has redesigned assessment projects for all departments in LiveText, which will provide better data sharing among faculty and with external evaluators. The OIE has also helped by providing templates for submitting assessment plans and subsequent assessment reports.

To improve communication and understanding of assessment, each college has organized a College Assessment Team to conduct a preliminary review of assessment plans and reports and to provide feedback with suggestions for improvement. The College Assessment Teams are new to the College of Liberal and Performing Arts and the College of Science and Technology. Each of these teams has already met with the OIE, and is currently reviewing the assessment plans developed by program leaders during the summer. College Assessment Teams already existed in the Colleges of Education and Business; these teams will continue to operate with some additional responsibilities for feedback and review. The College teams will support the work of the University’s Assessment Review Council and will provide better communication among colleagues about assessment.

Other continuous improvement initiatives have also been completed during the summer, including those briefly described below:

• Department chairs and deans developed and implemented a formal credit hour policy. Based on that policy, all faculty members completed credit-hour calculations for their fall 2013 classes, which are retained by the VPAA.
• Department chairs and deans worked with faculty to redesign course syllabi that will better communicate university and program missions, program learning goals, and the University’s credit hour policy. By September 4, all full-time faculty members have submitted new syllabi for fall classes, as have all the adjunct faculty. Syllabi are stored in an online database.
• The University has implemented campus-wide adoption of LiveText for collection, analysis, and communication of assessment results. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) has assisted the general education faculty, program leaders, and department chairs in identifying ways that LiveText can be used for assessment.
• The Library staff and the VPAA staff have developed an Academic Integrity Workshop that is required for students who have verified academic integrity violations. The workshop course meets once per month and requires students to view the Library’s online academic integrity tutorials. Each student must score at least 85 percent on the workshop’s final test to pass the course and to have an “academic integrity hold” removed from the student’s academic records.
• To improve student success in online learning, the University has developed an Online Primer course in Blackboard. Beginning in fall 2013, students must complete this 50-minute primer before accessing their first online class. The program provides information about successful strategies for online learning.
• To improve registration, new processes and forms were developed to assist fully online students.
• To help meet increasing demand for on-campus housing, the University completed construction of a new student residence hall.
• To improve operational efficiency in residence halls, the University completed many other projects during the summer. For example, four residence halls were renovated with new carpet
and lobby furniture; new computer labs were installed in the residence halls; and new laundry facilities were installed in student apartments.

- To improve efficiency and transparency for faculty, the financial services area has implemented a distributed purchasing system portal and payroll system.
- To improve access to all online resources, the University recently signed a contract to implement a single sign-in portal for all faculty, staff, and students. This system will allow access through mobile media.

Response to Systems Appraisal Feedback

In light of the accelerated timetable on which this review is based, the University will not have the usual time to study the systems appraisal much less implement changes in response to identified opportunities for improvement. Nevertheless, the University has taken steps to begin improvements in areas that we ourselves identified as areas for improvement in the Systems Portfolio. As noted in the Systems Portfolio, we recognize the need for improving the University’s academic advising process, faculty and staff development process, and the faculty evaluation process – current action projects are working to address these areas.

Within the Systems Portfolio, the University also identified the following areas for improvement:

- Review of mission statements at the University, college, and department levels,
- Collection and analysis of information from employers and alumni,
- Tracking of retention,
- Administrative succession planning,
- Better access to data for all stakeholders, sharing institutional data, and
- Improving communication between faculty, staff, students, and administration.

As the Quality Council has time to study the feedback to be provided in the Systems Appraisal, teams will evaluate the feedback and prioritize areas for improvement.