Arkansas State University
Institutional Response to
Higher Learning Commission Team Report

With few exceptions, Arkansas State University finds the report by the Higher Learning Commission team to be representative of the institution’s status. Many of the challenges and concerns identified by the review team stem from new opportunities and initiatives that emerged near the end of the ten-year review period. ASU is currently undertaking a comprehensive strategic planning process that will address many of these concerns, particularly those associated with governance, mission and purposes, communication, diversity, enrollment management, assessment, and advanced graduate and research initiatives.

Fulfillment of the Criteria

A. **Criterion I** – The institution has clear and publicly stated purposes consistent with its mission and appropriate to an institution of higher education.

**Evidence that demonstrates the criterion needs institutional attention:**

1. The self-study and interviews with faculty and administrators indicated a sense of the institution that continuing review of the mission needs to incorporate expanding doctoral programs and the Biosciences Institute’s place within the purposes of ASU.

**Institutional Response:**

The comprehensive strategic planning process will review the current mission statement and address the inclusion of the expanding graduate and research initiatives of the institution.

2. Student government and student association leaders, some faculty members and administrators stated that they concur with the self-study’s call for continuing attention to the use of the Indian mascot at ASU. The team’s issue here is continued open dialogue with the use of the Indian mascot at ASU. The team’s issue here is continued open dialogue with ASU constituencies.

**Institutional Response:**

Arkansas State University will continue open dialogue with ASU constituencies regarding the athletic team name, the Indians. In the summer, 2003, the institution adopted a new spirit figure without resemblance to the Native American. The figure has been received positively. Arkansas State University expresses concern, however, that the HLC review team would include this item as being associated with the institution’s mission, as the mascot has nothing to do with the purposes or mission of the institution. We submit that it is not appropriate to raise this issue in this report since it has not been an issue of the North Central Association (HLC) throughout ASU’s accreditation history, nor is there
any official pronouncement by HLC regarding institutional mascots. Moreover, our HLC liaison, Dr. Karen Kietzman, indicated that the mascot issue would not be a part of this report. Arkansas State University respectfully requests that the Reader’s Panel delete this segment of the final version of the report.

B. **Criterion II** – The institution has effectively organized the human, financial and physical resources necessary to accomplish its purposes.

**Evidence that demonstrates the criterion needs institutional attention:**

1. Vacancies and interim appointments are pending and this leaves governance, supervision, and planning gaps in the operations of ASU.

   **Institutional Response:**

   *At the time of the team’s visit in March 2003, several administrative searches were underway. As of July 1, 2003 most of these positions have been filled. Searches for the remainder will be underway in FY 2004.*

2. Older buildings like Wilson Hall pose an obstacle to effective use of instructional technology in the classrooms and to assuring an effective student-learning environment.

   **Institutional Response:**

   *ASU recognizes the need to improve the instructional environment of Wilson Hall, the primary classroom building for the liberal arts. As renovations to the structure are cost prohibitive due to earthquake code requirements, a new instructional technology building is being planned to replace the classroom space of Wilson Hall. To date, state appropriations have allowed for the completion of architectural plans and preliminary construction planning for the new classroom building. The institution will continue to pursue the funding required to complete this project. In the meantime, planning with faculty and staff in this building will anticipate cosmetic repairs in summer 2004.*

3. The continuing rise in tuition and fees especially relative to other institutions within Arkansas was noted by students and faculty as a source of concern.

   **Institutional Response:**

   *Most state-supported institutions of higher education have increased tuition and fees annually since 1999 (examples were provided in the self-study document). Since 2001, the state economic crisis has resulted in a substantial reduction of state appropriations to higher education institutions, including ASU, necessitating tuition and fee increases. The four comparable state four-year institutions have averaged 5.2-8.9% tuition increases from 1999-2002 (ASU averaged 6.9%). ASU has not increased fees for the last two academic years (2002-03, 2003-04). As of the 2003-04 academic year, ASU ranks third*
in tuition and fees for full-time, first-time freshmen among the other four comparable four-year institutions in Arkansas. Although there is a perception of an inordinate increase in tuition/fees for ASU, increases have been comparable to similar institutions in the state. For 2003-2004, tuition was increased 5%. ASU will continue to be mindful of this concern in its future planning and budgeting processes.

4. Communications of goals, plans and directions in the operations of the university system has numerous gaps. Middle management interviews indicated that they are not confident that they are consistently apprised of decisions made at a higher level. Faculty members indicate that they are not sure what committees are asked to do.

**Institutional Response:**
The strategic planning process is addressing governance and communication issues. Efforts will be made to ensure that there is communication flow to all levels of the administrative and university community. University committee tasks will be reviewed and revised, as needed, to provide a better understanding of each committee’s mission and charge. The Shared Governance Committee will meet with committee chairs and heads of the constituent bodies each fall semester to explain the goals and mechanics of the governance process, and the specific responsibilities of each committee.

5. Review of the University budget and interviews with library personnel indicate that the budget has been flat and even reduced during the state economic downturn of 2002-2003. The Team concluded that this is particularly problematic in the face of the addition of two doctoral programs and University goals for research and graduate program expansion.

**Institutional Response:**
Adequate library funding continues to be a concern of the institution, particularly in light of the expanding graduate and research initiatives. ASU will continue to address this concern through its strategic planning and budgeting processes. Library leadership is exploring creative and alternative ways to provide access to needed materials through possible consortial agreements with other library systems, additional electronic databases and other services. The library may be a viable target for institutional development activities as similar fund raising initiatives at other higher education institutions across the nation have been successful. This opportunity will be explored.

As of August 2003, faculty and students have gained access to an additional 5,500 full-text online journals and over 27,000 other research publications through the Ingenta Article Service. A cooperative agreement has been established with the University of Arkansas Library System that will enhance and expedite inter-library loan services while being more cost effective.

6. The interface of developing components of ASU like ABI has not been integrated into the planning and governance structure. The team found no provision for describing the place of these new components in the governance structure.
Institutional Response:
The strategic planning process is addressing the incorporation of new initiatives such as the Biosciences Institute (created by state statute in 2002) and others in the planning and governance structure of ASU.

7. ASU has addressed student ethnic diversity but its attention to diversity within the faculty and staff has not kept pace with its strides toward becoming a doctoral institution in other areas. The appointment of the Assistant to the President (for Diversity) provides a base for expanding ASU’s understanding of diversity, its communication, and delivery.

Institutional Response:
ASU has formalized its faculty and staff recruitment process that is designed to hold all units more accountable for developing and securing diverse applicant pools. This modification will make the recruitment process more creative, aggressive and personable. Additionally, the university has established a resource pool that will enable campus departments to make more attractive financial offers to ethnic minority candidates. Further, the university is providing financial support to ethnic minority doctoral students in exchange for promises to teach at ASU upon completion of their respective programs. Over time, these initiatives will result in more ethnic minority faculty members being employed. Finally, a diversity strategic plan is being developed in which recruiting, developing and retaining ethnic minority faculty members will be a key component.

Evidence that demonstrates the criterion requires Institutional Attention and Commission follow-up:

1. Shared governance remains largely a structure with elusive connections in the decision making process. Concern was expressed to the team concerning the relationships among the various committees and the chain of decision making that links committees and the Team found this concern to be supported. Evidence of committee reports and interviews with faculty administrative leaders and the Faculty Senate supports the conclusion that shared governance needs HLC attention to assist ASU in implementing a structured environment of shared governance.

   a. Board of Trustee members indicated apprehension about the meaning of shared governance and how it impacts their statutory responsibilities.
   b. Faculty sampled were concerned that it was not clear that they had the responsibility for generating academic decisions.
   c. Department chairs indicated that they were not involved in decisions about their degrees and courses being offered at off-campus sites but they were expected to assure quality of offerings.
   d. Middle management personnel offered examples to the Team of incomplete understanding of budgetary decisions affecting their areas of responsibility.
Focus visit in 2006-2007 on shared governance with emphasis on clarifying the role and responsibilities of faculty in the context of ASU’s evolving mission.

**Institutional Response:**

ASU’s shared governance process, implemented in 1996, is still evolving. The founding premise of shared governance at ASU is to provide all the constituencies of the university (faculty, staff and students) the opportunity to provide recommendation and review of policies that shape the university and affect these constituents. The process also allows these constituents to be informed of the outcome of their recommendations. It leaves intact most of the traditional management of the university, the means of making and implementing decisions.

Recently, it appears as though the roles of the constituencies in the “recommendation and review” have become blurred with the “decision making” process. It is apparent that a campus wide, collaborative effort is needed to ensure that all constituencies understand the purpose and goals of shared governance. Major attention will be given to the continued development and understanding of shared governance. Governance and communication within the shared governance process will be given emphasis during the strategic planning initiative.

a. The shared governance process will be reviewed periodically with the Board of Trustees to ensure that all members understand the shared governance concept as it applies to ASU.

b. Faculty have the ability to generate academic decisions in the areas of curriculum, academic programs, and instruction (Undergraduate Curriculum Council, Graduate Council and General Education Committee). Faculty may make recommendations through the shared governance process for other academic concerns. A concerted effort will be made to assist faculty in understanding their role and responsibilities in the academic decision making process.

c. Department chairs are involved in decisions about their degrees and courses being offered at off-campus sites as they must initiate degree program proposals that are approved at both the university and state levels. In addition, they must approve faculty hiring associated with their off-campus programs and courses. The Center for Regional Programs (off-campus programs) will strive to improve their collaboration and communication with department chairs concerning off-campus programming.

d. The incomplete understanding of the budgetary decision responsibilities associated with middle management leadership also appears to be a communication problem. The administration will endeavor to collaborate more closely with middle management to ensure that there is a clear understanding of the budgetary process, unit allocations and responsibilities.
C. **Criterion III.** – The Institution is accomplishing its educational and other purposes.

**Evidence that demonstrates the criterion needs institutional attention:**

1. Library resources are inadequate and current budgeting does not support the substantial improvement needed in continuing programs and, particularly, evolving doctoral programs. The team confirmed this with budget reviews in conjunction with library administrators, faculty members in expanding fields, and several department chairpersons. Reduction in available personnel for providing inter-library loan service to off-campus sites was described by library staff and reinforced by data indicating delays in delivering requests.

**Institutional Response:**

As previously addressed, ASU will continue to make this concern a high priority in its strategic planning and budgeting processes. The library has begun working with academic deans and department chairs on a comprehensive assessment of the status of holdings to support individual continuing and evolving programs, the impact of continuing reductions in subscriptions and book acquisitions, as well as the impact of the absence of new publications in the library to support current study, research and scholarship. That assessment will be expected to serve as the basis for identifying and requesting the level of funding that will restore the collection development budget to an appropriate level to support instruction and research at ASU.

There has not been a reduction in the classified staff in recent years in the Interlibrary Loan (ILL) Department. Classified staffing in ILL has remained constant with three full-time staff but there has been a reduction in the number of hours of student staffing from 80 to 60 hours per week in 2002-2003. New interlibrary loan software will substantially speed up the process of identifying sources and completing transactions for book and article requests. In addition, the creation of a new listing of print and electronic journal subscriptions/holdings with linkage of those holdings to current electronic indexing/abstracting databases will provide almost a 95% accuracy/efficiency rate in immediately identifying articles and other publications that are in the ASU library collections for students and faculty while they are searching electronic bases.

2. The Faculty Handbook does not reflect the changes that have occurred in the past few years. For instance, the Team found that teaching loads are not informed by clear guidelines and policies concerning supervision of graduate studies nor in adjustments in teaching load for teaching graduate courses. Overload teaching of graduate courses strains intellectual preparation of faculty and may hamper effective student learning. The Team urges the University to pursue, through shared governance, and updating of the Faculty Handbook accompanied by an examination of policies and procedures.

**Institutional Response:**

*The Faculty Handbook was under revision at the time of the team’s visit and continues to be revised. As of June 2003, ASU hired a nationally recognized consultant to assist the*
faculty and administration in completing this process. Particular emphasis is being placed on policies and procedures associated with graduate faculty workloads and reassignments, especially in light of ASU’s new initiatives associated with doctoral programs and research. Attention is being focused on the process used to craft these policies as well as other changes through the collaboration of the faculty and administration.

3. Allocation of resources is not clear to many middle management and academic units. The Team was apprised of needs that were not met, such as equipment repair, because of confusion about resources.

**Institutional Response:**
As previously stated, the administration will endeavor to collaborate more closely with middle management to ensure that there is a clear understanding of the budgetary process and associated unit allocations. It is assumed that much of this confusion has occurred most recently due to several abrupt reductions in the institution’s budget allocations due to reduced flow of state funding to the institution precipitated by the state’s economic downturn. ASU was forced to respond quickly to these funding reductions, which often impacted departmental supplies and services accounts. Although every effort was made to communicate these changes to all involved units, confusion did occur from time to time due to the limited time in which the institution was required to respond. The same communication problem may have existed when the flow of funding resumed (equipment repair example).

**Evidence that demonstrates the criterion needs institutional attention and Commission follow-up:**

1. Assessment is not being implemented to allow the institution to continue to meet its goals.
   a. Tests administered are not used for assessing general education effectiveness for instance. No clear standard exists for administrators to use in assuring implementation.

   b. The Team examined assessment plans for over 100 departments but found no plan in place for the completion of the cycle of assessment. The Team received no evidence of curricular improvements linked to assessment efforts.

   c. Assessment of Graduate level learning and program evaluation has been assigned to the Graduate Dean and the Graduate Committee but no implementation of this assignment has begun.

   d. The Office of Assessment was able to make considerable headway in creating a basis for an assessment environment but the position of director is vacant.
e. The Team confirmed ASU’s Self-Study identification of needs in the area of assessment.

Pattern of Evidence demonstrated; Commission follow-up recommended. Focus visit on assessment coordination and implementation recommended for 2006-2007.

Institutional Response:

a. As of fall 2002, ASU was given permission by the state to administer the state-mandated standardized assessment exam for general education in a format that can now be used to provide meaningful assessment feedback. Prior to this time, the administration of the exam, as prescribed by the state, did not provide a useful means of assessment. The new alternative format does allow for consistent and accountable implementation.

b. The process of developing these assessment plans has been a major step for ASU as the institution has become more attuned to assessment. These plans are being implemented and as assessment data are amassed, they will be used for curricular and program improvement.

c. Graduate level assessment remains a major priority. The graduate dean and graduate council will be provided with strong leadership by the new assessment director to assist in the implementation of this process.

d. At the time of the team’s campus visit, the recent assessment director had moved from the state. As the team visit was less than two months away, the decision was made to receive feedback from the team before initiating the search for a new Director of Assessment Services. This position is currently being filled via a national search.

e. Although the assessment culture of ASU has improved significantly in recent years, we are aware of our need to further develop our assessment practices and utilize assessment outcomes to facilitate change and improvement. The Office of Assessment Services will work collaboratively with faculty and staff to continue to develop a strong atmosphere of assessment that encompasses all aspects of planning, implementation, evaluation and change at the appropriate level.

D. Criterion IV. – The Institution can continue to accomplish its purposes and strengthen its educational mission.

Evidence that demonstrates the criterion needs institutional attention:

1. The University identified a number of enrollment challenges on the horizon: competition by community colleges for undergraduate students, increasing the number of graduate students, increasing the place of students in research, particularly in the new Biosciences Institute, and the currently leveling off of enrollment from ASU’s traditional sources of
students. The Team confirmed these concerns through interviews and examination of enrollment data in the institutional records. An enrollment management plan for meeting these challenges is not in place.

**Institutional Response:**

*ASU already has begun the process of developing a formalized enrollment management plan, which will be incorporated into the overall institutional strategic plan. Consideration is being given to focusing enrollment management through the Student Affairs division.*

2. Library and research sources will need to grow as ASU pursues its plan to work toward becoming a doctoral level institution. The Team concluded that evidence supplied does not indicate that ASU has anticipated the need for allocation of resources to these areas.

**Institutional Response:**

*This issue is being addressed through the comprehensive assessment of library holdings that will provide a basis for identifying and requesting the level of funding that will support the doctoral level of instruction and research. It is also being addressed through the strategic planning and budgeting processes.*

3. Access, Equity and Diversity has improved at ASU since 1993 as the Team verified through examination of diversity related documents and interviews. Students of color indicated that they felt the University continues to welcome them and to provide support for student diversity. An inclusive diversity plan is only in initial stages. A senior administrator assigned to this area was hired a short time before the team’s arrival. A widely understood definition of diversity and its goals does not exist. Reporting and workforce analysis requirements are not widely known throughout the University. ASU must grapple with the Diversity and Equity issue, especially at the faculty and staff level.

**Institutional Response:**

*A Diversity Task Force consisting of faculty, staff, students and administrators has been created to assist ASU in developing its definition of diversity, and to establish its vision and goals for integrating diversity into the culture of our institution. As previously stated, ASU has formalized a faculty and staff recruitment process that is designed to hold all units more accountable for developing and securing diverse applicant pools.*

4. The University identified resource issues heightened by its need to provide funding for simultaneous expansion of an athletic program, doctoral programs and research efforts. The Team confirmed the University’s analysis through examination of the university budget and interviews with personnel in each area. The Team did not identify plans that indicate a university wide confidence in ASU’s ability to meet these concurrent challenges.
Institutional Response:

The University has always balanced its budget as mandated by state law. We have every confidence that the University will continue to be capable to balance and fund both the athletic programs and the academic programs, as directed by the ASU Board of Trustees. The research programs have a new budget from the ABI allocation for ongoing needs. Institutional confidence should be lifted by realization that the financial operation of ASU has received zero audit exceptions for a period of the last seven years.

Evidence that demonstrates the criterion requires institutional attention and Commission follow-up:

1. ASU does not have an operational Strategic Plan. The Team examined the plan developed in 1996 but notes that it has not been updated to include consideration of enrollment challenges, continued funding challenges, and overall integration of major additions to the purpose of the institution. Senior administrators indicated that they have a vision for the future that drives their actions. A strategic plan rooted in shared governance will help establish day-to-day actions and University wide acceptance of this vision.

Institutional Response:

ASU has initiated a strategic planning process to address the many changes and needs of a rapidly growing institution. Top priorities of the plan include shared governance, enrollment management, advanced graduate and research initiatives, assessment, diversity, and alignment of these and other issues with ASU’s mission, vision, core values and strategic directions. The strategic planning process is a collaborative process with representatives from all of ASU’s constituent groups and stakeholders. Its purpose is to establish strategic directions, related measurable initiatives, and action steps with assigned responsibilities for achievement of the initiatives.

2. The team examined the assessment and program evaluation plans of the University and determined that these critical areas for the future of ASU were not embedded in a structure of strategic planning.

Institutional Response:

Assessment and program evaluation are being included as an integral part of the strategic plan.

Pattern of evidence sufficiently demonstrated. Commission follow-up recommended.

The follow-up chosen by the Team is a focus visit in 2006-2007 that examines ASU’s progress in developing a strategic plan.
E. **Criterion V.** – The institution demonstrates integrity in its practices and relationships.

**Evidence that demonstrates the criterion needs institutional attention:**

1. The Team’s interviews with numerous constituents including middle management, faculty and students indicated that there is a concern that change occurs mainly from the top down. The Administration can address this concern by increasing the regularity of communication among the several levels of constituents in an atmosphere of shared governance. Faculty members are not clear about their responsibilities according to some chairpersons and Faculty Senate members and this presents a challenge to leadership.

**Institutional Response:**

*ASU administration will continue to work collaboratively with all constituencies involved in the shared governance process. It will strive to promote a better understanding of the mission, goals, and responsibilities associated with shared governance while making certain that communication with these constituencies is made in a timely and open manner. Additional campus-wide communication vehicles, primarily web-based, have been initiated following the visit of the HLC team.*

**Evidence that demonstrates the criterion requires institutional attention and Commission follow-up. None**