

May 11, 2004

Middle States Commission on Higher Education
c/o Ms. Jean Avnet Morse, Executive Director
3624 Market Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104-2680

Dear Members of the Commission:

I offer my compliments to Dr. Roger Hull and the members of his visiting team for a very thorough and perceptive final Evaluation Report. The team's candid and incisive comments have already promoted considerable helpful discussion on campus and—even at this very early stage after the campus visit—stimulated some important steps at addressing the issues identified in the Evaluation Report. I am most grateful to all the members of the team for their generous commitment of their time, expertise and insights.

I am very pleased that the report held no great surprises for Bucknell; the issues that the visiting team identified are consistent with the ones that were given highest priority in our own self-study. The congruence of both reports will help the University focus its energies on the important issues, exploring strategies and developing appropriate agendas for change.

The visiting team also offered a number of suggestions for how the key issues should be addressed. While some campus constituencies disagree with particular team suggestions, these differences will stimulate productive discussion and all suggestions will receive careful consideration in Bucknell's ensuing planning process. At the appropriate time, Bucknell will report to Middle States on the outcomes of these discussions and the progress in strategic planning.

A few points in the Evaluation Report narrative require specific comment, and these will be discussed—briefly—later in this letter. Rather than deal extensively with small details, however, I would like to take this opportunity to frame the visiting team's list of suggestions and recommendations in a simplified organizational schema that I hope will be beneficial to the Commission, and that will be helpful to Bucknell in its ongoing planning and in its accountability to Middle States for future reports on our progress.

A careful review of the Evaluation Report suggests that all of the visiting team's recommendations and suggestions deal essentially with four major issues, all of which interrelate: governance, strategic planning, diversity, and assessment. The University's response to each is described below.

Governance

The Evaluation Report regarded governance as the central and most important issue for the future of the University. The report noted the opportunity cost associated with the short terms of service of the past two presidents. A period of sustained leadership and continuity of direction will be required if Bucknell is to achieve its ambition of moving to "the next level" in terms of institutional quality. Bucknell must now establish the conditions that will assure longevity in the office of the chief executive. Foremost among these conditions is the restoration of the power and authority of the office of the president, in relation both to the Board and to the Faculty.

Bucknell's self-study also focused on issues of leadership and governance as one of the key institutional challenges. The narrative summarized the extensive turnover that has occurred in recent years, not only in the office of the president, but in all the senior administrative ranks, and analyzed in detail the negative consequences of such administrative instability. The report concluded:

"This time of administrative turnover is an opportunity to review the boundaries and the forms and patterns of interaction among the institution's major constituencies: Board of Trustees, President, Faculty, President's Staff, administrative staff, support staff, and students. The goal is to clarify the appropriate boundaries of authority and action that promote stable, strong leadership for the institution. The institution should, therefore, determine whether the structure or system of governance in any way encumbers the formation of a stable senior administration."

The University is committed to this approach, as evidenced by initial steps by both the Board of Trustees and the Faculty.

In an effort to restore a more appropriate balance of governance powers between the Board of Trustees and the office of the president, the president-elect has been made a full, voting member of the Board. The Board Chair has also affirmed publicly the Board's commitment to a policy-making role, rather than one focused too heavily on operations. Finally, the Board completed its first self-assessment, with a commitment to repeat this exercise the next time with outside facilitation. The Evaluation Report has noted that more remains to be done, and other specific suggestions by the visiting team (e.g., presidential involvement in setting all Board committee agendas, a re-examination of the By-Laws, and changes in Trustee-campus communications) will have to be considered in depth by the Board.

Since the departure of the visiting team, there has also been progress in Faculty governance review. The Faculty voted its approval for a self-study of its own governance structure beginning in fall 2004 and scheduled for completion by December 2004. In the course of this study, the Faculty will give full and careful consideration to the specific suggestions of the visiting team regarding the powers and authority of the President (e.g., the suggestions that the President chair meetings of the Faculty and have authority to reject tenure recommendations).

Should the Commission agree with the visiting team in requiring a follow-up report on our progress in the area of governance, the suggested timing at the end of AY2004-05 is very appropriate.

Strategic Planning

The re-initiation of a comprehensive, institution-wide planning process, to be led by Bucknell's new president, emerged as an important priority in our own self-study. A comprehensive process of this sort subsumes many of the specific suggestions of the visiting team: a review of the mission statement, the clarification of distinctive institutional strengths and characteristics, an assessment of the environmental context of threats and opportunities, the specification of goals and priorities, measurable objectives, benchmarks, coordinated divisional action plans, and an appropriate timetable. In addition, a number of the unit-specific issues identified in the team's consideration of each Standard will fall naturally into the divisional planning phase of the strategic planning process. For example, the clarification of Bucknell's concept of information literacy, and suggestions regarding oral communication in our general education program will be part of the Academic Affairs plan; and matters relating to alcohol education and the mission and plan for the department of athletics will be part of the Student Affairs plan.

Diversity will also be an important element of Bucknell's new planning process. Due to its significance and the number of visiting team references to diversity across several Standards, it has independent status in this list of four priority issues.

Similarly, assessment is the logical end process of any strategic planning effort. It involves the "closing of the loop," so that the objective determination of outcomes can inform ongoing planning efforts. It, too, has independent status in our priority list of four issues because of its centrality in *Characteristics of Excellence* and because of the number of references to assessment in the Evaluation Report.

If the Commission supports the visiting team's recommendation that Bucknell provide an interim report on the status of strategic planning (including the review of our mission statement), we urge careful consideration of the timing of this requirement. The team's recommendation currently specifies a report at the end of AY2004-05—at which time Bucknell's strategic planning process will be in only an incipient stage. Current plans by Bucknell's president-elect suggest that the major elements of a new vision for the

institution will be made public in his inauguration speech in the spring of 2005. Strategic planning would commence after that event.

Suggestion: If the Commission wishes to have a more fully developed and substantive report on the progress of strategic planning, I suggest an alternate date of June 2006.

Diversity

The visiting team made five very appropriate suggestions regarding the improvement of the diversity of students, faculty and staff, the consideration of a multicultural center, and the funding of merit aid so that it does not reduce our institutional commitment to diversity. These are all consistent with the priorities of our self-study, and diversity will be considered as a special component of our strategic planning process.

Assessment

Across all Standards, the visiting team's Evaluation Report makes thirteen suggestions related to assessment. Some focus appropriately on the need to continue the implementation of assessment plans developed by all of the academic departments, and to develop a uniform institutional timetable for implementing assessment plans. Other suggestions address the issues of longer term support for a program of outcomes assessment, and how to document better the use of assessment results for institutional improvement. As a relatively new campus-wide initiative guided by a new institutional assessment plan, these are all valid downstream objectives for the further development of our assessment efforts. I anticipate continuing and substantial progress in the next few years.

I note here that some progress has been made since the departure of the visiting team. The institutional assessment plan has completed its transit through the University governance process, securing the approval of the Assessment Committee and its parent, the Committee on Instruction. These outcomes have only to be reported to the full faculty in the fall of 2004. In addition, the Assessment Committee, informed by the suggestions of the visiting team, has revised and broadened its charge, with the approval of its parent committee, to include (among other things) more direct responsibility for developing a "culture of assessment" and for communicating "best practices" to the Faculty.

Other suggestions related to assessment (the assessment of components of our general education program; the articulation of the assessment plan with institutional mission and goals) will be pursued as a matter of course during, or following, the strategic planning process.

General Clarifications

The visiting team concluded that there was only limited participation in the Middle States self-study process. There has been much confusion, even among our own faculty, on the

extent of this participation, in part due to the parallel processes of self-study and Vision 2010 strategic planning under the direction of a single steering committee. Together, these efforts involved substantial outreach to the community, and significant levels of participation in all phases of the self-study. While the level of engagement in both processes was still less than we had hoped, this is most likely symptomatic of the strains of administrative transition, governance issues, and a general weariness with planning that the visiting team observed. Two surveys of faculty that are planned during the coming year may shed some light on the limitations of engagement in the self-study process.

Under Standard 1, page 4, the University's mission statement is described as having been last revised in 1991. The basic form of the current mission statement actually dates back to 1981, but it was reviewed carefully and re-affirmed in 1991. In the last PRR (1999), however, the University indirectly modified the mission statement by considering *Foundations for the Future* (Bucknell's educational strategic plan) a formal extension of the mission. A more concise re-drafting of the mission statement, incorporating the principles of *Foundations*, is nonetheless in order, and we concur with the team on the importance of this review and revision.

Under Standard 9—Student Support Services, a formatting error in the final version of the team's Evaluation Report caused the last four bullets on page 14 to be included as sub-bullets of the point relating to athletics. It is very clear from the context that the last four bullets were intended to be independent suggestions relating to the general field of Student Support Services.

Within its discussion of Faculty (Standard 11), the visiting team states that “there has not been a thorough, institution-wide review of curriculum in more than 10 years. It is overdue.” There is an element of truth in this statement in the term “institution-wide.” However, the curricula of both Colleges have been extensively and repeatedly reviewed, and have evolved in parallel. Since the elaboration of the “common learning objectives” of the University's educational strategic plan (*Foundations for the Future*) in 1991, the implementation and evolution of the curricula at the College level has been continuous and ongoing. The *Common Learning Agenda* or *CLA*, the education program of the College of Arts & Sciences, which includes the goals for disciplinary depth as well as general education outside the major, has been through three formal reviews since its adoption in 1992; it is an agenda that is meant to evolve, and the most recent review from 2000-2002 resulted in 20 recommendations that are being implemented under the direction of the Curriculum Committee of the College of Arts & Sciences. Meanwhile, the College of Engineering just this past year has completed a thorough revision of its education plan, the *Bucknell Plan for Engineering Education*. The core curriculum requirements now parallel closely the *Common Learning Agenda* of the College of Arts & Sciences, as illustrated in the self-study (p. 146). Nevertheless, the common learning objectives of *Foundations for the Future* would now benefit from re-examination as part of the upcoming strategic planning process, including, for example, more explicit attention to oral communication and information literacy.

The team has also described in somewhat harsh terms two elements of the *Common Learning Agenda* in the College of Arts & Sciences: the “Broadened Perspectives” dimension was described as “clumsy,” and one component of Broadened Perspectives—the “Natural and Fabricated Worlds” requirement, as “not intuitive.” Student feedback in the most recent review (2000-2002) indicated that students do understand and value the goals of the *CLA*, including those elements. In following up on one of the recommendations, the Curriculum Committee appointed a subcommittee that considered revisions in the checklist for course approval and alternative names for the “Natural and Fabricated Worlds” requirement. In its meeting of May 3, the College of Arts & Sciences faculty decided that the current language most accurately reflects its intention for the requirement and that the recommended revisions to the checklist align the requirements more closely with the goal. The next round of *CLA* assessments will determine if the student learning outcomes of this program are being realized. These outcomes will be the best judge of the degree to which the program has been intuitive and intelligible to the students who have participated in it.

In closing, I welcome the conclusions and observations of the visiting team’s Evaluation Report as largely supportive of the findings of the University’s self-study. The team’s insights and suggestions will serve as important tools for orienting Bucknell’s new chief executive officer, stimulating a thorough review of our governance structure, and launching a new strategic planning process.

Sincerely,

Steffen Rogers
President