
Looking to the Future: Summary and Conclusions

Milestone anniversaries, such as a centennial year, provide an opportunity to reflect on the University's history, evaluate the present, and chart a future course. The Higher Learning Commission self-study process has provided a structure for this self-examination. In this chapter, the Higher Learning Commission's "Cross-Cutting Themes" are used to summarize evidence that the University meets the criteria for accreditation and to synthesize significant strengths, challenges, and recommendations listed at the ends of Chapters 1 through 5.

Youngstown State University Is a Future-Oriented Organization

Youngstown State University's path to the future is guided by its mission. The relationship between the University's mission and actions is clear. The Mission Statement calls for a "broad range" of programs, and YSU has developed new "certificate, associate, baccalaureate, and graduate programs." Low tuition (in comparison to other Ohio universities), a large scholarship program, developmental education, and strong student services facilitate "open access" to an "affordable" university. Chapter 3 of the self-study describes how the University supports and rewards "high quality education" and "outstanding teaching." Chapter 4 provides examples of "outstanding...scholarship" by faculty and students. Chapters 1 and 4 explain how YSU promotes "diversity and an understanding of global perspectives." Chapter 5 documents the ways the University "encourage[s] public service" and "advanc[es] the intellectual, cultural, and economic life of the state and region."

Youngstown State University engages in planning and achieves planning goals. Dozens of faculty, staff, students, and members of the community participated in development of the *Centennial Strategic Plan*, which has been supplemented by other more targeted plans, including the *Technology Master Plan*, *Centennial Campus Master Plan*, and *Enrollment Management Plan*. Planning has led to tangible results—greater access to administrative and instructional technology; a more attractive and functional campus; and, most importantly, increased enrollment.

A state-mandated tuition freeze, declines in state subsidy, uncertainties at the state level, and unfunded mandates have made budgeting difficult. Without careful planning and established priorities, managing financial resources would have been even more challenging. Although planned initiatives are sometimes delayed, the University has a strong record of achieving its stated goals.

Youngstown State University integrates technology into administrative and academic activities to improve efficiency and enhance learning. The University is in the last phase of replacing its administrative-computing systems. The implementation of *Banner* is one of the most time- and labor-intensive changes the University has made in the past decade. When completed, *Banner* will have transformed processes in nearly every office, from Admissions to Alumni Relations. YSU has significantly increased the availability of instructional technology and provided faculty training in its use. Multimedia stations are available in many classrooms, and a goal has been set to install appropriate technology within all classrooms by 2013.

The University’s educational offerings and organizational structures reflect social, technological, and economic changes. Credit and non-credit courses have been designed at the request of regional employers, and programs such as Social Work, Nursing, and Physical Therapy have been developed or expanded to meet the growing demand for health and human services professionals. Ohio’s focus on increasing graduates and research in the STEM disciplines, which are so critical to the state’s economic development, led to the creation of the College of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.

Youngstown State University focuses on the future of the University and the future of its constituents. The University set an ambitious capital campaign goal of \$43 million to support initiatives that would benefit students, faculty, staff, and the community in the years to come. The Centennial Capital Campaign is nearing its goal and will strengthen educational quality by supporting student scholarships; endowed chairs and professorships; a new building for the Williamson College of Business Administration; and improvements in engineering and science laboratories.

The University provides professional development to build the capacity of its faculty and staff and to ensure that the University can continue to function productively now and in the future. Training will be particularly important as the University manages the loss of “institutional memory” resulting from the Early Retirement Incentive Program. Although the ERIP presents current challenges, it also presents opportunities to save money, reduce health-care costs, and reorganize.

Youngstown State University Is a Distinctive Organization

Youngstown State University’s fundamental mission documents (Mission, Vision, Core Values) clearly define the University’s commitments to open access and academic excellence. University trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, and students articulate this mission consistently, in words and in actions. YSU acts on the belief that access and excellence are not mutually exclusive; the University provides services that nurture the underprepared student, as well as opportunities that challenge the brightest.

Statewide changes (e.g., creation of the University System of Ohio; potential formation of a community college in the Mahoning Valley) may fundamentally alter the very characteristics that have defined the institution for many years. The University must be vigilant to assure that its voice is heard in educational policy discussions.

Consistent with its open-access philosophy, Youngstown State University has created a more diverse and inclusive University community. Diversity among students, faculty, and staff has increased substantially since the 1998 accreditation visit. Youngstown State University is proud of this accomplishment but must continue its efforts to increase diversity and awareness of diversity issues.

Fostering an understanding of diversity is a key curricular goal. However, despite the attention given to diversity in the curriculum and in cocurricular activities, assessment results indicate that we should better prepare students for living in a multicultural world. The University needs to improve assessment of diversity-related outcomes, share the results more widely, and use the information to improve curricular and cocurricular experiences.

We recognize that a critical part of students' education in the modern world is the ability to interact with people of cultures and backgrounds different from one's own. YSU students have limited contact with people from other countries. Few students study or travel abroad, and the percentage of international students at YSU is low. The University needs to strengthen international education.

YSU holds itself accountable for fulfilling its distinct mission. The University collects, analyzes, and reports data relative to enrollment, diversity, and other institutional goals. Student learning outcomes are publicly stated, and the University has developed a system to assess whether they are achieved. YSU seeks input from its constituents regarding the effectiveness of its services—the comments in this self-study from community leaders illustrate how much the community values the University. However, more frequent and systematic evaluation of the University's services could lead to even greater effectiveness.

Youngstown State University Is a Connected Organization

Youngstown State University serves the common good. As expressed in the *Academic Strategic Plan*, “YSU is a public university for the **public good** committed to excellence, engagement, and meaningful experiences in diverse settings.” YSU has a long institutional history of planning for engagement and successfully connecting to the community through academic programs, public events, and service.

YSU has been a good neighbor; its park-like campus contributes to the beauty of the community. The University has been a catalyst for urban neighborhood renewal by acquiring land, demolishing abandoned houses, and leading local planning efforts (e.g., Wick Neighbors). YSU has strengthened connections with the City of Youngstown by engaging in collaborative planning and meshing the *Centennial Campus Master Plan* with the City's comprehensive plan—*Youngstown 2010*.

The citizens of the region look to YSU for cultural, civic, and athletic events that engage, entertain, and inform. They also turn to YSU for help in addressing the region's social, environmental, and economic problems; the University responds through the Public Service Institute and many other outreach initiatives. The difficulty of responding to so many needs sometimes creates a sense of frustration. The University needs to be more deliberate in its engagement—clarifying strategic intents, prioritizing activities, and identifying resources needed to achieve its engagement goals.

Youngstown State University connects the people of the Mahoning Valley to better opportunities. Although the University reaches out to a wide region, the people of the Mahoning Valley have historically been the University's primary constituents. Educational attainment in the tri-county area is lower than that of the state or the nation. To help address that gap, YSU has kept its tuition the lowest among comparable Ohio universities, and Youngstown State University and the Youngstown State University Foundation provide substantial scholarship support. The focus on affordability, access, relevant programs, and student services has contributed to a fall 2007 enrollment that is the highest in 13 years.

The Metropolitan College was created to provide the community with more convenient access to education. However, fulfillment of that mission has been hampered by frequent changes in leadership and other factors discussed in Chapter 5. The University needs to monitor the effectiveness of the restructuring of Metropolitan College, because the needs that prompted the creation of the College still exist, and the University must find viable ways to address them.

Youngstown State University fosters a culture of service among students and employees.

YSU's collaboratively developed statements of mission, vision, and goals express the high priority given to engagement and service. This culture of service is reinforced as units reflect on their activities in annual reports and include engagement in their plans. The curriculum connects students with external communities in meaningful ways, and cocurricular activities provide additional opportunities for service. Faculty and staff aggressively pursue external funding to support innovative community programs.

Youngstown State University collaborates with many institutions to improve the economic, educational, social, and cultural life of the region. We are especially proud of YSU's connections with Pre-K–12 schools. The examples cited within this self-study represent only a portion of this extensive involvement.

The University participates in consortia and other higher-learning partnerships, and such collaborations are likely to increase as a result of the new University System of Ohio and recommendations of the Northeast Ohio Study Commission. Increased collaboration will present both opportunities and challenges for all institutions of higher learning in Ohio.

YSU also collaborates with businesses, as well as the nonprofit and public sectors. For example, through these partnerships, YSU trains highly skilled workers for the electrical utility industry; spurs the development of advanced manufacturing processes; prepares leaders for nonprofit agencies; and promotes environmental health. Faculty, staff, and students conduct research that benefits the region, and their work is often supported by local governments and industry.

Youngstown State University has forged strong connections with its external constituents; and the YSU community is endeavoring to strengthen its internal connections as well. There has been a sense among employees at all levels that their work is not appreciated. Many employees are dissatisfied with the budget process and would like to be more involved in decisions that affect them. Although differences of opinion exist about the meaning of "shared governance," there is also a mutual desire to improve communication and relationships. The self-study process has provided an opportunity for open discussion of tensions and concerns.

Opportunities for meaningful discussion have increased. These include the Labor Management Council, the Budget Information Committee, and a new approach to collective bargaining. Employees from all divisions and levels are coming together and strengthening interpersonal relationships at informal "civility hours." People throughout the campus are making an effort to resolve differences and focus on common goals.

Nevertheless, some issues are difficult to resolve; making budgeting processes more participatory is challenging when discretionary funds are limited. If the financial situation improves, it may be possible to involve more employees in prioritizing the use of funds. Efforts to improve labor-management relations and campus morale must continue.

Youngstown State University Is a Learning-Focused Organization

Youngstown State University supports learning for students, faculty, and staff. Faculty, staff, and administrators see themselves as student-centered and the University as teaching-focused. Employees cite YSU's relatively small class size, student-to-faculty ratio, and emphasis on undergraduate education as strengths of the institution. The well-qualified staff members in academic support services help students (who vary widely in their preparation for academic work) achieve success. The examples of student achievements included in Chapters 3 and 4 illustrate the results of YSU's focus on student learning.

The self-study has identified ways to improve the learning environment. Many classrooms and offices need refurbishing or additional space; academic departments complain that funds for equipment replacement are inadequate; the proportion of credit hours taught by part-time faculty has grown; and reports have recommended increased support for academic advising. Some of these factors may explain why a number of faculty and staff disagreed on the Campus Climate Survey that the University's financial allocations support a life of learning. However, YSU is committed to excellence in teaching; consequently, the *Academic Strategic Plan* addresses several of the concerns, and steps to improvement are underway.

Personnel policies and professional-development programs demonstrate that YSU also values learning for its employees. Substantial resources are allocated to tuition remission, reimbursement for advanced degrees, faculty-development travel, educational leaves, and training. However, the University needs to find innovative, cost-effective ways to assist faculty in improving their teaching. A Council on Teaching and Learning could provide leadership in this regard.

Youngstown State University has made substantial improvements in the assessment of student learning. The campus has developed an infrastructure for assessment, clarified its assessment processes, and gained valuable momentum in gathering assessment data. Assessment is occurring at the course, program, and institutional level. There is more to be done—not all faculty are fully committed to the assessment philosophy, and assessment of degree programs is more mature than assessment of general education. Nevertheless, faculty and staff are documenting assessment results, discussing implications, and making changes that benefit students.

Youngstown State University supports the scholarly, research, and creative activities of students and faculty. The increase in external funding during the past decade provides evidence of the growing capacity of the faculty to conduct research and the effectiveness of the University's support structure for scholarly activities. The intellectual contributions of the faculty are varied and include, in addition to the traditional research, publishing, and presentation of academic papers, the creative activities pursued by faculty in the arts and other fields.

YSU is particularly proud of its research opportunities for undergraduate students. Both graduate and undergraduate students have numerous opportunities to participate in research through courses, employment, and special programs. QUEST, undergraduate research grants, the research assistant program, and travel support for conference presentations recognize and reward student research.

Students at Youngstown State University are acquiring breadth of knowledge and skills, the capacity to exercise intellectual inquiry, and preparation for continued learning. Students consistently indicate on the Graduating Student Questionnaire that the institution has prepared them for life-long learning. The foundation of this preparation is a learning-outcome-based general education program that fosters intellectual inquiry, social responsibility, diversity, technology, and global awareness. A University-wide committee and faculty coordinator provide leadership for the program.

However, the general education program faces some challenges; not all students complete 100% of the requirements. Academic departments need to meet their general education assessment responsibilities and develop an adequate number of “intensive” courses. The centrality of general education should be reflected in the budget so that the general education program has the financial support to improve assessment and use the results for program development.

Strong academic majors, including many professionally accredited programs, build on the general education foundation. Students have many opportunities (e.g., internships, clinical experiences, independent study, capstone projects) to demonstrate that they have mastered the knowledge and skills necessary for independent learning and living in contemporary society. In addition, cocurricular activities, such as the Emerging Leader Program, provide opportunities for students to exercise leadership, contribute service, develop creativity, and demonstrate professionalism.

Youngstown State University has increased its capacity as a learning organization through the self-study process. The in-depth self-examination undertaken for accreditation purposes presented a valuable learning opportunity for many members of the University community. More than 100 individuals, including members of the community and Board of Trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, and students, served on the various self-study committees. Hundreds of other individuals participated in surveys and discussions, provided information, and responded to draft material. The thoughtful questions and recommendations of these individuals were instrumental in creating a self-study report that is meaningful and self-reflective.

The knowledge generated from the self-study is already informing plans and leading to improvements. The *Academic Strategic Plan* was developed contemporaneously with the self-study. It includes strategies to address many of the issues identified in this report, and action is being taken on items of highest priority. In addition, several self-study criteria committees have recommended an annual review of progress made on implementation of the self-study recommendations.

The time frame encompassed by the *Centennial Strategic Plan* is drawing to a close. As the University enters its next planning cycle, it should carefully consider the findings of the self-study and the Higher Learning Commission site-team evaluation as it develops a strategic plan to guide the University in Ohio’s changing environment for higher education.

This self-study was conducted for purposes of continuing accreditation by the Higher Learning Commission. Its greater value, however, is that we, as a campus community, engaged in self-reflection, recalled our successes, and identified our challenges as we begin a new cycle of planning for Youngstown State University’s promising future.

Higher Learning Commission Self-Study Committees

NOTE: Dates in parentheses indicate the dates that a member served on the committee if he or she did not serve on the committee throughout the self-study process.

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