STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY

SELF-STUDY – THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

SUBMITTED TO

MIDDLE STATES COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION

PUBLIC DRAFT SUMMARY

The full document may be found at http://ws.cc.stonybrook.edu/provost/ms/ms.shtml

The topic that we have chosen as the focus of Stony Brook's self-study lies at the core of the institution's history over the last decade: **the student experience at Stony Brook**. The major objective of our self-study has been to study, understand and assess the student experience at Stony Brook and its relation to student outcomes, so that we can use this understanding to drive change in the direction of the goal of improving the student experience for all students, undergraduate and graduate. In this self-study, we identify what real progress we have made to date towards our goal, what the important gaps are, and what we need to develop or improve.

In deciding on what subtopics to choose for this self study, we were acutely aware of the danger that in breaking the topic up into manageable pieces we might lose the essential relatedness of the whole. The five subtopics that we arrived at in the end divide the topic up thematically, along both diachronic and structural dimensions. Diachronically, we traced students' progress through their academic career. Structurally, we examined the students' educational and social environment at the university, which should together foster growth of the complete person.

The themes of the self-study are as follows:

Theme 1: Transition to Stony Brook University

Who are our incoming students, how do we prepare them before they begin their education at Stony Brook, and how do we facilitate their transition to Stony Brook?

Theme 2: The Foundational Experience at Stony Brook University

Do the first and second years of our students prepare them for further success at Stony Brook?

Theme 3: Education and Scholarly Activities

Do we provide an integrated diverse education for Stony Brook students?

Theme 4: Stony Brook as a Community

How good is the Stony Brook community as an environment for intellectual growth?

Theme 5: Life Beyond Stony Brook

Are our students prepared for life beyond Stony Brook?

Professors Mark Aronoff and Petar Djuric were appointed to lead the reaccreditation process in the fall of 2001. Together, they selected a small group of faculty and staff, who arrived at the five themes, with a subcommittee devoted to each theme and each subcommittee co-chaired by two members of a steering committee made up by augmenting the original core group. The size of the steering committee was determined by the desire to represent the diversity of Stony Brook's campus, including representatives from throughout the academic and administrative sectors, while keeping the size within reason to be effective and efficient. Ten of these members also created and co-chaired thematic subcommittees and two co-chaired a research committee. The steering committee has met regularly since early April 2002.

The role of the steering committee has been to provide the principal guidance and coordination of the assessment processes carried out by the subcommittees. The steering committee co-chairs also met regularly with the President and Provost to ensure that the self-study was consonant with the mission and goals of the university. A major role of the subcommittees has been to keep in touch with the campus community and represent all areas of campus in making concrete suggestions. Subcommittee co-chairs were charged with two tasks: build the subcommittees and begin to formulate a set of questions around which their subcommittees could do their work. The subcommittees prepared questions that identified specific topics addressing core issues of the self-study with respect to the guidelines in *Characteristics of Excellence*.

The long term goal of this self study process is to foster a culture of assessment at the university. The efforts of the steering committee and subcommittees reflect this initiative. Most notably are the session work at the Student/Faculty Staff (SFS) Retreat and the design and implementation of a comprehensive student and faculty survey.

The primary goal of the SFS Retreat, which has met annually since 1985, is to provide a forum for interaction among these groups. In the fall of 2002, the steering committee directed the retreat, creating a series of breakout sessions in which to address the five themes and obtain feedback from the campus community. Over the two day retreat 60 campus representatives brainstormed on ways to improve the student experience at Stony Brook. In the months following the retreat, several participants joined the subcommittees and a reunion in the spring of 2003 allowed the steering committee to assess the progress made on issues raised at the retreat.

The steering committee devised a survey designed to elicit opinions of Stony Brook University and the fulfillment of its mission, which was administered in the spring of 2002. The Stony Brook University Center for Survey Research conducted telephone interviews with Stony Brook University faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, and alumni.   Separate questionnaires were constructed and administered to each group. The results of this survey were instrumental in formulating the recommendations for improvement.

The self-study culminated in a set of recommendations from each of the subcommittees, which were discussed and refined by the full steering committee in consultation with the President and the Provost. We expect these recommendations to guide the university through the next decade.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THEME 1: THE TRANSITION TO STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY

> ***1.   Continue to enhance scholarship and financial aid opportunities for new students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.***

The number of first-year undergraduate students who received scholarships increased from 6.4% in 1999 to 15.8% in 2002. We must continue to expand these awards to compete for highly qualified students. Similarly, stipends for doctoral candidates should be brought into alignment with those of our competitors.

> ***2.   Improve the availability of courses for incoming students.***

The academic progress of some of our undergraduates is adversely affected by lack of space in appropriate courses. Failure to provide all incoming students with needed courses has the potential to harm our reputation and, consequently, our ability to attract highly qualified applicants. Modifying the orientation process to allow students to register for courses further in advance will provide more accurate prediction of demand in gateway courses.

> ***3.   Raise further the external perception of institutional reputation.***

Stony Brook must do a better job of informing the public and prospective students of our successes if we hope to be seen as an institution of high standing. In addition to promoting our educational and research programs, we need to better monitor and promulgate the success of our alumni in gaining admittance to graduate and professional schools, obtaining jobs, passing professional licensing exams, and other outcome measures, since these measures are central to prospective students' decision to attend a particular institution.

> ***4.   Improve the geographic diversity of the undergraduate student body.***

Our peers are national in their undergraduate enrollment and they conduct significant ongoing out-of-state undergraduate recruitment.   Attracting a more geographically diverse student body will undoubtedly enhance our national reputation.

> ***5.   Improve advising for new undergraduate students.***

Stony Brook must provide ways to connect individual new students with advisors and mentors.   For example, initial satisfaction might be improved by giving students more time with the orientation leaders during the registration day. In future years, students will be oriented within the context of their Undergraduate College assignment, which will

likely provide them with a greater initial sense of connection.

6. *Enhance incoming students' first registration experience.*

We want the summer registration days to be more of a meaningful, engaging early socialization experience. This year's (Summer 2003) switch to an on-line writing placement exam was very successful and we hope to use a similar method for mathematics placement. We need to investigate other ways to enhance the registration experience.

7. *Initiate systematic evaluation of orientations for graduate and international students.*

We need to assess the extent to which our programs meet the specific needs of graduate and international students. Furthermore, the variability in comprehensiveness of orientations offered by individual graduate programs is wide. It would be useful to scrutinize the curricula of these programs to develop best practices to enrich the orientation experiences of all graduate students.

8. *Strengthen and expand coordination among orientation events.*

We must coordinate all University orientation efforts, including those of individual programs, departments, student organizations, and the Undergraduate Colleges. Orientation curricula should be evaluated to provide examples of effective practices and to eliminate duplication of effort and information. Moreover, communication among various groups should be fostered to allow optimal sharing of resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THEME 2: THE FOUNDATIONAL EXPERIENCE

9. *Improve large first-year courses.*

Efforts to improve students' learning and experience in the classroom should be concentrated on large first-year gateway courses. Faculty should explore innovative ways of changing the large lecture course experience to make it more interactive, personal and 'small'. In an effort to foster interdisciplinary cross-fertilization, faculty teaching large lecture courses in related disciplines should collaborate to develop common problem sets or learning skills exercises.

10. *Simplify the array of courses available to first-year students.*

Freshmen are faced with the overwhelming task of putting together a schedule from the many available courses. First-year students should be given a restricted list of courses that most freshmen take and directed into particular paths through the use of schedule templates or course schedule 'packages' (possibly related to their Undergraduate College assignment) that they can simply select, based on interest and need.

11. Improve the foundational experience.

Virtually all academic programs offer courses that address broader needs of the campus community, such as freshman seminars, introductory survey courses and courses designed to satisfy general education (DEC) requirements. In each case, the learning objectives and outcomes of the course should be explicitly stated and publicized and assessment conducted on a regular basis.

12. Create a culture of constructive assessment throughout the university.

Many members of the university community view assessment as an externally imposed burden, rather than a tool for improvement. Stony Brook should create incentives for assessment and mechanisms for disseminating and encouraging best practices.

13. Encourage student self-assessment of academic and career goals.

Stony Brook should find mechanisms to encourage students to assess their academic and career intentions regularly. These should include improved outreach to students and other positive incentives to encourage students to select a major.

14. Provide mentoring opportunities for every student.

Our surveys show a very strong demand among students for mentoring. Mentoring can have a significant impact on the satisfaction, success, and retention of undergraduate students. Further, the relationships established between the mentor and mentee are mutually beneficial. No single program or approach can sufficiently meet the needs of all students and their mentors. Therefore, efforts should be made to both grow existing mentoring programs and develop new programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THEME 3: EDUCATION AND SCHOLARLY ACTIVITIES

15. Improve communication between teachers and learners.

Effective, two-way communication between instructors and students is one aspect of a research-focused institution that often needs reinforcement. Our intent is to promulgate active learning by providing instructors with opportunities to improve their communication skills and hence their teaching effectiveness. Since communication is a two-way process, students should be provided with similar tools and resources that will permit them to excel.

16. Provide incentives to departments to improve TA training and performance.

It is essential to ensure that our TA's are appropriately trained to communicate with our student body. Existing programs must be enhanced to achieve such an outcome.

Associated with TA training is the strong need to ensure that best practices are made available to Stony Brook's community at large. For example, regular workshops could be arranged where TA's, instructors, and faculty who have been recognized for their excellence in teaching can meet within a common forum to exchange information concerning those practices that had an impact and those that did not. Web-based dissemination of successful practices might also be useful.

17. Evaluate curricular offerings regularly to ensure that they meet the needs and career interests of our students.

The academic enterprise lies within a changing world. Colleges, schools, and departments should therefore examine their courses and curricula on a regular cycle to ensure that they fit the needs of students, within the resources available. Curriculum and student demand should be important factors in hiring and planning at all levels.

18. Improve recognition and rewards for faculty members who have demonstrated excellence in directing research and creative academic projects.

We must recognize and reward in an appropriate fashion the effort that a faculty member devotes to directing undergraduate research and creative activities. This will both encourage faculty buy-in and enhance the overall quality of students' research and creative academic projects.

19. Increase the number of students who perform independent research.

The incorporation of undergraduate students into research labs is highly desirable. Because such students are an extra load on the resources of the host, it is appropriate to consider a mechanism whereby faculty can access resources that will induce them to mentor more undergraduates.

20. Support further expansion of the electronic library.

Surveys of university students demonstrate a strong preference for electronic content which they can search on the Internet and download to a disc or printer. The library's role is to acquire and display these resources and to instruct students on their use. The very accessibility of these resources makes them valuable, and costly. In its drive toward an excellent student experience, the university needs to support these high cost/high benefit resources. Use of these resources is not intuitive. Expanding the library's instruction program would help the university give students life-long information skills.

21. Improve library access.

Even as more and more information is going online, student use of the library's reading rooms is increasing. The university will open a 24x7 study space in Spring

2004, an important step toward the larger goal of a 24x7 staffed information commons. The type and quality of all facilities within the physical boundaries of the main library building needs to be kept in mind, as well.

22. *Assess and update instructional facilities regularly.*

The quality of the educational process is directly related to the quality of the teaching environment. Thus, classrooms and laboratories need to be assessed regularly and, where needed, upgraded to a common standard that facilitates the learning process. The expected outcomes are more efficient setup and delivery of instructional materials by the instructor, and a learning-friendly environment for the students. Because laboratories will have specific needs which depend of the academic discipline (e.g., music vs. biology vs. engineering), considerable care is needed to ensure appropriate changes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THEME 4: STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY AS A COMMUNITY

23. *Provide regular timely information on community activities.*

Stony Brook has a wealth of activities and events but students, faculty, and staff perceive that it is more difficult than it should be to get information about these, despite the fact that the information is disseminated in a wide array of formats at considerable cost (e.g., web-based, email, bulletin board, kiosks, university/student newspaper, television, radio, flyers). A mechanism should be found for disseminating information to both the university and the wider community in a timely and simple fashion.

24. *Improve the integration of graduate and upper-level undergraduate students into the wider community.*

The survey data indicates that incoming students feel themselves to be more a part of the wider community than do upper-level and graduate students. Ways should be found to improve the engagement of these sectors of the university. We also need to look carefully at our highest-achieving students, who appear to be less connected and to feel less sense of community.

25. *Institute ongoing assessment of the sense of community.*

The sense of community is created through many factors, all of which have temporal components and reflect the evolving local culture. Mechanisms need to be established for assessing changes. A periodic assessment survey focused on community would enable us to get a clearer handle on the specific factors that might improve the sense of community at students. Most crucially, assessment must be followed by action.

26. *Promote community pride.*

The focus groups and survey results confirmed the finding of the Boyer Report that pride in one's institution or the celebratory aspects of belonging are a vital aspect of the Stony

Brook community. Undergraduate students in particular seem strongly influenced by celebratory events as a way of demonstrating and instilling pride in Stony Brook.

Increase opportunities for individual advising.

Mechanisms should be found to encourage students to meet regularly with faculty members and professional advisors who will listen to their concerns and talk with them about academic programs, course selection, internships, and career plans. These connections would help students reflect on their experiences and understand the transferability of their skills, especially in the liberal arts, to a variety of post-college options in graduate study, research, and employment.

27.   Promote internships and other pre-professional work experience.

Students must be better informed about career and internship opportunities. This can be accomplished by better interaction with academic departments and the Career Center. Invited professionals from the community can provide career scenarios in specific majors (e.g. high school chemistry teacher). Corporate internship programs are the first source for hiring at the entry level, yet few non-HSC students participate. Credit and non-credit internships should be tracked and opportunities promoted by departments. Alumni could also help us identify internships within their organizations.

28.   Improve alumni record keeping and communication – especially post-graduation destination data.

If we do not know where our alumni are, we cannot communicate with them, nor can we involve them. Available alumni data are fragmented and often difficult to obtain. Stony Brook needs a campus-wide effort to assemble post-graduation destination data on a regular basis and report the results in a timely manner. Maintaining regular communication with alumni and getting them involved will strengthen their commitment to the university.

29.   Leverage existing models of success.

We should make a concerted effort to identify departments and schools whose alumni feel a greater sense of connection to Stony Brook. The striking satisfaction of HSC alumni, for example, should prompt us to examine what results in such great satisfaction. We benchmark with other institutions on a variety of measures; we now have an internal model, elements of which may be used to improve the student experience for all areas of campus and result in greater attachment over the long term of alumni to the Stony Brook community.