

**Graduation Rate Outcomes Study**  
**Northwestern State University at Natchitoches, Louisiana**  
**Final Report**

October 29, 2007

David Dowell, Vice Provost and Director of Strategic Planning, California State University, Long Beach

Beth Pellicciotti, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Purdue University, Calumet

Kaylene Gebert, Provost, Middle Tennessee State University

Charles Hawkins, Director of Institutional Research and Planning, North Georgia College and State University

Marianne Kennedy, Professor of Communication Disorders, Director of University Assessment, Southern Connecticut State University

Rhonda Luckey, Vice President for Student Affairs, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Karen Pugliesi, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies, Northern Arizona University

## Table of Contents

Table of Contents .....	2
Executive Summary .....	3
Purpose and Context .....	4
Purpose of the Visit.....	4
Organizational Context .....	4
Interactions with Constituencies.....	6
Documents, Materials and Web Pages Reviewed.....	6
Student Success.....	7
Campus Leadership for Student Success .....	7
Campus Organization for Student Success .....	7
The Role of the Faculty.....	9
Identified Uses of Data to Inform Student Success Efforts .....	9
Opportunities for Improving Student Success Efforts .....	11
Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes .....	12
Campus Leadership and Organization for Assessment .....	13
The Role of the Faculty In Assessment .....	14
Identified Uses of Assessment Data to Improve Academic Programs .....	14
Identified Assessment Strengths .....	15
Opportunities for Streamlining and Improving Assessment.....	15
Integrating Student Success, Assessment, Enrollment Management, Strategic Planning .....	17
Conclusions.....	19
Key Strengths.....	19
Recommendations.....	19

## Executive Summary

From October 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> 2007, Northwestern State University (NSU) at Natchitoches, Louisiana hosted a site visit by a Graduation Rate Outcomes (GRO) study team sponsored by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. The team included seven higher education professionals and the visit focused on student success and assessment of student learning outcomes. GRO site visits seek to understand campus leadership, programs, institutional intentionality, integration of efforts, proactive interventions with students, and uses of information that contribute to student success and, in this case, assessment of learning. The NSU study was made more complex than the original AASCU project by expanding the scope to include assessment as well as student success.

The AASCU team was very impressed with the mission, commitment, values and especially with the people at NSU. The campus is home to committed, skilled, and knowledgeable leaders and the university is lucky to have such valuable human resources. Senior and key university leaders appear to have developed a congenial and collaborative culture that well serves the institution. The university added the word “Responsive” to the campus mission statement in years past and appears to take seriously the idea that NSU will be responsive to student needs and to regional opportunities and needs. There seemed to be a broad understanding that student success is everyone’s job and a genuine understanding of “shared leadership.”

A dedicated and energetic faculty is another significant strength and their commitment to student success is clear. NSU has developed strong student support systems such as the University College, Louisiana Scholars College, a TRIO program, and the Academic Center. NSU has developed a very strong plan for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools with the QEP/ACE proposal. The fact that all programs that have external accrediting agencies have achieved external accreditation is rightly a great source of pride in the university. NSU has remarkable presence in online education which provides a key asset. Institutional Research is a well-respected and effective data analysis operation, useful to campus leadership.

Overall, NSU has made remarkable progress in recent years on a variety of strategic projects that are important to all modern universities: student success, academic assessment, strategic planning, and enrollment management.

The visiting team identified several opportunities for the consideration by campus leadership. Below is a listing of the recommendations and in the final section of this report is a discussion of each.

1. Continue and increase efforts to share information and to integrate activities among faculty and staff working on enrollment management, retention, support for student success, academic assessment, and strategic planning.
2. Develop opportunities and support structures for faculty development of pedagogy, especially about active learning.
3. Continue and expand programs that celebrate exemplary faculty, staff and programs in the best Louisiana tradition!
4. Intensify research on the success of specific student subgroups using the fine Institutional Research capabilities.
5. Integrate the excellent Academic and Career Enhancement plan into other campus efforts.
6. Review institutional policies about such matters as matriculation, withdrawal, and grading in light of campus student success goals.
7. Review institutional policies for retention, tenure and promotion to ensure that they support institutional student success and other goals.

8. Review reward structures for faculty and staff in light of institutional goals.
9. Give priority in assessment efforts to discussion of and use of assessment data.
10. Integrate assessment results into strategic planning and enrollment management.
11. Incorporate post-graduation data into assessment efforts.
12. Use the Assessment and Advising Committees more intentionally.
13. Consider alternative ways to integrate strategic planning, budgeting, enrollment management, retention and student success efforts, and assessment.

## **Purpose and Context**

### Purpose of the Visit

The Graduation Rate Outcomes (GRO) Study originated as a partnership among the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, The Education Trust and the National Association of System Heads in 2005. GRO site visits seek to understand the success achieved by study campuses with respect to graduation rate outcomes. Reviews try to discover leadership, programs, institutional intentionality, integration of efforts, proactive interventions with students, and uses of information that contribute to student success. The original project was conducted by a group of 96 higher education professionals, nominated by their campus presidents or system heads. Subsequent to the original study, some universities have voluntarily asked to receive GRO teams to review campus efforts to promote student success.

Northwestern State University (NSU) at Natchitoches, Louisiana requested a site visit focusing on both student success and assessment of student learning outcomes. A study team of seven higher education professionals visited NSU on October 2-4, 2007. Study team members included individuals with expertise in areas such as admissions, retention, academic support, management, assessment, and institutional data use (see attached information for team credentials). To prepare for the visit, the campus provided and the visiting team reviewed extensive information in advance. Observation and interviews were the primary modes of information gathering employed by the study team during the campus visit. The team broke into two sub-teams focused on student success and academic assessment. The review team provided an exit interview to senior university leadership and has also prepared this written report. NSU leaders were given an opportunity to review the draft to identify factual errors prior to its final submission.

### Organizational Context

Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, Louisiana is a regional university that describes its mission in the following terms:

*Northwestern ... is a responsive, student-oriented institution that is committed to the creation, dissemination, and acquisition of knowledge through teaching, research, and service. The University maintains as its highest priority excellence in teaching in graduate and undergraduate programs. Northwestern State University will prepare its students to become productive members of society and will promote economic development and improvements in the quality of life of the citizens in its region.*

*Location:* NSU is located in the northwestern part of the state in a rural, largely low-income area that is mainly agricultural. The city of Natchitoches is a historic city that attracts significant tourism. The more than 900 acre campus is spacious, well-landscaped, and attractive. Among other amenities the campus has a newer Wellness Center open to students, faculty and alumni, renovated residence halls, a Scholars Academy, and is the location of the Louisiana School for Math, Science, and the Arts.

*Demographics:* The total enrollment at NSU was reported as 9,431 for fall 2006. This includes students at the Natchitoches campus, at least three satellite locations, and online. One thousand two hundred and

fifty (1,250) undergraduates live on the Natchitoches campus, including 701 freshmen. About 74% of the undergraduates are reported as full-time. Over the last 6 to 7 years, more NSU students matriculate at other NSU campuses than at the Natchitoches campus. The student population is majority White but includes about 30% African American students, 2% Latino, 2% Native American, 1% Asian students, 0.4% international and about 5% unknown. As with many U.S. universities in this decade, a trend is evident of increasing female enrollment relative to males with females comprising about two-thirds of the current student population. The average age at the campus is about 24 years, not very different from a traditional, residential university.

*Admissions:* In 2005, NSU made an important transition from open to more selective admissions with implications for all areas of campus planning--enrollment management, retention and student success, and academic assessment. Under a state mandate, NSU implemented selection criteria that included high school math through Algebra II and four years of college preparatory English. In theory, this change should restrict enrollment to better prepared students. Expected consequences of this change should include students' elevated commitment to academic goals, a need for enhanced student life, increased retention and progress to degree, and increased graduation rates. It is important to note that the change in admissions corresponded to Hurricane Katrina's devastation of parts of Louisiana and the accompanying displacement of thousands of residents. The impact of these series of events is still being felt by NSU, making this change in admissions policy difficult to measure at this time.

*Students' Academic Goals:* Subsequent to starting selective admissions, more NSU students pursue the baccalaureate degree with a decline in the percentage indicating an associate degree. This shift almost certainly relates to more selective admissions. The percentage of students who indicate a goal other than the baccalaureate remains high for a four year institution but as the pre-selective admissions cohorts move through, this percentage may decrease further. The most popular majors on campus appear to be Nursing, Business, and General Studies followed by Social Sciences, Family and Consumer Sciences, Creative and Performing Arts and Education. Some major counts may be misleading because students apparently declare majors at will, with some declared majors not meeting prerequisites for such selective majors such as Nursing.

*Enrollment as Strategic Issue:* NSU's history provides ample reason for enrollment management to be an ongoing strategic concern. At some time in the past, the campus was concerned about closure due to enrollment declines. In the region, high school demography is not driving increased demand for higher education. As President Webb has noted, NSU's main campus is in a very isolated area in the state in contrast to many colleges and universities that may pull students from large population centers. The state is considering "performance" funding models tied to enrollment. For these reasons, the campus has had and will continue to have, for the foreseeable future, significant concern about all aspects of enrollment management from recruitment to graduation and beyond.

*Online Education:* NSU has remarkable strength in online education. Over forty percent of students take at least one online course with twelve percent of students learning exclusively online. This latter group comes from all over the state and even the nation. Online courses are taught by both resident faculty and adjunct faculty, some of whom are non-local, including one in China. This leadership role in online education is a key strategic issue for the university and presents both a strength and a challenge. NSU's online enrollment creates a revenue stream that buffers other enrollment losses associated with selective admissions and high school demographic trends. At the same time, online enrollment is a challenge because exclusively online courses have generally proven more successful with older, more mature students who already have basic skills, internet savvy and self-direction. These traits are not always characteristic of the relatively poor lower income, somewhat under-prepared, and frequently first generation students who form the largest part of NSU's entering student population, especially freshman.

*Graduation Rates:* In the most recent year reported in the Education Trust College Results Online database, NSU is reported to have a six year first time freshman graduation rate of 30.5%, placing NSU tenth of sixteen comparison institutions (<http://www.collegeresults.org/>, retrieved 10/5/07). Data furnished by the campus report a higher rate, in the mid-30 percent range, a rate similar to regional comparison institutions selected by NSU. Both comparisons are based on cohorts who entered NSU during the open admissions era. The campus faces a number of issues that impact retention and graduation rates including the regional economic fluctuations, local poverty, military transient students, and competitor institutions to which students may transfer.

*Funding:* A January 2005 study of NSU funding patterns by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) reported that compared to a selection of peer institutions, NSU is near the bottom in all funding areas. That report identified no problematic patterns in funding allocations among subunits of the institution. In the Education Trust College Results comparison group, NSU was fifteenth among sixteen comparable institutions in funding per FTES at \$5,071, in contrast to median funding for the group of sixteen at around \$6,600. However, these funding data are from the past. Until recently, NSU was funded at a fraction of state formula but with an improved Louisiana economy, NSU is funded for the current fiscal year at 100% of that formula. This improved funding has brought the potential for significant improvements.

*Planning:* As understood by the AASCU team, NSU conducts strategic planning mainly through several campus entities. The Cabinet appears to appropriately play the largest role in considering key strategic issues. A separate Strategic Planning/Budgeting Committee is active in years when new funds are available for distribution. Academic departments and other campus units are asked to annually set objectives and report on accomplishments using an online system managed by the Office of Assessment and Planning in Academic Affairs.

### Interactions with Constituencies

The AASCU team was impressed with the openness and collegiality of the faculty and staff at NSU. The team observed and experienced a true sense of community at the institution. NSU staff was aware that the AASCU team was onsite to help, and in turn, made every effort to help provide the team with data and background information. The visiting team divided into two smaller teams, one focused primarily on student success, the other on assessment efforts. Both teams met with President Webb and his cabinet, academic deans, and academic department heads. Smaller teams met with the following groups:

Student Success Team	Enrollment Management	Student Affairs
	University Advisory Committee	Student Success and New Student Programs
	University College	Student Counseling
	Academic Advising Center	Student Activities
	Disability Services	Student Recreation
	Student Support Services	Athletics
Assessment Team	Institutional Research	Auxiliary Services
	Planning and Assessment	Student Activities
	Library	Student Services
	Physical Plant	Athletics
	Registrar	Research and Sponsored Programs
	Electronic and Continuing Education	Alumni Affairs and Advancement
		University Assessment Committee

### Documents, Materials and Web Pages Reviewed

The institution provided the team with access via the web to extensive reports and documentation, much of which had been compiled for NSU's recent SACS reaffirmation visit. NSU also provided the attached respondent report which gave the team many references to additional material available on the NSU web site. It should be noted that many reports available on the website had not been updated with data later than fall 2006. Hopefully, this does not indicate that the best practices described in this report have been abandoned now that the 10-year SACS process is over.

The team also reviewed a variety of reports provided by outside consultants to NSU. The Louisiana System and NSU should be commended for use of outside consultants to identify opportunities to improve. NSU is particularly open with resultant reports, posting them publicly on its web site. Here are several examples. Contracted by the System, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) evaluated e-learning initiatives. The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) conducted a study with a report (January, 2005) of NSU operations concentrating on funding. Noel-Levitz (2005) studied enrollment management but with an emphasis on retention as well. The institution contracted with Drs. Robert L. Armacost and Julia Pet-Armacost of ORIE Assessment Technologies to review student learning systems and program assessment in spring, 2004. The NSU's website contains a report of their findings.

## **Student Success**

### Campus Leadership for Student Success

*Responsive Leadership:* Throughout the AASCU visit, those with whom the site visitors met clearly and consistently saw themselves as personally and professionally responsible for student success – retaining and graduating students. Faculty members, academic deans, chairs, and administrators appear both enthusiastic and energized by the university's continuing commitment to positively impact student success. These individuals take personal responsibility for the success of students, supporting and facilitating their academic progress, recognizing that many NSU students are first-generation college students and that there is a growing proportion of non-traditional learners and adult learners who are pursuing their higher education goals through multiple delivery systems and locations. The diversity of the student body underscores the importance of a university culture that is responsive. It is evident that the attitudes of these leaders are reflective of the President's and his leadership team's strong commitment to providing NSU students with opportunities to develop as educated and effective citizens. As Dr. Webb indicated, he has intentionally sought to appoint NSU alumni to serve in those roles charged with formal responsibility for the delivery of student success programs and services. These individuals are role models to students for the ways in which the NSU experience has contributed to their success, both personally and professionally.

### Campus Organization for Student Success

In the last five years there have been several pivotal consultations which have focused on improving student success outcomes. The findings from these reports have been thoughtfully considered by University academic and student affairs leaders, leading today to a series of decisions to better coordinate and direct existing enrollment management programs and services.

Recognizing the need to maximize the effectiveness of the university's efforts devoted to student retention and progression, this fall President Webb expanded the mission of the division of academic affairs to include student affairs and enrollment management functions. This reorganization is continued evidence of the institution's intentional actions to address student success and specifically, the effective implementation of the SACS Quality Enhancement Plan's Academic and Career Engagement initiative. At the foundation of the reorganization is the university's mission of providing a responsive, student-oriented learning environment to enable the achievement of students' academic goals and addresses the university's four strategic goals.

While the new organizational alignments will facilitate communication, coordination, and collaboration among those units formally charged with the development and implementation of programs and services, what is more relevant is the leadership model that characterizes the university's culture. Among those with whom we met it appears that the academic and student affairs administrators have embraced a "shared leadership model" and exercise their responsibilities in an environment of team-work, trust in, and support for one another. Rather than projecting an attitude of territoriality, there appears among the

various stakeholders a spirit of cooperation and genuine respect for one's colleagues, regardless of position or title. These attributes the team has further characterized as those of "servant leaders" who are dedicated to the care and support of their students and each other. The team believes that the reorganization positions NSU well for the future. This realignment will further augment the relationships among the various units by leveraging current structures, resources, and the strengths to enhance institutional performance. With the centralization of functions within the Academic Affairs division, along with the active participation of the student success team as members of the Provost's leadership team, the opportunities to create synergy among the various student success efforts will be maximized. By so doing, this strategic goal is further emphasized and elevated to institution-wide visibility.

*Strong Student Support Systems:* NSU has developed strong systems to deliver student support services. Each of these services is seen by colleagues as effectively addressing the needs of the students for whom they have responsibility. University College, Louisiana Scholars College, the TRIO program, the Academic Center, 4th week early warning, academic success among returning students (PASS), new student orientation, electronic and continuing education, departmental orientation courses, freshman interest groups, 1010 advisers, and freshman connections all appear to effectively address students' needs within their respective spheres of responsibility. QEP/ACE will add an additional vehicle to address students' needs, specifically in the areas of advisement and career development. The QEP/ACE also provides an opportunity for NSU to infuse campus-wide understanding of the values of developmental advisement, to build skill campus-wide in the area of student advisement, to add human resources devoted to advisement, while drawing upon NSU's current portfolio of student success and support services.

NSU's organization for student success programs has been largely rooted in four areas: Student Programs, University College, the division of student affairs, and the academic colleges. The decentralization of student success efforts has cultivated the array of good practices and a collective sense of responsibility for student success as described above. Cross-organizational committees weave together the different facets of programming and provide an effective platform for communication and coordination. This arrangement has also produced several leaders with great expertise who will be invaluable assets as NSU endeavors to take its student success initiative to the next level.

The September 2007 Progress Report on Student Success and Progression enumerates the many efforts across all divisions, which have been intentional and focused on the success of students, their satisfaction and persistence, and eventual graduation. This report provides evidence of the ongoing and sustained attention to the continuous improvement agenda to promote success of students in the broadest sense: effective transition to college, academic achievement, graduation, and professional success beyond graduation. The QEP/ACE program covers a much broader population of students over their entire academic careers at NSU. The QEP/ACE also provides an opportunity for NSU to 1) create campus-wide understanding of the values of developmental advisement, 2) build skills campus-wide in the area of student advisement, 3) add human resources devoted to advisement, while 4) drawing upon NSU's current portfolio of student success and support services. QEP also offers an opportunity for NSU faculty and staff to understand systematically the needs of students and the impact of career and advising services on the success of students.

Through a framework of integrated planning, the new QEP/ACE functions, assessments of quality, cost effectiveness, and impact of services on student learning will need to be incorporated within a refreshed Student Success and Progression Delivery and Assessment Plan (SSPDAP). Given the infusion of \$2.1 million over the next five years to support QEP processes and initiatives, the team recommends that the University Enrollment Management Council (U-EMC) conduct a comprehensive outcomes assessment and cost analyses of student success services and programs. The AACSU Team also recommends that the U-EMC study the impact of retention performance improvements on the university's financial health, and set overall and student cohort enrollment goals (recruitment and retention) in light of the persistence and graduation performance increases.

NSU has an opportunity to leverage leadership and organizational units in place to expand, more strongly coordinate, and enhance the effectiveness of student success programs. The mission and responsibilities of the University College could be expanded and some programs re-aligned so as to strengthen leadership, coordination and synergies among various student success efforts. The purview of the University College could be explicitly recast as university-wide leadership and infrastructure for advisement and career planning, student academic support, pro-active services for students in transition or on probation, along with the general studies program and, perhaps, new programs supporting nascent service learning and undergraduate research initiatives.

The University College is strongly identified with the general studies program. At the same time, the general studies program appears to have become a path for completion for students who have not found their footing elsewhere. Intentional academic and career advisement for students who are slow to develop goals and an academic plan, fail to gain admission to professional programs, or who find that their intended path is not a good fit, could diminish the extent to which the general studies program serves as a degree completion path. A reconfigured University College could partner with and buttress the efforts of the remaining colleges to provide high quality programs, strong student guidance, and a rich array of learning opportunities.

Regardless of the organizational strategy NSU determines to deploy, active university-wide committees empowered to assess the performance of advising and academic programs is an essential element of a strong foundation for student success. The Advisement and Assessment Committees should jointly review evidence of impact and progress, identify for the university community good practices, propose revisions of policy as warranted, and explore the introduction of new retention initiatives. The AASCU team encourages the university's academic leadership to bring together findings of assessment of learning outcomes with data about student progress to sharpen focus on NSU's curricula and instructional practices.

### The Role of the Faculty

Through the site visit interviews and the review of the September 2007 Progress Report on Student Success and Progression, it is evident that faculty, department chairs, and academic and student affairs leaders understand that student success requires integrated thinking and is everyone's responsibility. Faculty members are advocates for institutional change which would positively impact students' academic progress. Systems have been established to recognize and celebrate exemplary faculty advisors and best practices. NSU has invested resources, as well, in strengthening faculty understanding of the effectiveness of an intrusive advising model and faculty skill development.

Faculty members are passionate about the need to adopt new approaches to support students' persistence and achievement of their academic goals and have creative insights for change.

A number of programs already in place should be assessed for their potential to be expanded and/or enriched by deeper faculty engagement. Programs that should be examined in this light include OR1010, the career exploration course, FIGS, 4th week early warning, and academic and career advisement. A framework for leadership that invites deep engagement of faculty in student success programs may aid in realizing the great potential increasing the scope of faculty engagement with students, which was identified by NSU student success leaders as an area needing improvement.

### Identified Uses of Data to Inform Student Success Efforts

*Organizing and Creating Meaning:* NSU has the advantage of extensive assessment and data gathering. The institution's challenge is identifying and utilizing those data that are most useful for student success efforts. The Office of Institutional Research produces extensive reports on enrollment as well as an

annual retention report breaking down the student population into cohorts based on a number of factors, including:

- regular vs. exception admits,
- age, gender, ethnicity,
- whether the new student attended the Freshmen Connection orientation program,
- lived on- or off-campus,
- by high school GPA, SAT/ACT scores,
- first-semester GPA, TOPS scholarship,
- development areas needed based on test scores,
- developmental areas taken,
- campus, college, department
- retention rates compared also to that of other University of Louisiana System

The institution requires mid-term grades, a valuable source of data not only for advisors and others monitoring student progress but more importantly for the students themselves. As was pointed out to the AASCU student success team on more than one occasion, a complete approach to enhancing student success should include consideration of student participation in employment or graduate education following graduation. Consideration of this aspect of student success, including data on alumni employment, was not found in the institution's documentation, although career and major choice were emphasized in student success efforts. Here are examples of additional types of data which might aid student success efforts.

Data	Uses to Inform Student Success Efforts
Retention and graduation data on other groups-- such as traditional age, on-campus students – who take courses on-line.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Does taking a mix of on-line and on-campus courses have any impact on time to graduation?</li> <li>● Are certain majors more likely to do this than others?</li> <li>● Does this behavior positively affect retention and graduation? Is this a strong positive that should be marketed to prospective students and their families?</li> <li>● Does this behavior negatively affect retention and graduation? Would intervention come through QEP/ACE?</li> </ul>
Survey of stop-outs and drop-outs. Research on reasons for adults to return to school mined through the CALL program.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Is there a pattern to stop-out behavior (number of hours worked, age, change of major, moving from full-time to part-time, financial need)?</li> <li>● Does the university have any control over any part of these decisions (early intervention – policy change, work with families, additional on-campus jobs?)</li> <li>● Does the research mined through the CALL program further inform future marketing efforts to adult learners?</li> </ul>
Studying the data from the 360 Student Support Services Students monitored and assisted.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What are the barriers to the at-risk students?</li> <li>● What are the programs and services in Student Support Services that have helped students overcome these barriers? Does this data tell NSU about student success programs that can be used with other populations at NSU?</li> </ul>
Academic Program Assessment Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How do students progress through various curriculums?</li> <li>● Are there gateway courses which affect students' progression? Do students need additional academic support for these gateway courses?</li> </ul>

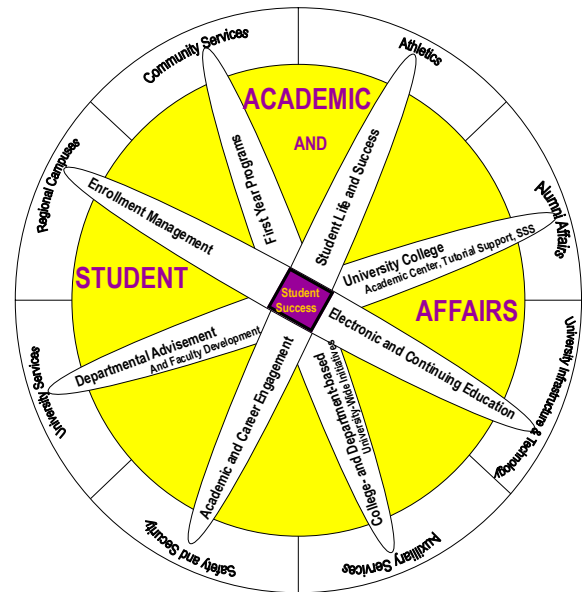
Data on individual students are collected by the office of Student Support Services for 360 students identified as being at high risk for dropping out or failing. Similarly, the Program for Academic Student Success monitors data on students who have been readmitted following academic dismissal. In addition to this monitoring of those students who have returned following academic dismissal, an “early warning system” for all students, or at least for all freshmen and sophomores, should be considered by the university, in which students are contacted by their advisors when certain behaviors occur, such as low grades, class absences, or indicators that they are planning to leave NSU such as requesting transcripts or failing to pre-register for the next term. Even though some faculty may think this too much “hand holding”, first-time college students, particularly those who are first-generation college students, would benefit from this added help in transitioning from high school under parental supervision to college. Perhaps through this help, fewer students will start their college experience with poor grades leading to academic dismissal.

## Opportunities for Improving Student Success Efforts

The AASCU Team is very impressed by the many ways that college deans, department chairs, faculty members and dedicated staff have engaged in retention efforts and the wide array of programs and services on campus. At this point, NSU will be best served by creating mechanisms to reward coordination of efforts. This approach will demonstrate to the university community that intentional collaboration produces symbiotic relationships resulting in even greater success outcomes. Simply put, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The team offers the following visual to graphically convey the ways in which a diffuse model can be reconceptualized to create a “web of success.”

Graph 1: NSULA’s Web of Success

In order to fully experience the synergies among the various parts of NSU’s success model, the Team recommends that the role of faculty be strengthened by incorporating expectations aligned with institutional priorities into policies for faculty promotion, tenure and evaluation. Team members were informed that advisement and other student related responsibilities, including engagement in student success efforts, are not encompassed in the reward structure and evaluation processes for faculty. The team recommends that NSU evaluate its current system of policies and work assignments to ensure that student success activities are recognized and that expectations for promotion and tenure are linked to faculty members’ distribution of effort. Faculty workload, including all duties such as advisement and committee work, should be reviewed to ensure that faculty have time for valuable interaction and engagement with students.



Two key factors in student persistence are academic success and engagement. Faculty members are central to both of these dimensions of student experiences at any institution. The team recommends that academic leaders collaborate to explicate goals and expectations for instructional practices and faculty engagement with students beyond the classroom. Consideration should be given to promoting instructional practices known to benefit student learning and engagement with faculty and peers. Faculty should be encouraged to pursue scholarship of teaching and learning, which cultivates dialogue and learning about best practices. The AASCU Team recommends that faculty development and support be expanded and centralized through the Office of the Provost or, perhaps, the University College.

Another opportunity for NSU is the cultivation of undergraduate research. In an institution with a primarily undergraduate mission, in which faculty struggle to balance teaching and other student related responsibilities with scholarship, undergraduate research presents an opportunity to create a powerful learning experience for students with faculty as mentors that also benefits faculty scholarly productivity. One excellent idea in place is the program to provide small grants of \$2500 administered by the Sponsored Research Office to support faculty and undergraduate research. Academic leaders and faculty should collaborate in auditing current undergraduate research activities at NSU, developing goals for undergraduate research and, designing college-based and university-wide programs to reach those goals.

## Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

*Recent Recommendations on Assessment:* The summary statement from the report, *Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment at Northwestern State University* (2004), by Armacost and Pet-Armacost noted that “at this point, there is no broad-based quality assurance system in place that ensures that units are participating in the process and that their plans, measures, and results are reviewed. The possible addition of subcommittees of the university assessment committee could be used to distribute the workload associated with a quality assurance process...”

In *NSU's Response (Section A) to the SACS Report* (2007), the Continual Improvement Plan (CIP) provided a strategic planning infrastructure to using assessment information at every level in the institution.

“All units, both academic and nonacademic, participate in a planning and evaluation process that is ongoing, integrated, and comprehensive. This mission-focused, research-based process requires each unit to identify objectives designed to support the University’s mission. Also, each unit identifies assessment tools needed to determine progress toward objectives. This portion of the Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP) includes the unit strategic-planning system.

“Further, degree-granting academic units must define **expected learning outcomes** (ELOs) related to student success. The reported assessment data for each objective directs decision making at unit and University levels. Data-driven changes are recorded as “responsive action.” This comprehensive system provides a complete cycle whereby data are distributed, recorded, and used for continuous improvements. This process may be viewed at: <http://sacs.nsula.edu/display/cipelofdefault.aspx>”

*Reviewing Assessment Data:* All campus units appear to be participating in assessment activities. However, it was unclear whether or not “their plans, measures, and results are reviewed.” Several department chairs and others commented that data they had forwarded for various purposes had elicited no feedback. They were unclear if or how the data were used. This is an important item for institutional consideration and follow-up. While time would not generally permit an institution to provide personal responses to submitted data, a plan needs to be developed to aggregate data where appropriate and return this to the original data providers. In some cases, such aggregate data could be discussed in deans or chairs meetings, and then they could provide the response to appropriate individuals. It may be that if data are not used, the need for the data to be submitted should be reviewed. Additionally, the users who receive the reports need to provide feedback on its usefulness.

The AASCU committee did not have an opportunity to explore how the unit reviews for the CIP assessments were done and how units, vice presidents, and the president feel about their value. The student affairs representative noted that the CIP was especially valuable to their area in their assessment and planning processes. Student Affairs uses CAS Higher Education Standards to assess its programs and units, and their reports show use of data to make improvements. Many of the Student Affairs items note that student learning is important and apparently is assessed primarily through surveys, for example, at the end of each event.

*Integrating Assessment with Student Success Data:* The Armacosts suggest the addition of a sub-committee of the assessment group, but this may or may not be the appropriate location for this response activity. However, as noted above, integrating student success initiatives with an understanding of program assessment data might be a recurring agenda item for the Provost’s direct reports and/or the Assessment or Advisement Committees. The suggestion that the institution’s assessment system, i.e., the plan/chart which describes all the assessment activities in the institution be developed with identification of the unit, purpose of the assessment, persons responsible, assessment tools, cycle, etc. should be reconsidered. A SACS format might be used or another example of such a chart might include:

Assessment Purpose	Assessment Tools	Responsible Unit/Person	Reporting Cycle	Resulting Change or Decision
	Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency			
	Major Competency Exams (national and locally developed)			
	Student Evaluation of Instruction			
	Exit interviews (for undergraduates)			
	Graduating Senior Survey			
	Graduate School Survey			
	ACT Student Opinion Survey			
	National Survey of Student Engagement			

Discussions on campus regarding the efficacy, timing, and use of these instruments need to be held. Consideration should be given to integration of budget considerations with assessment needs and effectiveness. Another part of this discussion is the timetable for accreditation and program self-studies. For example, the need for alumni survey data for an accreditation report could be fit into the assessment cycle and adjustments made if the need for the data is requested a year or more in advance.

### Campus Leadership and Organization for Assessment

The pre-visit information document provided a list of individuals with leadership responsibilities for assessment of student learning outcomes. In many cases, these were appropriately deans and chairs. The outcomes were thoughtfully developed and appear to be a relevant and helpful part of the assessment process.

Due to the timing of submission of student learning outcomes (summertime), there was less opportunity to hold discussions, departmental focus groups, or work within the traditional departmental committee structures. Faculty have responded and placed student learning outcomes on their syllabi, but more work may need to be done on assuring to assess student understanding of this learning performance on learning outcomes. Faculty may also want to use assessment to focus on the progressive expectations of the departmental academic program and to identify within the department either necessary or unnecessary redundancy in the coverage of curricular content, etc. Such program discussions about the development, implementation, and efficacy of student learning outcomes could now be held. In many cases, the assessment measures identified by the departments can be linked with this discussion.

With the recent reorganization of academic and student affairs responsibilities, it appears that the Provost and Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs has the primary responsibility for campus leadership with regard to expected learning outcomes. The team did not clearly determine the degree to which the associate provost for Academic Affairs and Institution Accountability, the Institutional Research Office, and the Director of University Planning, Assessment, and EEO have direct responsibility. The AASCU team notes that the management team of NSU is a collegial and collaborative group. Their focus is on getting the work done, rather than who is in charge. Nevertheless, the job descriptions of these team members need to describe their scope, responsibility, and authority.

The charge, composition, and responsibilities of the Assessment Committee (or some other administrative/faculty structure) need to be considered and clarified with regard to development and review of student learning outcomes. Does a sub-committee need to review the unit learning outcomes results? Or is this solely an administrative responsibility? Additionally, the integration of Electronic and Continuing Education, primarily the distance education programs, principally with the evaluation of student learning outcomes should also be discussed and determined.

### The Role of the Faculty In Assessment

As noted in NSU's description of the CIP process to SACS, faculty members are key participants in the administration of the assessment instruments. They also should be key users of the data. Not all faculty are clear about the advantages and uses of expected learning outcomes, for example, how ELO's can provide information on curricular progression, the need for new or revised prerequisites, where academic material is repeated (either needed or unnecessary redundancy), how students are meeting the goals of the course.

As faculty become more familiar with the philosophy and forms of assessment and the data generated by their department, they should be involved with the discussions about any revision of learning outcomes and the assessment measures employed. Additional faculty development on assessment may continue to build the foundation for this greater understanding of the value of assessment to the academic department, school, and institution

The team supports the plan of the provost to visit with department heads to hear what their perception and uses are of the assessment programs. Likewise, the Assessment Committee could hold informal discussion sessions with faculty, students, and other units to discuss assessment issues. Some questions that might form the basis for these discussions include: Who does the faculty see as leaders for assessment at the university and departmental levels? How is program assessment linked to strategic planning? Do departments get aggregated assessment data back? Do departments use the data/accomplishments to make curricular changes? What challenges do departments face in using assessment data? What suggestions do departments have to improve/expedite the assessment processes? What successes have departments had? What is the mix of student learning outcomes and other program outcomes? What is the base number of outcomes per program or concentration? Have students noticed any differences since expected learning outcomes have been identified? Do students have an awareness of learning outcomes? How did they get this? What do students know, think, or are able to do?

A well-informed and engaged faculty will contribute to the success of assessment initiatives and strengthen their academic programs while simultaneously contributing to the success of students.

### Identified Uses of Assessment Data to Improve Academic Programs

General Education core competencies are mandated by the state legislature and a distributed model is used to implement the competencies. A number of assessment strategies are being used to collect data, including a variety of course embedded, home grown assessments (typically test items) and a standardized measure (CAAP). Each department that offers core courses reports their data on the web interface. The CIP web interface is used by departments to document changes that were made based on data collected.

Academic major programs with external accreditation are providing evidence and documentation of how they are using assessment data for program improvement.

Student Affairs provided the AASCU team with documentation of changes made in response to data collected through the CIP process. For example, a number of these are described in the CIP as well as in a document titled, "Report of Decisions based on Assessment Data."

The Continuing Education Program provided the AASCU team with documentation of changes made in response to data collected through the CIP process, changes documented on the CIP site. The director described how the CIP process has been helpful in understanding how to use assessment, align programs with university goals, and use data to inform their decision making.

### Identified Assessment Strengths

The team identified a number of key strengths in the assessment arena. All programs that have external accrediting agencies have achieved external accreditation. This is a great source of pride in the university (as well it should be). The Director of Assessment and staff in the Institutional Research Office were consistently praised as being helpful and responsive to faculty and departments. NSU is planning to administer the NSSE and FSSE in 2008. This is a great opportunity to get institutional level data (that can be “sliced and diced” in any number of ways) without additional burden on faculty, provided enough students take the survey. It is recommended that NSU consider over sampling, particularly at the senior class level, to ensure enough data for subgroup analyses, particularly between majors. Comparing NSSE and FSSE (Faculty Survey of Student Engagement) data will also provide insight into the alignment of faculty and student perceptions concerning engagement. Such comparisons can provide a springboard for discussion among all university constituencies. The Assessment Committee has revised the program review process; a faculty member co-chairs the committee with the director of assessment. The composition of the committee represents faculty, department/program heads as well as support units (IR, assessment). The CIP process has been used very effectively by many units, especially Student Affairs units and continuing education. Expected learning outcomes appear on all syllabi and there are links from many department web pages to the CIP.

### Opportunities for Streamlining and Improving Assessment

Now that NSU has identified expected learning outcomes for all academic programs and has collected a great amount of data, the important focus is to transform “mere data” into meaningful information that can drive improvement. Academic programs and other units may need significant assistance with this task. However, this task is not primarily technical in nature. Faculty development may be instrumental in this process.

Now that NSU has several semesters of baseline data (especially in the core) and has been able to see trends, it may not be necessary to measure every outcome every year. The institution may want to consider random sampling of students, and rotating the outcomes measured each year (this can apply to standardized tests as well as the course embedded assessments). This will allow some relief from data collection and provide some time for considering how to use the data for program improvement.

Faculty members are concerned about using class time for assessments. Increased use of web-based surveys and tests (including use of Blackboard for home grown assessments) can relieve faculty from using class time. This will also make it more efficient for data analysis as the responses can be downloaded in a spreadsheet and easily tabulated and analyzed.

NSU may want to consider adding the BCSSE (Beginning College Student Survey of Engagement) next year as a way of getting a baseline on entering students. The institution may be able to follow specific cohorts over time using BCSSE/NSSE. The BCSSE can also inform the FYE program and augment the “early warning” system for students at risk. This is a great way to further the integration of student success and assessment initiatives.

Another survey that might be considered is the Classroom Assessment of Student Engagement (CLASSE), which compares faculty expectations to student experiences at the classroom level, yielding feedback to faculty for their use in improving student engagement in their classes. This survey, based on the NSSE, was developed by Bob Smallwood and Judy Ouimet, with more information available at <http://www.unf.edu/acadaffairs/assessment/classe/overview.html> and at <http://www.ngcsu.edu/Resource/IRP/irphome/classe.shtml>.

The Assessment Committee has the potential to be used more efficiently and effectively to support campus assessment efforts. To date, the committee has been working on particular projects assigned by

the Provost. – working as a committee of the whole, almost as an ad hoc committee. The University could make this a standing committee with a clear charge (by-laws), rotating, and staggered membership. This committee could divide into subcommittees for specific tasks (e.g., review of course evaluation surveys) and become involved in reviewing and providing collegial feedback to programs undergoing 5-year program review. This would not only provide peer support for programs that have little experience with program review and assessment, but also provide an arena for sharing successes. (One common complaint – not just here but at most campuses – is that so much effort is directed to these reports and then they just sit on a shelf for five years until it is time to do it again.)

A structured follow-up process following program reviews (e.g., meet yearly with dean, provost to discuss changes, needs) would also be helpful in integrating the review process into the daily life of the program.

Faculty members are primed and eager to learn. They want to know how assessment will benefit them and their students. Many faculty still do not understand what assessment is and why they should do it (other than to be compliant). The vocabulary and jargon of assessment is not readily understood. As one faculty member stated, “I do assessment – it’s called grades.” (Faculty members were unaware of things they were most likely doing that may be used as assessment.) Increasing faculty development opportunities around issues of pedagogy, scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), and assessment would be very helpful. One way that this can begin to be done is by sending a team of faculty to a national conference on assessment (e.g., the annual IUPUI conference) with the expectation that upon return, they will spread the word. This will add to the desired culture change around assessment.

While a lot of assessment is being done, it does not always filter down to the academic departments that need to be using the data for program change. For example, ECE administers CAAP at various off-campus sites, but no one was really sure how these scores were communicated to the academic programs. Some faculty commented that they do assessment because they have to, but do not find it useful in making changes to programs nor does it have an impact on how or what they teach. It is not clear how the various components of general education are coordinated and overseen.

The team did hear complaints that the web interface was difficult to use. Indeed it was somewhat difficult to navigate and find learning outcomes, particularly the general education core. This is not news to the university as the director of assessment discussed the steps that are already being taken to address this issue. In addition to making data entry more user friendly, it would be helpful to have student learning outcomes and some summary of data on departmental web pages (so that the student or parent visitor to the site would be able to understand the information).

There is no centralized mechanism for collecting alumni and employer data. These data, needed by academic programs undergoing accreditation and self-study, are currently collected by individual departments or programs. Department heads and program directors find this to be a difficult task for which they may not be trained nor have the necessary resources. A centralized system (e.g., web-based surveys with opportunities for customization for individual discipline needs) would be helpful to all units and provide another source of institutional level data.

Consider how the university may leverage internal assessment resources -- for example, the School of Education uses Passport – an online portfolio system and Continuing Ed is considering another online portfolio program. It is possible that one of these programs may be very useful to other programs that use portfolios as part of their assessment methodology. Standardization on one such program might help the university in the future.

## Integrating Student Success, Assessment, Enrollment Management, Strategic Planning

Prior to the site visit, the scope of this study was defined as including student success and academic assessment activities. The AASCU team discovered at NSU that these two areas of activity also intersect in important ways with enrollment management, retention, and strategic planning. The team identified many excellent activities in each of these areas underway at NSU. However, the team came away with the impression that these activities had been occurring largely in isolation from one another and particularly without a great deal of faculty understanding of their strategic importance. This is not unusual for modern universities as all of these areas of activity are somewhat new in U.S. higher education.

One useful step might be for the campus to consciously adopt an expansive interpretation of “strategic enrollment management.” This concept is best understood in the contemporary higher education world as a “cradle to grave” continuum from pre-application to graduation and beyond. It could encompass such activities as working with K-12 to develop better prepared applicants, marketing the university, mapping the application process to eliminate glitches for students, retention efforts and more. Assessment results may even be used to inform enrollment management decisions. For example the table below shows potential uses of assessment information in enrollment management.

Understanding incoming students	Assessment	Enrollment Decisions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Traditional age students at Natchitoches campus</li> <li>At risk students</li> <li>Undecided students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>BCSSE</li> <li>Student Services Assessment</li> <li>University College Assessment;</li> <li>Focus group results for QEP/ACE</li> <li>Individual assessment with University Scholars</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Marketing and implementing student success programs for traditional students with different needs and expectations of college.</li> <li>QEP/ACE focus group results may show the need for repeated messages and programming about career opportunities throughout college.</li> <li>QEP/ACE focus group results may also show influence of family members and need to continually include them in career-oriented information.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adult students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CALL Program Research</li> <li>Profile of CALL inquirer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Trigger” events may spur an adult to make a phone call or seek enrollment. Marketing efforts may capitalize on these “trigger” events and understanding the profile of adult learner. The personal approach in navigating enrollment processes may be necessary.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Distance learning students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Call Program Research</li> <li>Satisfaction Surveys – Distance Education Division</li> <li>Retention profile of both on-campus students taking distance learning and distance learning only students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>QEP/ACE advising for incoming students may be adjusted based on the needs of incoming students for more or less distance learning. For example, traditional on campus students may be advised to reduce work off campus and not take distance learning courses as entering students, if this combination has shown to be negative in assessment research.</li> </ul>

The team also believes that there may be opportunities to integrate assessment and student success activities. For example, NSU might benefit from consistently promoting processes that bring together different parts of the institution to talk about what they have learned through their assessment and how this impact enrollment management. For example, focus groups have led to creation of the ACE/QEP program. These focus groups have yielded significant learning about students and their need related to careers and advising. This significant learning needs to be shared in some detail to inform other decision making and programs.

Integration does not mean one size fits all. It is important to understand the different needs of different populations. For example, some assessment of traditional age (under 21) students who are taking a full time course load, some of it through distance courses, and also working close to full time may benefit from further study. If this pattern of activity leads to dropping courses or leaving school, some intervention may be in order. Perhaps the nature of the work could be changed, with these students working on campus. An early warning system, as described earlier, could alert faculty and administrators of students needing individual help regardless of reason.

Integration may mean taking best practices learned from assessing positive pilots, such as the CALL process, and using these concepts in a larger-framed program, such as the QEP. Valuable assessment data are currently being collected in the CALL initiative. Why adults would chose to return to school, what is the profile of these adult learners, what might be commonalities of the stories that they tell staff members are very valuable pieces of information needed to continue efforts to market this program as well as making the program successful. It should be noted also that this information would also inform outreach and programming for all adult learners, including those in the general studies area, who initially were NSU students and seek to come back to finish their degrees. These insights might also inform future outreach efforts including education on military bases and initiatives in Louisiana. Being able to show a prospective partner in training or development solid evidence of “understanding adult students’ enrollment and learning needs” makes for a persuasive argument to enter into such a partnership. Note that a faculty member is currently interested in this program and its success and may be the researcher who could analyze the qualitative information now available

Understanding the changing needs of different populations is critical for the success of student success and enrollment management programs. It was noted in at least one discussion with unit support leaders and then later with faculty that traditional student needs are not only changing, but rapidly changing. Students want to know about student activities rather than attend them. They obtain their information via pod casts, text messaging and cell phones, and feel comfortable in situations where they multi-task. Recent studies with these types of insights should be shared.

An overall need exists to make assessment more understandable and meaningful to faculty and staff as well to external populations. The SLO’s program objectives may be reviewed with a focus on what this says about NSU’s graduates. How could these SLO’s be translated for parents and employers?

The broadest integrative framework for any campus is “strategic planning.” NSU has done extensive work in this arena with four clear, strong campus strategic goals and with annual unit level reporting. However, the team came away with the impression that NSU’s strengths were at the very top and at the unit levels, with less evidence of clear and intentional use of strategic plans at intermediate levels, at least on the academic side. Departments seemed to not fully understand the importance of campus strategic goals and also seemed to perceive retention efforts, assessment efforts and strategic reporting as disconnected streams of activity. The team was not able to gain a clear understanding of the respective roles of the Cabinet versus the Strategic Planning and Budgeting Committee in dealing with strategic issues (but our time to gain this understanding was very limited). Again, this state is very typical of modern universities.

The team believes that there may be an opportunity to build on the strong foundation developed by NSU, using strategic planning and strategic enrollment management as overarching, integrative frameworks. It may be a very useful exercise for NSU to gather key campus leaders and spend some time placing side by side various projects within several areas of strategic importance including strategic planning, marketing, enrollment management, retention, student success, and academic assessment. The purpose of the exercise would be gain a common understanding among campus leadership of how these domains can synergistically interact with one another, to identify redundancies and gaps, and to review responsibilities. An internal communication plan to share this integrated understanding with faculty and staff would complement this exercise.

## Conclusions

The AASCU team came away with a very strong appreciation for the mission, commitment, values and especially for the people at NSU. NSU is home to committed, skilled, and knowledgeable leaders and the university is lucky to have such valuable human resources.

### Key Strengths

The AASCU team identified many points of strength at the NSU campus. Foremost were the talent and commitment of key university leaders and key staff. Senior and key university leaders appear to have developed a congenial and collaborative culture that will well serve the institution as it endeavors to fulfill key university goals. The university added the word “Responsive” to the campus mission statement in years past and appears to take seriously the idea that NSU will be responsive to student needs and to regional opportunities and needs. There seemed to be a broad, although not quite universal, understanding that student success is everyone’s job. There seemed to be genuine understanding and application of “shared leadership” across units. The recent reorganization seems likely to reinforce campus strategic efforts. The extensive web-based assessment reporting and strategic reporting systems are strengths.

The dedicated and energetic faculty is another very significant strength and their commitment to student success is clear. NSU has developed strong student support systems such as the University College, Louisiana Scholars College, TRIO program, the Academic Center. NSU has developed a very strong plan for SACS in the QEP/ACE proposal. The fact that all programs that have external accrediting agencies have achieved external accreditation is rightly a great source of pride in the university. NSU has remarkable presence in online education which provides a key asset. The Offices of Assessment and Planning and Institutional Research are key assets and a well-respected and effective data analysis operation, useful to campus leadership.

Overall, NSU has made remarkable progress simultaneously on a variety of strategic projects that are important to all modern universities: student success, academic assessment, strategic planning, and enrollment management.

### Recommendations

The AASCU visit was brief and the team, comprised of skilled and knowledgeable professionals, brought varied backgrounds and perspectives to the task. The NSU study was made more complex than the original AASCU project by expanding the scope to include assessment as well as student success. Moreover, at NSU it was discovered that these two issues intertwined with campus strategic planning and with enrollment management, making the task more complex still. Only the skilled and knowledgeable leaders at NSU will be able to judge whether the recommendations we are suggesting are useful and appropriate.

*Continue and increase efforts to share information and to integrate activities among faculty and staff working on enrollment management, retention, support for student success, academic assessment, and strategic planning.* These should not be disconnected activities or “silos.” There is tremendous good will to collaborate at NSU. Effective collaboration only requires that campus leaders create the opportunities for information sharing and integration. This sharing and integration will work best if it involves faculty integrally.

*Develop opportunities and support structures for faculty development of pedagogy, especially about active learning.* The department chairs and faculty at NSU are strongly committed to the institution. As at all universities, new faculty members come to their jobs with little training in pedagogy. Research shows that student success is connected with more effective pedagogy, especially with the use of active

and varied learning strategies that respond to the learning needs of diverse students more effectively than traditional lectures. Examples include undergraduate research, service learning, study abroad, and classroom collaborative learning. The campus has begun to move in this direction. Supporting and expanding this movement will yield good return on investment in faculty development.

*Continue and expand programs that celebrate exemplary faculty, staff and programs.* One of the best ways to move an institution is to praise people for what they are already doing well that fulfills the mission. NSU has many examples of exemplary projects, staff and faculty who deserve to be celebrated in the best Louisiana tradition!

*Intensify research on the success of specific student subgroups.* The campus has excellent Institutional Research capabilities that already provide good information on student retention. This capability could be used effectively to examine very specific student success questions in ways intended to help target interventions.

*Integrate the ACE/QEP program into other campus efforts.* The Academic and Career Enhancement plan is an excellent plan for SACS that will strengthen advising and career counseling at NSU. We recommend that as this project is implemented, efforts be made to connect it closely with other campus units including University College, other academic colleges, and other support units.

*Review institutional policies in light of student success goals.* Policies about matriculating, withdrawing, grading and other matters can have great effects on student success. Identifying ways to make these policies work in support of student success efforts is likely to yield good return on investment of effort

*Review institutional policies for retention, tenure and promotion* to ensure that they support institutional student success and other goals. Sometimes retention, tenure and promotion policies do not reward the faculty who best serve key institutional goals.

*Review reward structures for faculty and staff in light of institutional goals.* The AASCU team was told that faculty members are not compensated for advising and offered few incentives for other student focused efforts. Aligning available rewards to faculty with key campus student success goals is a highly effective and important step.

*Give priority in assessment efforts to discussion of and use of assessment data.* NSU gathers a great deal of assessment data already. However, there appears to be a gap between collection and discussion and use of those data. Focusing on collecting data and neglecting discussion and use of the data is a common situation on higher education campuses across the nation. Faculty in departments and staff in other units should spend regular time meeting and discussing the data at least once each academic term. Faculty may need initial guidance in making these discussions productive. Participants should be encouraged to take the data seriously in the sense that if currently ways of collecting data are not useful to program decision making, then methods should be changed to become useful. It may be more useful to gather some data every other year or every third year. If it is necessary to curtail data collection to make time for data discussion and use for a period, that might be advisable. These discussions will provide the most intelligent way to “streamline” assessment efforts.

*Integrate assessment results into strategic planning and enrollment management.* If assessment conversations are confined to the department and unit levels, faculty and staff get a sense that assessment is not a serious endeavor. Department and unit level discussions of assessment should articulate upward and deans and unit directors should be in a position to describe, to the provost and president and other audiences, current assessment results in their units, what has been learned from those efforts, and what program changes have occurred as a result. These summaries should influence strategic planning and enrollment management.

*Incorporate post-graduation data into assessment efforts.* Some faculty made the point that their goal is to prepare students for employment, not just to retain or graduate them. This point is apt, given that NSU serves to prepare the workforce for a specific region. Surveys of employers would bring a useful outside perspective to assessment and planning efforts.

*Use the Assessment and Advising Committees more intentionally.* Both committees were passionate about their respective charges but the team came away with the impression that neither felt central to campus initiatives in their respective domains.

*Consider formal ways to integrate strategic planning, budgeting, enrollment management, retention and student success efforts, and assessment.* The AASCU team came away with a sense that the relationship among these university activities is complex at NSU for at least two reasons. One is that recent and prior university reorganizations have moved units and changed reporting lines, leaving some uncertain about linkages. A second reason is the separateness of activities in distinct units without formal organizational or communication linkages. This complexity may be exacerbated by the way that strategic issues are addressed at NSU, with the Cabinet playing the major role but a separate “Strategic Planning and Budgeting Committee” in existence. We suggest that the campus might benefit from formal communication among all units involved in the vital campus activities. This could take the form of an annual series of reports to the Cabinet and the Strategic Planning Committee in a joint session from units involved in these key activities with some ensuing dialog. Benefits from this kind of effort to communicate and integrate would include better information for strategic planning at the all-university level and importantly better communication back to the departments and units through the committee members. However, the AASCU team recognizes that this is a complex issue and defers to the judgment of the NSU leadership. The AASCU team again expresses its thanks for the opportunity to visit and study key issues for the university and for your hospitality.