

Report to Faculty, Administrators, Trustees, Students  
of the  
University at Albany, State University of New York  
Albany, NY 12222

Prepared following analysis of the institution's  
Periodic Review Report

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# **Evaluation of the Periodic Review Report of University at Albany, State University of New York**

## **I. Introduction**

The University at Albany, State University of New York (subsequently noted as UAlbany) is a public, research university. First accredited in 1938, UAlbany has grown from being primarily a teachers college to a research university, very high research activity (Carnegie Classification). Today, UAlbany offers fifty-four bachelor programs to approximately 13,000 undergraduate students and eighty-four master programs and thirty-nine doctoral programs to approximately 5,000 graduate students. The university's stated mission, "expanding knowledge and transforming minds to shape the future of our community and our world," is clear in its simplicity and is descriptive of the University's view of its future.

The Periodic Review Report (PRR) is well-written and rich in describing a dynamic, forward-looking institution. The PRR provides a comprehensive overview of institutional progress since the College's decennial self-study and team visit in 2010, including the deactivation of specific under-enrolled undergraduate programs, the inauguration of a new president in 2013, the opening of a new School of Business building in 2013, the transitioning of its College of Nanoscale Science and Engineering to a fully independent state institution, a major revision of its undergraduate general education requirements, the recent decision (2015) on the part of the State of New York to house the nation's first College of Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security, and Cybersecurity at UAlbany, and its broadening of its STEM programs. The readers commend the University for providing a document that concisely reflects the complexities of their institution in a readable, clear manner. The report is also reflective of widespread community involvement in its preparation and it communicates a strong sense of commitment to institutional progress.

## **II. Responses to Recommendations from the Previous Decennial Evaluation**

From the 2010 decennial report prepared by the visiting team, there was only one major recommendation. As stated in this report: "We recommend, in the light of the many important events now in course at UAlbany and in its state and national environments, that its next Periodic Review Report be focused on the University's soon-to-come new strategic plan and its implementation outcomes during the next five years." This recommendation is part-and-partial with the University's 2010 self-study in which it delineated 156 recommendations (including suggestions) for the institution to work toward completion. This strategic plan was revisited and consolidated into six "strategic" themes in 2013 with the installment of the University's new president, President Robert J. Jones.

The six strategic goals of the University's revised Strategic Plan are as follows:

1. To enhance the quality of undergraduate education at UAlbany and attract and serve a highly qualified and diverse group of students.
2. To create an excellent student experience that integrates academic and co-

curricular experiences, engages the surrounding community and the world, and fosters lifelong pride in the University.

3. To advance excellence in graduate education in support of the University's reputation, role, and stature and the preparation and competitiveness of graduates.
4. To increase UAlbany's visibility in, and resources for, advancing and disseminating knowledge, discovery, and scholarship.
5. To add to, and reconfigure, our teaching, research, student life and support spaces in a manner compatible with our contemporary mission.
6. To engage diverse communities in strategic partnerships to increase public, scholarly, and economic benefits.

According to the University's PRR, since 2010 UAlbany has addressed 143 of its 156 self-initiated recommendations. In the body of its PRR, UAlbany devoted approximately 16% of the body of this report (eleven pages) discussing the actions it has taken to address these recommendations. As the University's Strategic Plan is very ambitious, it would be pedantic and difficult to summarize all of the actions taken to date without, in essence, copying this section of the PRR. Also, while the Strategic Plan as written rightly concentrates on enhancing the educational experiences of UAlbany students, they have a direct impact on the future retention and recruitment goals of the University and, hence, the fiscal well-being of the University.

With the inauguration of President Jones in 2013, and in relation to the University's 2010 Strategic Plan, the President put forth four pillars, or "stakes," for UAlbany to build on:

1. Expanding our portfolio of degree-granting programs.
2. Recruiting more out of state and international students.
3. Broadening our role as a University engaged in the community.
4. Grow our resources to fulfill our ambition.

The highlights of the actions related to the four stakes as outlined in the PRR are more easily summarized. As the University noted, since 2010 at least 33 academic programs have either been developed or modified, seven of which are new undergraduate programs, and six new graduate programs are in the process of being approved both internally and by the State. Since 2010, the number of students classified as out-of-state and international have increased by approximately 400 students (14% of the total student body of the University, up from 12% previously). As to the goal of growing their resources to support their ambitions, the PRR notes that UAlbany is participating in the NYSUNY 2020 program linking rational tuition increases over a five-year period to dedicated capital funding which will allow for the hiring of approximately 200 new full-time faculty and the construction of new research facilities, and the designation of UAlbany to receive \$13.5 million in seed funding for the construction of new facilities to house the proposed College of Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security, and Cybersecurity.

*As the strategic goals and four "stakes" noted above are directly integrated with the University's enrollment and finance projections, the readers **suggest** that the University carefully monitor whether the actions taken have the desired return on investment related to enrollment and finances.*

### III. Major Challenges and/or Opportunities

The University's PRR noted that the main challenge confronting it is the fluctuations in budgeting it experiences as an institution that is part of the State University system of New York. In an era of declining state support for public higher education, and with the transitioning of the College of Nanoscale Science and Engineering to be independent from UAlbany, along with changing demographics for high school students, creates a period of financial uncertainty. For example, the PRR states that from 2008 to 2010 the University experienced a decrease of \$46 million in their base budget, causing the University to eliminate 338 FTE positions and the deactivation of five programs (one of which has since been reinstated). The decline in federal funding for research likewise presents a challenge for the prestige of the University and the University's faculty as they compete for shrinking resources in this area.

This in turn creates anxiety and distrust among faculty and staff as to the future of specific areas of the University and their employment. This was evidenced by the internal response to the deactivation of specific programs at the University and the perceived lack of transparency in the decision-making process. Although President Philip was eventually supported by the faculty and the Faculty Senate, the response from the University's Governance Council Task Force stated, in part: "However, we wish to state in the strongest possible term that in the future, the administration must remain mindful of the need to consult with the Senate, and to inform the Senate directly about its decisions with sufficient detail to satisfy reasonable concerns and questions, both before and after decisions have been reached." Transparency and the timely dissemination of relevant information to the constituencies of the University, allowing for feedback, go a long way toward mitigating the influence of rumor and misperceptions.

*The readers **suggest** that the University administration be more diligent in providing faculty and staff with relevant information about the financial health of the University, in accordance to their own Bylaws, Article 1, Section 2.2.2.*

To offset some of the financial concerns noted above, the University has delineated plans on increasing their endowment from its present level of \$40 million to more than \$100 million over the next five years. The significance of this goal is that is targeted toward providing support for student scholarships and faculty research.

As for the challenge of changing demographics in the Northeast, UAlbany, through its Strategic Plan and the "Four Stakes" presented by President Jones, UAlbany has responded by creating thirteen new academic programs at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, with the appropriate planned positive impact on admissions and retention. The renaming of the College of Computer and Information Science to the College of Engineering and Applied Science, the new construction to house the College of Business, and the seed money for the State of New York to create the nation's first College of Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security, and Cybersecurity also will enhance the University's ability to attract new instate students as well as student from out-of-state and

internationally.

Finally, out of challenges comes opportunity. With the College of Nanoscale Science and Engineering becoming independent from UAlbany, the University is looking towards focusing its energies and finances on the new programmatic area noted in the PRR. However, as each segment of the Strategic Plan and “Four Stakes” is interrelated, successfully recognizing each component part is critical to the overall success of the University over the next five years.

*The readers **recommend** that the University provide a comprehensive assessment of the outcome of the Strategic Plan and the “Four Stakes” in its next self-study as this was a significant component of its 2015 PRR.*

#### **IV. Enrollment and Finance Trends and Projections**

UAlbany’s PRR indicates that its overall headcount enrollment has declined by 316 students over the past five years, led predominantly by losses in the graduate programs and the non-matriculated undergraduates. In the President’s address to the faculty in 2015, he acknowledged this stating “...our most significant financial threat is declining enrollments.” Over the next few years, the planning for enrollment is going to be more complicated as the College of Nanoscale Science and Engineering (CSNE) transitions into an autonomous institution, with a projected loss of 160 graduate students and 50 to 60 new freshmen from the University’s enrollment number and projections. The PRR, however, was not clear to the readers as to whether the independence of the CSNE would have other negative impacts on the undergraduate enrollment of UAlbany.

Based on the information in the PRR, UAlbany is projecting an overall growth in enrollment from 17,173 in 2015 to 18,867 by the Fall 2019, an overall increase of approximately 9.9%. This is predicated upon a substantial growth in the University’s new transfer student population (18.5% over four years), a substantial growth in the non-matriculated student population (145.5% over four years), and a modest growth in graduate students (5.2% over four years). The enrollment projection in UAlbany’s PRR is premised upon many moving parts: (1) serving as the undergraduate general education provider for the undergraduate students in the newly independent CSNE; (2) the recruitment of more international students through their newly formed “pathway” program that targets international students looking for an intensive English Language Program prior to becoming matriculated students at UAlbany or other American institutions; (3) expanding out-of-state recruitment and improving their “penetration of in-state markets” by increasing their appeal to minority students; (4) new undergraduate program initiatives that are approved or in various stages of approval, including programs such as Computer Engineering, Bio-Instrumentation, Human Development, Informatics, Digital Forensics, and Urban Studies; (5) new graduate program initiatives in English Studies, Geographic Information science, International Affairs, graduate certificates in Teaching Composition, Health and Human Rights, and Global Health Studies.

The evident concern with the above is that the financial model put forth by UAlbany is

highly dependent, at least in part, on the projected growth in student enrollment as shown in its Table 4.2 of the PRR. UAlbany does have the advantage in its financial planning in that it participates in the SUNY rational tuition program, which allows for a systematic increase of \$300 per year for undergraduates and \$500 per year for graduates. This, however, is subject to renewal by the State legislature and was up for renewal 2015. The enrollment projections in UAlbany's graduate programs may also be impacted by the lack of funding to support master-level students in favor of assisting doctoral-level students, as well as the decentralized nature of the planning in graduate programs. In UAlbany's own words: "while financial inputs are increasing through the revenue and fee increases . . . , our financial planning models tell us they need to be linked to higher enrollment levels to meet the planned expenditures, or planned expenditures must be reduced." The question in the readers' minds is whether the higher enrollment levels are driven by the planned increase in expenditures or vice versa.

As part of the State University of New York (SUNY) system, UAlbany does not issue its own financial statements. These are the product of the SUNY System Administration which compiles the financial data for each campus and which, in turn, is forwarded to the New York State Comptroller and becomes part of the New York State financial statements.

## **V. Assessment Processes and Plans**

UAlbany is intricately involved in the assessment of its academic programs and student learning as well as institutional effectiveness. Like the University itself, the assessment process is complex and inclusive. Developed in 2004, UAlbany's "Institutional Assessment Plan" (IAP) has evolved as the University has evolved. The IAP lays out procedures and expectations for assessment in the areas of student learning and institutional effectiveness for both the undergraduate and graduate levels of the institution. To support the demand for assessment, the University provides its faculty with resources and workshops designed to support the assessment process and improve the teaching process and "faculty effectiveness," focusing on "student learning objectives, developing assessment mechanisms, and . . . regard[ing] the classroom as learning laboratory guided by purposeful activities all with the intent purpose of maximizing student learning and intellectual growth." Further, UAlbany has held a "Provost's Assessment Symposium" in 2013 designed to "catalog and inventory efforts in the schools and colleges that address student satisfaction, academic engagement, and student learning, requires that all departments provide an annual summary report detailing departmental assessment activities and results, asked all departments to post their student learning objectives on their web pages, and moved to distinguish indirect assessment from direct assessment by requiring all departments to clearly differentiate between them in their reporting process.

UAlbany's PRR clearly demonstrates how the data collected from the various assessment tools and processes is used to effect change within their academic programs and in the areas affecting institutional effectiveness. However, there are areas of concern remaining in the University's assessment processes. First, as part of the SUNY system, UAlbany is called upon to have its strategic plan blend into the SUNY Strategic Plan and to have a core of common metrics upon which they campus can be evaluated in relation to the other SUNY

campuses. This is just beginning under a pilot program. Second, the part of the IAP that calls for the assessment of the effectiveness of the administrative units at UAlbany has yet to be implemented; a draft of that plan is just now being reviewed by the appropriate unit administrators. Third, a draft plan for the assessment of institutional effectiveness in research, public service, academic support, and administrative services is undergoing review by the senior administrative staff of UAlbany. Fourth, the University has yet to achieve having all departments develop a link on their main webpage so that students, parents, and other parties can view the learning expectations of each program. This effort was begun in 2012. Part of the problem in having the assessment process finalized in full seems to be the turnover in senior leadership at the University and the need to revisit the plans that had previously been drafted.

The readers make the following recommendations in relation to Standards 7 and 14:

*The readers **recommend** that the University complete ~~their~~ reviews, assign responsibility, and establish clear timelines for addressing each of the above assessment challenges, as articulated in the PRR, so that the finished IAP plan with appropriate assessment data be available by the next decennial visit.*

## **VI. Linked Institutional Planning and Budgeting Processes**

UAlbany's budgeting processes and their link to institutional planning are complex and dependent upon various elements – e.g., State assistance to the University based on the legislative process and approvals; the competitive NYSUNY 2020 Challenge Grant program; overall student enrollment based on recruitment and retention; recruitment of international students; recruitment of out-of-state students; recruitment of transfer students. UAlbany's PRR demonstrates that the University has consciously linked its budgeting priorities to the University's latest Strategic Plan, investing in the priorities as outlined in the Strategic Plan's goals and objectives, and developed metrics to assist in their evaluation of the successes or failures of these initiatives.

UAlbany uses what it describes as a budget process that is "incrementally based." The bulk of this process is used to determine the operating costs related to units/departments based on the previous year's reconciled budget and the project cost of operation based on elements such as negotiated salary increases, budget additions or reductions based on changes in state allocations, and projected tuition revenue goals. The needs of the units/departments are then matched to the priorities stated in the University's Strategic Plan. Most of the University's investment in new strategic initiatives is primarily predicated upon the University's success through the NYSUNY 2020 program.

In summary, from the readers' perspective, UAlbany's PRR clearly demonstrates that the University's Strategic Plan is a dynamic document that is utilized by the University various departments and senior administrators identify institutional planning priorities. The processes by which such priorities are established and by which budgetary decisions are derived seem to be sound and effective.

## VII. Conclusion

The University at Albany, State University of New York, has demonstrated that it is a complex, dynamic, well-respected institution of higher education and senior research institution. Their Strategic Plan shows an institution that is constantly evolving, constantly looking forward, and comfortable in their mission and in the role that they have within the SUNY system. The readers also recognize that the changes enumerated in the PRR, combined with the changes in senior leadership at the University, present a challenge of continuity in the institution's application of its Strategic Plan and its Institutional Assessment Plan.

In summary, UAlbany and its members should be proud of what they have accomplished over a relatively short 77 years since their original accreditation. As they look forward to their next decennial review in 2020, they are asked to address the following recommendations:

*The readers **recommend** that the University provide a comprehensive assessment of the outcome of the Strategic Plan and the "Four Stakes" in its next self-study as this was a significant component of its 2015 PRR.*

*The readers **recommend** that the University complete ~~their~~ reviews, assign responsibility, and establish clear timelines for addressing each of the above assessment challenges, as articulated in the PRR (see page 6 of the PRR review), so that the finished IAP plan with appropriate assessment data be available by the next decennial visit.*

Finally, the readers would like to direct attention to the following two suggestions:

*As the strategic goals and four "stakes" noted above are directly integrated with the University's enrollment and finance projections, the readers **suggest** that the University carefully monitor whether the actions taken have the desired return on investment related to enrollment and finances.*

*The readers **suggest** that the University administration be more diligent in providing faculty and staff with relevant information about the financial health of the University, in accordance to their own Bylaws, Article 1, Section 2.2.2.*