

April 20, 2010

Dr. Elizabeth H. Sibolski
President
Middle States Commission on Higher Education
3624 Market Street, 2nd Floor West
Philadelphia, PA 19104

Dear Dr. Sibolski:

I would like to thank you, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), and especially the external review team for its report strongly supporting reaffirmation of UAlbany's accreditation status. As the Commissioners will note from the accompanying Executive Summary, I encouraged our Self-Study Steering Committee, and its nine subcommittees, to look self-critically and constructively at all aspects of UAlbany as they relate to MSCHE accreditation standards. Composed of over 100 faculty, staff, and students, the subcommittees conducted extensive analyses and made evidence-based recommendations that are appropriate for our campus. Their work was further strengthened through a process of campus-wide review and vetting. As a result, I feel especially confident in affirming that our Self-Study is a product "of the campus, for the campus." I cannot understate my appreciation for the tremendous work achieved by our faculty, staff, and students in preparing our Self-Study.

Our Self-Study included 157 recommendations, many of which are currently being considered in the context of our ongoing Strategic Planning process. I am most pleased that the evaluation team specifically endorsed many of our internal recommendations and applauded our continuing efforts, such as our current Strategic Planning process and longstanding commitment to assessment.

We, as a campus, also appreciate that the evaluation team took the time to make additional suggestions across several accreditation standards. Several of the review team's suggestions concern complex issues. As noted below, the University has already begun to engage many of the issues about which the team has developed a variety of suggestions. As we move through our campus Strategic Planning process and other related governance and planning processes, we will give these suggestions careful consideration. It is particularly important to reflect on their potential application within the UAlbany political, administrative, and faculty culture.

We agree fully with the evaluation team's single recommendation that we focus our next Periodic Review Report "on the University's soon-to-come new strategic plan and its implementation outcomes during the next five years." This will be a most useful activity to assist us in closing the loop on our intended future directions and initiatives, and will allow us to measure our success along the way.

I would like to take this opportunity to comment briefly on the review team's more major suggestions for UAlbany, as we are most appreciative of the thought and expertise from which they are derived. Also included below are reflections on the team's assessment of UAlbany's challenges.

The team's suggestion that UAlbany establish a new, distinctive, and perhaps even unique brand was somewhat surprising. In April 2008, we concluded an intensive and comprehensive branding initiative that drew upon the input of thousands of individuals – including students, parents, faculty, staff, alumni, and the community. While our "World Within Reach" branding initiative may not have been a focal point of conversation during the site visit, it is very much a part of our Strategic Planning process. Survey research of our constituent base conducted for our Strategic Planning process confirmed our brand attributes, and UAlbany strengths in the areas of location, diversity, research opportunities, and value. Our brand promise statement and brand attributes complement and help define our draft mission and goals. Further, the University has made a substantial investment of time and constituent resources to develop this new brand. We have incorporated our brand attributes into all of our recruitment and orientation materials, optimized the language into our new website, and are using the "World Within Reach" slogan in a myriad of promotional, programmatic and recruitment materials. While it may be too early to quantify its impact, there are several major evidenced-based indicators that the brand is resonating with students, faculty, staff, alumni and the community-at-large. Quite simply, we believe our current initiative needs more time to bear fruit before abandoning our efforts and undertaking a major new brand initiative.

In the area of *Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal*, I am pleased to note that our Strategic Planning process continues to move along rapidly. To date, the Strategic Planning Committee has drafted a Mission Statement, six major goals, and, in the past few weeks, six Task Forces have developed specific objectives for each of the six major goal areas, along with action plans for each objective. These goals/objectives/action plans include specified timelines and identify specific administrative units and/or governance councils responsible for their attainment. In accordance with MSCHE standards, the UAlbany Strategic Planning process has been designed for maximal participation, input, and communication by the University community. For example, beginning on April 15, 2010, these goals/objectives/action plans are being shared with the University community through a series of Town Hall meetings, as was the initial set of analyses that led to the development of the strategic goals. In addition to the Town Hall meetings, regular email updates are provided to the community at large, and working documents are posted on the University wiki for the entire campus community to review and comment. We are thus confident that we are currently proceeding in the spirit suggested by the evaluation team in its report.

It is the intent of UAlbany leadership to link resource allocation to the Strategic Plan, as suggested by the evaluation team. As the first step in that process, the Budget Advisory Group is being asked to consider the next budget reduction exercise in light of the new Strategic Plan as soon as it is available in May. UAlbany's 2015 Periodic Review Report will document how effective we have been in this regard.

As is the case with most other public research institutions, especially in New York State, we are considerably challenged in the area of *Institutional Resources*. We concur with the review team that expanding the development capacity at UAlbany is an important step in diversifying resources, and will do so – within the constraints of a projected further decline in state resources.

We concur with the review team's assertion that department chairs play a critical role in the *Leadership* of the University. Indeed, over the past several years we have already begun to address this challenge and have been developing a strategy for investment in our chairs. Most recently, this has included several multi-day, university-wide leadership development workshops for those in chair and higher administrative positions. To date, over a third of the 40 chairs on the campus have participated in this program. We also plan to add a chair-specific opportunity to the Career Leadership & University Excellence (CLUE) program, which currently includes a faculty retreat, intensive seminars for faculty, and focused planning groups. Our plan is to continue our work in developing the leadership capacity of this group. Let me also note that several of the reviewers' suggestions, such as chair terms, supplemental stipends, a formal renewal process, and reduced teaching obligations are already in operation.

In the area of *External Governance*, the team offered the suggestion "that consideration be given to including SUNY System relations in the Director's [Director of Governmental Relations] portfolio and that the Governmental Relations staff have responsibility for getting to know well the System's people and regulations and for acting as a contact point and facilitator for campus faculty and staff who need assistance in managing an initial encounter with a System- or State-related process." It is our sense that UAlbany's Director of Governmental Relations already works effectively with SUNY System Administration's governmental relations staff in focusing on state and federal government, as well as broader political issues. We do believe, however, that appropriate avenues of entrée already exist for most other functional/operational matters, as campus personnel in need of System Administration assistance already successfully interact with and have designated counterparts in the System Office. For example, the interim VP for Finance and Business, and many of his senior officers, regularly interact with System Budget and Finance staff. These relationships are further buttressed by functional associations within SUNY, where issues and policies/procedures are regularly discussed, such as the SUNY Registrar's Association (SUNYRA), the SUNY Association of Institutional Research and Planning Officers (AIRPO), the SUNY Business Officers Association (SUBOA), the SUNY Council of Chief Student Affairs Officers (SUNYCCSAO), among others. A number of functional organizations also exist with the Student Affairs area, as well as in other areas. In addition, on matters of academic concern, the chief academic officers regularly communicate with the SUNY Provost and his staff. Arguably, adding these activities to the portfolio of the Director of Governmental Relations would add an unneeded layer of bureaucracy to a smoothly operating communication system between campus and System offices.

Student Admissions and Retention is an area in which UAlbany has historically performed quite well, relative to other public research universities. Here we would like to note that consideration of the demographics in higher education has been a feature of the Strategic Planning process, so we are indeed looking hard at issues around how the New York State population of both traditional and non-traditional students might be changing in future years, along with implications for how UAlbany might capitalize on these changes. We need to fully

consider the broad range of possible implications and ramifications of potential initiatives. Questions about future student populations and the services they need will be considered in the context of our forthcoming Strategic Plan. Similarly, consideration of different modalities of instruction, such as the delivery of online courses, has been and will continue to be discussed in our Strategic Planning process as we determine future priorities.

We were pleased to see that the review team regards UAlbany's *Student Support Services* as "comprehensive and effective." The team's suggestion that academic advising in the major be strengthened is captured in an action plan now being crafted by the Strategic Planning Committee within its Undergraduate Education Taskforce. I would also like to note that we completely agree with the suggestion to implement an online health center appointments system, and, in fact, efforts in this area are already well underway.

With regard to our *Faculty*, we concur that the contributions of our part-time faculty need to be thoughtfully considered, and, further, that the needs of these faculty be identified and addressed. Toward that end, the CLUE program, discussed above, and our Institute for Teaching, Learning, and Academic Leadership (ITLAL) have made initial assessments of the needs and concerns of part-time faculty. In fact, this issue is already on the agenda for the Deans to consider in the coming months. With regard to the team's suggestion to give serious attention to developing and enhancing institutional mechanisms to assist and support its present faculty, and the future professoriate it is now preparing, we celebrate progress on this front as the CLUE group and ITLAL are heavily engaged in advancing this objective already. Indeed, we believe that one of the reasons why ITLAL was mentioned so frequently in the Self-Study is that this unit has been completely transformed over the past three years from its prior focus on instructional technology to a much broader focus on pedagogy and effective and proven strategies to promote student learning and teaching excellence. In addition, while we agree with the review team's point that "The new technologies of online learning are nontrivial to learn and use," we would like to emphasize the great strides we have already made in ensuring that faculty teaching online courses are well-prepared to do so. Indeed, our Information Technology Services Faculty Technology Resources group works closely with ITLAL, and runs an Online Course Development Program that prepares instructors to teach online and assists them in developing courses following standards that ensure quality instruction.

Suggestions from the review team concerning *Related Educational Activities* also merit consideration by the appropriate University committees and administrative offices. We appreciate the suggestion to develop further our online tools for student support, but wish to stress that we believe that much of the success of our developmental programs such as EOP, CSTEP, and IELP can be attributed to their "high-touch" approach (rather than "high-tech"). Thus, while we explore possibilities for adding technology-based components, we do not see such additions as replacing the "people-contact" that serves as a basis for our success with student developmental needs.

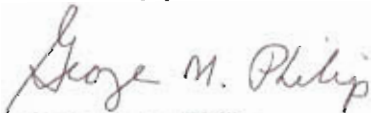
Similarly, in the area of distance learning, and the potential shift toward engaging more non-traditional students, we agree that these are issues to carefully consider, but the answers or strategies to engage them may not be the same as those suggested by the review team. These are issues that UAlbany has engaged, and will continue to engage, but will likely do so most successfully within the context of an agreed-upon campus mission and shared objectives – which are now being finalized in our Strategic Planning process. Resource

issues notwithstanding, it would be premature at this juncture to speculate how we will resolve these and the other suggestions proffered by the review team, but we wholeheartedly agree that all suggestions merit future discussion.

We are most pleased that the review team acknowledged our commitment to and expertise in the *Assessment of Student Learning*. This is perhaps one of the most critical accreditation standards, as it concerns our primary mission to teach and educate the citizens of tomorrow. Our shared commitment to this standard clearly transcends the presidents and provosts who have brought about the demonstrable progress we have made in assessing student learning over the course of the self-study period. As with the review team's other suggestions, I will ask the appropriate administrative units and governance councils to seriously consider the Self-Study recommendations on assessment that the review team endorsed. Similarly, *Institutional Assessment* should be seen as a core activity and integrated within our Strategic Plan. The team's suggestion to afford ample attention to the establishment of formal assessment systems for all administrative units, including post-assessment, closing-the-loop activities, is sensible and should be pursued through the course of implementing our new Strategic Plan.

In closing, I thank the review team for its recommendation and numerous suggestions. As noted above, I fully endorse the recommendation to focus our next Periodic Review Report "on the University's soon-to-come new strategic plan and its implementation outcomes during the next five years." The review team's thoughtful suggestions merit careful consideration, either in our currently "ongoing" Strategic Planning process, or in other decision-making venues, as appropriate. The re-accreditation process has been extremely useful to our University.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "George M. Philip". The ink is dark and the signature is written in a fluid, connected style.

George M. Philip
President