

Report to the
Faculty, Administration, Trustees, Students

of

Fitchburg State University
160 Pearl Street, Fitchburg, MA

by

An Evaluation Team representing the
New England Commission of Higher Education

Prepared after study of the institution's
self-evaluation report and site visit
March 20 – 23, 2022

The members of the team:

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This report represents the views of the evaluation committee as interpreted by the chairperson. Its content is based on the committee's evaluation of the institution with respect to the Commission's criteria for accreditation. It is a confidential document in which all comments are made in good faith. The report is prepared both as an educational service to the institution and to assist the Commission in making a decision about the institution's accreditation status.

**New England Commission of Higher Education Preface
Page to the Team Report**

Name of Institution: Fitchburg State University

Date form completed: 3/21/2022

1. History: Year chartered or authorized: 1894

Year first degrees awarded: 1897

2. Type of control: State City
 Private, not-for-profit
 Proprietary

Religious Group; specify: _____
 Other; specify: _____

3. Degree level:
 Associate Baccalaureate Masters Professional Doctorate

4. Enrollment in Degree Programs: (Use figures from fall semester of most recent year):

	Full-time	Part-time	FTE	Retention	Graduation	# Degrees
Associate	-	-	-	-	-	-
Baccalaureate	2,497	671	2,688	68%	57%	847
Graduate	508	2,010	1,226	81%	85%	901

(a) full-time 1st to 2nd year

(b) 3 or 6 year graduation rate

(c) number of degrees awarded most recent year

5. Student debt:

	Most Recent Year	One Year Prior	Two Years Prior
Three-year Cohort Default Rate	6.4	6.5	6.3
Three-year Loan Repayment Rate	66	66	65

	Associate	Baccalaureate	Graduate
Average % of graduates leaving with debt	-	82%	37%
Average amount of debt for graduates	-	\$26,204	\$20,421

6. Number of current faculty: Full-time: 191 Part-time: 188 FTE: 254

7. Current fund data for most recently completed fiscal year: (Specify year: 2021)
 (Double click in any cell to enter spreadsheet. Enter dollars in millions, e.g., \$1,456,200 = \$1.456)

Revenues		Expenditures	
Tuition	\$43,352	Instruction	\$37,848
Gov't Appropriations	\$56,222	Research	\$118
Gifts/Grants/Endowment	\$16,594	General	\$57,128
Auxiliary Enterprises	\$8,583	Auxiliary Enterprises	\$8,552
Other	\$3,754	Other	\$11,448
Total	\$128,505	Total	\$115,094

8. Number of off-campus locations:
 In-state _____ Other U.S. _____ International _____ Total _____

9. Number of degrees and certificates offered electronically:
 Programs offered entirely on-line: 12 Programs offered 50-99% on-line: 3

10. Is instruction offered through a contractual relationship?
 No Yes Specify program(s): Vocational Technical Teacher Approval Program; MEd: Curriculum and Teaching, Occupational Education, Educational Leadership and Management; CAGS: Educational Leadership and Management, Interdisciplinary Studies

Introduction

The Evaluation Team visit at Fitchburg State University (FSU) began on Sunday, March 20 with a one-hour campus tour led by three FSU Student Ambassadors (one graduate student and two undergraduate students) followed by a welcome dinner on FSU's campus where there were 29 FSU administrators, staff and faculty members in attendance as well as the Chair and Vice Chair of the Board of Trustees.

Throughout the Evaluation Team's visit, all members of Fitchburg State University's (FSU) campus community were candid in their comments and offered full assistance to the team. All of the individuals with whom the team met were well aware of the self-study report and the purpose of the team's visit. Extensive meetings were conducted on a one-on-one basis and with small groups with representatives and leaders from all areas of the university including faculty, students, trustees, and staff. A meeting was held for trustees only, with 10 trustees in attendance including the Chair of the Board. The team members met with 10 members of the of the president's executive cabinet, members of the faculty including all 16 department chairs and the chair of the Faculty Council, 10 faculty and administrators from online learning and continuing education, 26 students including the president and vice president of the Student Government Association and graduate students, and key members of the Self-Study Steering Committee, the Curriculum Committee, and the editors/authors of the strategic plan. Also, in open meetings, the team met with 14 faculty members, 11 students, and 62 staff members. Prior to our visit, two team members met virtually with one of the institution's off-campus instructional locations, Collaborative for Educational Services (CES).

The Evaluation Team found the self-study report and the other materials provided, such as the strategic plan, viewbook, various handbooks, the campus master plan, and audited financial statements, and an assortment of survey data to be sufficiently comprehensive and an accurate description of the state of the University. The team appreciates the preparation of the self-study to include electronic links to the most important exhibits. A review of these documents before and during the team's visit to FSU, the chair's preliminary visit the semester before the on-site evaluation (October 6, 2021), and the team's visit to campus together have provided the basis for the information and evaluative judgments contained in the sections of this report which address the *Standards for Accreditation* of the New England Commission of Higher Education.

1. *Mission and Purpose*

The Fitchburg State University (FSU) was chartered in 1894 to provide residents of the state with quality and affordable degrees while supporting the Massachusetts economy. The mission was updated by the Board of Trustees in fall of 2010 to reflect university status and is also in alignment with the MA Board of Higher Education Mission Statement and the MA Department of Higher Education’s mission for the State Universities. It reads: *“Fitchburg State University is committed to excellence in teaching and learning and blends liberal arts and sciences and professional programs within a small college environment. Our comprehensive public university prepares students to lead, serve and succeed by fostering lifelong learning and civic and global responsibility. A Fitchburg State education extends beyond our classrooms to include residential, professional, and co-curricular opportunities. As a community resource, we provide leadership and support for the economic, environmental, social and cultural needs of North Central Massachusetts and the Commonwealth.”*

It is our observation that the institution has successfully embedded its distinctive mission in the broader campus ethos as the vast majority of students, faculty and staff have indicated they are familiar with it. In fact, the 2021 NECHE Accreditation Survey indicated that 99 percent of staff and administrators, 96 percent of faculty and 81 percent of students were aware of the mission of the university. Additionally, there is visible marketing collateral, signage and postings throughout campus further contributing to the overall transparency of the mission.

The mission also supports an institutional vision that emphasizes: 1) Excellence in Teaching and Learning; 2) Transforming lives through education (reflected in the institutional learning priorities, General Education program and academic offerings) and, 3) public service (demonstrated through an assortment of community partnerships including the Reimagined North of Main Project and other projects through the Douglas and Isabelle Crocker Center for Civic Engagement). The university has made good progress through strategic planning to execute this vision.

FSU has also established five (5) core values including: Accessibility, Affordability, Community, Enrichment and Excellence. Based on the self-study, FSU can enhance the definitions associated with these core values as well as specific instances where the university specifically affirms or reinforces these core values. Furthermore, the university has powerfully affirmed and demonstrated the value of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). The review uncovered numerous examples of in-depth conversation about this important work now and in the future. While the university is intentionally supporting DEI discourse across the campus it is not currently highlighted in the mission, vision or core values .

While the current mission statement is adequate for the functioning of the university, FSU should establish a regular review of the mission statement in alignment with strategic planning. It is anticipated the university’s mission will be reviewed no later than May 2024, in advance of the next Strategic Plan. The timing is ideal to clarify the balance and sustainability of undergraduate, graduate and online offerings.

2. *Planning and Evaluation*

Emphasis from the NEASC response to FSU’s 2015 interim report: progress on strategic plan. In response to the Fitchburg State University’s 2017 interim report, NECHE requested that this comprehensive evaluation give emphasis to the institution’s “continued success in implementing and assessing its strategic plan and assuring the effective integration of strategic planning, operational planning, and budgeting.”

The 2015-2020 Strategic Plan was focused on academics and resulted in 300 completed action items related to the plan with 100% of initiatives addressed. FSU began the process for developing its 2020-2025 strategic plan on September 3, 2019, with a campus-wide development day during which the Commissioner of the Department of Higher Education (DHE) highlighted the importance of the DHE’s equity agenda. The planning process followed the guiding principles of inclusivity, transparency, respect, broad perspective, and consensus decision making. The process was led by a steering committee with the assistance of an external consultant and supported by five theme-oriented committees.

The plan came together as the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. Approval of the plan by the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education was delayed until December of 2020 as state agencies grappled with the pandemic. The plan focused on six goals connected to the mission, vision, and core values : 1) forge innovative paths to knowledge acquisition, career readiness, social mobility and lifelong learning; 2) become a model student-ready university and narrow the achievement gap; 3) be an engine of social, economic, civic; and 4) establish inclusive excellence, innovation, and environmental stewardship as signature strengths; 5) assert our distinctive value proposition and institutional learning outcomes boldly and widely, and; 6) steward physical and financial resources responsibly and navigate a path to long-term organizational sustainability.

Under the six goals, the 2020-2025 Strategic Plan has a total of 39 strategies (six or seven per goal) and 53 outcomes (between 6 and 12 per goal). The campus identified over 100 key performance indicator metrics each with benchmark data and a target that track across the six goals/strategies/outcomes, the equity agenda, and the DHE Performance Measurement Reporting System. The Assistant Vice President of Institutional Research and Planning (OIRP) is collaborating with the Vice President of Student Affairs, and the Chief Information Officer to create a tool that will allow for transparent tracking and assessment of the Strategic Plan. The tool will assign a responsible party for each metric and map the metrics to the NECHE projections. A pilot of the tool is scheduled to be in place for late spring and roll out to the campus next year.

The campus has worked to ensure broad awareness of the Strategic Plan, 82 percent of the faculty and staff reported being aware of the plan, its role in driving decision making, and the connection to resource allocation. Student awareness of the plan increased by 8 percent over the 2015-2020 plan and the administration has shared a student-designed infographic to further increase awareness.

The university employs an annual report process to track progress on the strategic plan. Each department submits a report including information regarding the connection of department initiatives to specific goals, strategies, and outcomes of the Strategic Plan. These are compiled at the division level and each Vice President submits a report to the President in June. The president then creates an annual report that is shared with the FSU Board of Trustees in September.

FSU's annual budget planning process includes prioritization based on the Strategic Plan. Funding requests beyond normal operating base budgets are submitted on a Petition for Strategic Funding Request Form. The form asks for detailed information explicating the connection of the request to the Strategic Plan and the expected impact on metrics.

Traditionally, division Strategic Plans are developed the year following the campus-wide plan adoption. However, responding to COVID-19 and planning for the NECHE 2022 Self-Study delayed these plans. The development of divisional Strategic Planning began in early 2021. Institutional Advancement completed a plan for 2022-2027 in spring of 2021. Academic Affairs is developing a long-term Academic Plan as is the division of Student Affairs. Technology and Finance, and Administration will create plans that support the goals outlined by Academic Affairs and Student Affairs.

As the NECHE Self-Study process concludes it may be prudent to reassess the Strategic Plan and timeline to ensure the goals are relevant and the strategies/outcomes are focused and achievable. Delays in implementing the Strategic Plan and developing other plans due to COVID and the NECHE Self-Study; the upcoming implementation of an assessment tool; integrating the numerous goals/strategies/outcomes with the NECHE projections; and the rapidly changing landscape of higher education present an opportunity to engage with the campus and ensure the Strategic Plan is inspiring and aspirational while providing a guide for decision-making and a structure to evaluate the university's performance.

Planning:

FSU has a history of developing and implementing successful strategic plans. These plans were closely tied to the Academic plan. Departments and divisions are highly compliant with an annual reporting process that includes narrative regarding initiative connection to the Strategic Plan along with an action plan for the upcoming year. During academic years 2020 and 2021 departments were also asked to report and reflect on pandemic related impacts and lesson learned.

Long-term planning at the division level, as evidenced by planning documents, is inconsistent. The lack of plans in areas such as finance, makes it difficult for the campus community to be informed of the longer-term strategic goals. The lack

of a finance long-term plan had led to confusion regarding the budget process as well as spending decisions. The 2020-2025 Strategic Plan provides an opportunity for all divisions to clarify priorities and to inform resource allocation.

Academic departments participate in a seven-year program review process reviewed by the Provost. The review process includes annual assessment reports based on the NECHE E Series template, and a self-study process with external evaluators, culminating in a five-year action plan. Academic programs with external accreditation are reviewed on a regular basis by their professional associations.

An Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management was hired in 2021 and reports directly to the President. This new division has brought together Admissions, Marketing and Integrated Communications, and Financial Aid. This formal structure has pulled all the pieces of the enrollment pipeline into coherence to ensure that brand messaging is consistent.

Evaluation:

As mentioned earlier, the 2015-2020 Strategic Plan resulted in over 300 action items, including the creation of Institutional Learning Priorities, the First-Year Experience Seminar, new 4 plus 1 programs, and the Center for Faculty Scholarship; a revision to the General Education Program; the expansion of the Peer Mentoring program; and the implementation of the Navigate Advising Platform.

The DHE evaluates the university annually utilizing the Performance Measurement Reporting System, consisting of key performance indicators and the Equity Agenda established for the state universities. Data reported include retention and graduation rates, credit accumulation, gateway course success rates, and undergraduate enrollment.

OIRP provides these data points and is responsible for developing, launching, and analyzing campus specific surveys as well as FSU's participation in national surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement. EAB Navigate, Academic Performance Solutions and Edify are employed to facilitate student support services and institutional effectiveness. Current graduates are surveyed as part of the commencement process and alumni follow-up surveys occur at one, three-, and five-years post-graduation.

The DHE contracted the EY Parthenon Group in Fiscal Year 21 to conduct a stress test for the state university system. FSU's financial statements are audited annually by an external accounting firm. Ten years of clean financial audits along with the EY Parthenon stress test indicate that the university is on firm financial footing.

The Provost uses the annual reporting process to assess unit effectiveness, demonstrate progress toward the institutional goals, set priorities and allocate resources. Along with the assessment metrics previously mentioned, the Vice President for Student Affairs utilizes the annual report process to tell the story of the division impact on the student experience. The Vice President of Institutional Advancement led the engagement of the UMASS Donahue Institute to explore the economic impact of the downtown Theatre Renovation project and will use the findings to guide fundraising efforts.

FSU has embraced a culture of transparent assessment and continuous improvement. Information is shared frequently and broadly on specific topics such as enrollment, graduation, demographic, financial, and campus climate. The campus could benefit from a review of the number of evaluation tools currently in use to determine if there are possible synergies and efficiencies that can be achieved in the data collection process. Simplifying the data collection may increase survey response rates and provide greater insights into the effectiveness of programs and initiatives, leading to a more successful implementation of the Strategic Plan.

3. Organization and Governance

Fitchburg State University is part of a 29-institution system that is governed by a state appointed 13-member Board of Higher Education (BHE) and a Commissioner of Higher Education. The system is divided into three segments: 15 community universities, nine state universities (including FSU), and five universities. FSU is also overseen by its own 11-member Board of Trustees (BOT). Nine members are appointed by the governor to serve five-year terms, one member is elected by the alumni association for a five-year term, and a student trustee is elected each year by the student body. The authority and responsibilities of the Commissioner, BHE, and BOT are clearly detailed in state statute (M.G.L. Chapter 15A), while the authority and officer duties of the BOT are clearly outlined in the bylaws, which can be

found on the University's website. The BHE is responsible for setting tuition and approving academic programs and admission standards, mission statements, strategic plans, presidential appointments, and annual budgets and spending plans, while the BOT oversees the local governance of FSU by establishing all University fees; making all personnel decisions regarding appointments, tenure, promotion, and dismissal; and overseeing the budget process, annual self-assessments, and five-year plans. The team found strong evidence that the relationship between the BHE, the BOT, and FSU is understood by all.

The composition of the BOT is also governed by state statute, with requirements to ensure representation of the public and avoid conflicts of interest. Six of the ten non-student Trustees are FSU alumni, and one is a former faculty member and administrator. The composition and statutory authority of the BOT ensures its ability to act independently and in the best interest of the University. The BOT's by-laws clearly outline the powers and duties of the Board's officers and Executive Committee and stipulate a schedule for meetings. Board meeting dates and locations are published on the University's website in advance and are open to the public. The bylaws also establish five standing committees: Academic Affairs, Student Life, Administration and Finance, Personnel, and the Executive Committee. Agendas and minutes for all BOT and standing committee meetings are available on the University website, but only materials from full Board and Finance and Administration committee agendas and minutes are posted there for the last five years. The other committees do not meet regularly, as their business is typically handled by the full Board. Trustees report completing a self-assessment twice each year and that new members receive orientation materials about the University and participate in a formal orientation through the BHE. Other than the self-assessments completed by Trustees, there is no process in place to review the effectiveness of the BOT but the self-study and meeting with the Trustees indicated that an external review will be conducted by spring 2023.

The BOT has a collegial working relationship with the administration, faculty, and students at FSU. A meeting with seven of the Trustees indicated that they have a strong understanding of the University's mission and a deep commitment to serving FSU's students. Further, conversations with Trustees and senior leadership indicated that Board members take their fiduciary responsibility seriously. The BOT also reviews the performance of the President annually and shares the review with the BHE, which is the entity responsible for hiring chief executive officers. The interview with the Trustees indicated that they understand their role of ensuring the integrity and quality of FSU but that they also delegate appropriate authority to the President and the campus administrators.

Internal Governance: The senior staff at FSU work well together. Collaboration is aided by weekly meetings of the Executive Cabinet, consisting of the provost, VP for Finance and Administration, VP for Institutional Advancement, VP for Student Affairs, Associate Provost, Associate VP for Finance and Administration, Chief Information Officer, the Assistant VP for Institutional Research and Planning, Associate VP for Human Resources, and Associate VP for Enrollment Management. The President also holds weekly meetings with the vice presidents as a group and individually. The President communicates with members of the campus community through his opening address at the beginning of each year, open forums two or three times each year, and open office hours one day each week. Members of the Executive Cabinet also meet regularly with their staff.

Based on the organizational charts, the provost reports directly to the President, and, in concert with the faculty and the four deans, is responsible for the quality of the academic programs. The creation of the academic deans structure in 2014 was a significant improvement, giving department chairs more frequent access to an administrator other than the provost. This structure allows the deans to lead strategic discussions about innovative academic programs and greater budget alignment. The faculty exercise their responsibility for the content, quality, and effectiveness of the curriculum through the All University Committee (AUC) and curriculum committees and assessment committees or assessment liaisons in each academic department. Governance of curricular matters is outlined in the collective bargaining agreement between the BHE and the Massachusetts State University Association (MSCA). The AUC consists of eight elected faculty or librarian members, three administrators appointed by the President, and three students selected by the Student Government Association (SGA). Changes in curriculum or academic policies typically originate from the departments and are referred to one of three AUC standing committees: Curriculum, Academic Policies, and Student Affairs, each of which includes representatives from the faculty/librarians, administration, and students. Curricular or policy changes that move from a committee and are approved by the AUC are sent to the President who is the final authority on each proposal. Interviews with faculty indicated that they would like greater transparency regarding the budget process and resource allocation, particularly when difficult budget decisions need to be made. However, the provost and deans reported that department chairs did participate in a process to cut 3 percent of the Academic Affairs budget in fall 2021.

Programs offered through contractual partnerships are overseen by the Extended Campus Office which is in the School of Graduate, Online, and Continuing Education (SGOCE). These programs are governed by a Letter of Agreement (LOA) which is reviewed and renewed annually. The LOA articulates how programs and courses will be delivered, including procedures for syllabus review, instructor credentials, and course evaluations. Interviews with the Dean of SGOCE and participating faculty indicated that the Associate Dean of SGOCE, department chairs, and academic deans meet with partners multiple times each year to ensure the quality of the programs offered through the Extended Campus Office. While it is clear that courses offered through the SGOCE are regularly vetted by the appropriate academic departments at FSU, assessment of student learning outcomes in those programs is uneven.

Students are active participants in governance at FSU in a variety of ways, largely because their input is intentionally solicited by the AUC, administration, and the BOT. The SGA Senate consists of 32 seats elected by the student body with four seats reserved for first year students. Students serve on the AUC and its committees, typically as vice chair of the committee, where they occasionally serve in place of the chair. The student Trustee reported, and the BOT minutes reflect, that he is given time to address the Board in each meeting, sharing the concerns and ideas of the student body. Students serving on AUC and University committees also reported that their input was actively sought by other committee members, making service on those committees meaningful. Communication between students and the administration is enhanced by weekly meetings between the SGA President and the Dean of Students, regular meetings with the Vice President of Student Affairs, and meetings with the President twice each semester.

4. *The Academic Program*

In Fall 2021, Fitchburg State University enrolled 6,751 students. There were 2,504 full-time undergraduates, 852 part-time undergraduates, 520 full-time graduate students, and 2,875 part-time graduate students. FSU does not offer any PhD programs. There are 13 programs that are 100% online with 2,920 students enrolled in 2021. There are 4 programs that are partially online (50-99%) with 480 students enrolled in 2021. The team learned, through its on-site visit, that the number of online programs has increased slightly since these numbers were produced, as a result of COVID-19, and the desire of some faculty to keep their courses online. Approximately 3% of students receive instruction through FSU's other instructional locations through contractual arrangements.

The structure of FSU's programs fit into one of four categories as determined from their website and self-study narrative.

1. The Undergraduate Day Program reflects a more traditional, in-person university experience.
2. The Undergraduate Evening Program, open to degree-seeking and non-degree seeking students, is overseen by the School of Graduate, Online and Continuing Education (SGOCE). These undergraduate courses and degrees are offered on campus, off campus, and online. Courses offered through the SGOCE are taught by FSU adjunct faculty.
3. SGOCE also offers graduate-level courses, certificates, and degrees. Several programs are online.
4. Other FSU graduate degrees and certificates (primarily in Education) are offered through FSU's Extended Campus contractual relationships. Some are 100% online, and some are hybrid with students attending offsite locations.

FSU's academic programs appear to be in line with its mission and purpose which are reflected publicly throughout its website and online catalog. Published four-year plans, degree descriptions, and an on-site review of accelerated courses confirm that each undergraduate and graduate program requires at least one year to complete and are in recognized fields of study. Learning outcomes are published in department pages of the FSU website.

The coherency and consistency of programs, leading to degrees or other awards, is mostly clear as evidenced throughout FSU's website and through an on-site comparison/review of course syllabi of both full-term and accelerated programs, offered via different modalities, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. There appears to be appropriate breadth, depth, and continuity among and within most programs. However, some faculty in the undergraduate day program questioned the integrity of FSU's 7-week accelerated programs. Policies and procedures for admission to the university and programs are extremely clear and specific. FSU's Institutional Research data sets, and Standard 8 data first forms illustrate respectable rates for retention and graduation rates. The university is encouraged, however, to continue working on the distinction between the BA and BS degree. As noted by the team and reflected in the self-study, the only

difference between these two degrees is the language requirement for the BA and that this requirement may ‘create a disincentive for students to pursue the BA.

Online Courses and Programs

FSU offers robust options for online learning, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Several degrees may be earned via hybrid format (online + campus), while many more are 100% online. Some of these degree programs have specialty accreditation or involve state licensure. FSU also offers non-externally accredited, online degrees and options that include certificates of advanced graduate study, professional development courses, specialty courses in cooperation with Extended Campus partners, and occasional offerings to compliment a majority on-ground undergraduate degree.

Throughout its review of the integrity of undergraduate and graduate programs (curriculum, published learning outcomes, and requirements), the team has noted a consistency in expectations and descriptions between both online and on-ground offerings. Prior to its on-site visit, team members conducted a virtual visit with an Extended Campus partner—Collaborative for Educational Services (CES). CES offers graduate classes both online and in hybrid format for FSU. From this visit and subsequent on-site visit, the team can verify that security measures for online classes are in place to ensure that the same student who enrolls in Learning Management Systems is the same student who completes the course and receives credit. Students confirmed that they are provided ample access to FSU resources and services including financial aid, academic advising, course registration, career and placement counseling, and library.

For non-externally accredited online degrees, programs, and offerings, the team has not seen evidence of evaluative measures for learning outcomes, overall student success, or program effectiveness that incorporates an external . The team has concluded that non-externally accredited online degrees, courses/programs and accelerated courses/programs, whether taught by FSU or Extended Partners, are not being measured for comparability to campus-based programs or against a main component of Standard 4—Institutions develop ‘the systematic means to understand how and what students are learning and to use the evidence obtained to improve the academic program.’

Extended Campuses

Extended campus programs involve contractual arrangements in which partners deliver credit-bearing courses and programs. Programs of study are primarily in Education, at the graduate level. Page 5 of the self-study lists 7 contractors, with their location, and offered programs. The self-study narrative, however, in several places, refers to 32 contractual partners. While on-site, the team was able to verify yet a different number of 37 contractual partners. The provost and members of SGOCE explained that this number will continue to change as the institution works to acquire more partners. A thorough review of the contract indicates the institution demonstrates its clear and ongoing authority and administrative oversight over these partner programs. FSU’s oversight, to which partners must agree includes: Operating Policies and Procedures, Preparation and Delivery of Education Courses and Programs, Tuition Policies, Fair Practices, and more.

Some external partners provide programs with agency teacher licensure, and those programs are reviewed by the state every seven years. With others, the team has not seen evidence of the evaluation of Extended Campus program learning outcomes that lead to non-externally accredited degrees, certificates of advanced graduate study, or for professional development courses. It is recommended that the institution develop assessment measures for these areas, which involve external perspectives, and that are used for improvement.

Assuring Academic Quality

The institution appears to provide sufficient resources to sustain its programs and FSU has implemented a course development process that is quite comprehensive. Program and course creation, modification, deletion, core curriculum, etc. involve academic departments, various levels of curriculum committees and, when appropriate, the Graduate Council. Policies for committees and committee membership is articulated in the MSCA contract. The All-University Committee and the Graduate Council actions must be approved by the president. New programs of study must also be approved by the Board of Trustees and the Board of Higher Education.

Change to program requirements, including the elimination of programs, appears to be applied consistently and fairly. Students complete degree requirements according to year of entry, so modifications to curricula do not interfere with degree completion. Teach-out plans, as described in the self-study, are in line with the NECHE Policy on teach-out plans and teach-out agreements.

Academic Affairs, led by a provost and vice president, is charged with leading student learning and faculty development. The Director of Assessment is responsible for strengthening university assessment culture. Results of program review provide a rationale for program related budget requests. Department chairs annually submit recommendations for full-time faculty positions.

For the most part, a review of the institution's e-series and Annual Reports indicates a commitment to evaluating and improving program-specific requirements for concentrations and majors. It appears that most programs were included in the e-series section. Those programs that have specialized accreditation were included in e-series, part B. Externally accredited programs follow the accreditation cycle and process of their accrediting agencies. Undergraduate programs with external accreditation currently include Human Services, Nursing, Business Administration, Computer Information Systems, Computer Science, and Education and Business programs at the graduate level. The review of e-series has not added clarity to the assessment activities of those programs, offered through Extended Campuses that are non-externally accredited or that lead to graduate certificates or for professional development courses.

Undergraduate Degree Programs

Through its review of the online catalog, available four-year plans, and student support/academic website areas, the undergraduate programs at FSU appear to have a coherent design that lead students from broad areas to in-depth mastery. Requirements for the program and major are usually stated clearly, with illustrations in the four-year plans for general education requirements and electives.

Prerequisites are amply noted in the Course Descriptions section of the catalog. Students must maintain a minimum GPA of 2.0 in their major and overall, in order to complete their undergraduate degree. Some programs require a higher GPA for continuation in the program, for internship work, and for graduation. Degree requirements are integrated into the major. Majors generally appear to require a culminating and synthesizing experience in terms of a capstone, internship, or similar advanced-level experience. The course numbering system is generally clear, yet the team encourages FSU to continue developing one particular area as identified in the self-study: *"The course numbering system is not uniform across programs. While higher numbers (i.e., 4000) can relate to more advanced courses in given majors, they do not always do so, which can cause confusion for students that may impact course enrollment."*

The division of Academic Affairs is currently developing a long-term academic plan that will consider new/modified academic offerings, interdisciplinary collaborations, scholarship, workforce development, and more. The team reviewed the current version of the plan, dated March 2022, and is encouraged by the direction and scope of the plan.

General Education

The new General Education program at FSU (formerly Liberal Arts and Sciences Program) underwent a significant revision and was implemented in Fall 2021. The new gen ed is comprised of 51 required credits and can broadly be placed in three categories, 1) Foundational, 2) Breadth of Learning, and 3) Integrative. Both undergraduate and graduate students are expected to demonstrate collegiate-level skills in the English language. International students are required to complete the TOEFL exam or other approved language proficiency exam. The new gen ed is a distribution model where students must demonstrate proficiency in areas such as Information Literacy, Quantitative Reasoning, Speaking and Listening, Writing, Critical and Creative Thinking, Diverse Perspectives, and Scientific Inquiry and Analysis. Although the new gen ed program appears to be coherent and substantive, the team is unable to determine the academic quality and integrity of the new program based on program review or data. In the e-series for Educational Effectiveness, the institution states: *"We are currently in process of creating assessment tools for all of the learning outcomes in the new General Education Program. Over the next five years, tools will be created for all aspects of the program."*

Graduate Degree Programs

FSU has robust offerings for graduate online/hybrid programs as evidenced in the data first forms. SGOCE offers 20 master's degrees, 11 graduate certificates, and two certificates of advance graduate studies. Some of FSU's graduate programs in Education are in cooperation with Extended Campus partners through contractual arrangements. 59% of all graduate enrollments in SGOCE are in 3 accelerated programs—seven-week online and on-ground courses. These programs are the MBA, the M.Ed. in Curriculum and Teaching, and the M.Ed. in Educational Leadership and Management. In addition, the university also has six other seven-week accelerated hybrid or online graduate program options.

Most FSU graduate degrees are suitably structured to give students mastery of their program area, beyond the undergraduate level. The learning outcomes and requirements are generally clear in relevant publications and reflect expectations, inherent in advanced study. General graduate admission requirements are published and are within the norms of many universities. Special admission requirements (such as RN license for the nursing program or MTEL scores for licensure-based Education) are also included on the graduate admission web pages.

Faculty assignments for graduate courses are regulated by the Massachusetts State University Association (MSCA) Division of Graduate and Continuing Education (DGCE) contract. The team has reviewed the contract and found that the lowest rank for eligibility to teach graduate courses is Visiting Instructor—requiring a master's degree and two years of appropriate professional experience. The highest rank is Visiting Professor—requiring a terminal degree and 8 years of professional experience and 6 years of university or university teaching. The team is unable to determine the requirement for research or contributions to the field which is in line with the self-study statement: *“Adjunct faculty teaching for SGOCE do not have a contractual obligation to develop professionally; however, when faculty are hired careful attention is given not only to qualifications and degrees, but to experiences, research, and ability to stay current in the field.”*

Many of FSU's graduate programs do not appear to require original research. The majority do, however, require courses in relevant research methodology. Some have options for a thesis, but many more require the demonstration of advanced professional practice. The team is satisfied with the research approaches of most graduate programs as they relate to the programs specific purpose. The team acknowledges FSU's reflection and intention to develop research as stated in the self-study: *“While all graduate programs encourage contributions to scholarly research and several programs offer a thesis option for a student's capstone experience, there are limited opportunities for university-sponsored research for graduate students beyond their program requirements.”*

Overall, data and reports for the continued evaluation and improvement of graduate programs was inconsistent in the self-study and inconclusive from the site visit. In particular, the team has not seen evidence of the evaluation of Extended Campus non-externally accredited program learning outcomes or for courses that lead to graduate certificates or for professional development. Exceptions are the accredited, accelerated, online MBA program and programs with licensing examinations (Nursing and Education). Data from these program exams appears to be reviewed and used to inform curricular and program revisions. Although supporting data is not clear, this process appears to be followed as discussed during several on-site interviews.

Transfer Credit

FSU has published on its website clear transfer policies and procedures for both graduate and undergraduate degrees, reflecting appropriate levels of academic quality. On its undergraduate Transfer website, there are a host of equivalency documents from several nearby Community Universities. The website also links to the MassTransfer Equivalency Database for equivalent courses among state universities and UMass campuses. An abbreviated version of transfer policies and procedures also appears in the FSU catalog. 90 credits may be transferred from regionally accredited four-year institutions and 75 credits from regionally accredited two-year schools. In order to reduce barriers for students pursuing their Bachelor's in Nursing, the university has made an exception to allow RN to BSN students to transfer 88 credits from two- year institutions.

All Students must receive 1.7 or above on transferrable credits and must complete at least 50% of the coursework in their major at FSU, as well as one-quarter of their overall credits. Transfer credit is not accepted for pre-collegiate-level or remedial work designed to prepare students for collegiate study. The team has noted that the policies above appear to allow for proper intermediate and advanced coursework at FSU.

Graduate transfer credit is published on the graduate pages of the online catalog. Here, students will also find the institutions policies on 4+1 programs. Articulation agreements, and a list of participating institutions, are clearly published in the Admissions & Aid pages of the FSU website. A maximum of 6 semester hours in transfer credits is allowed, with a grade of B or better. Pass/Fail grades are not transferrable. The team has noted that the policy appears to preserve the integrity of the graduate degrees awarded.

Integrity in the Award of Academic Credit

Degrees are named appropriately based on the level of the courses and number of credit hours required. A minimum of 120 credit hours, including 51 credits in general education, are required at the baccalaureate level and masters degrees require a minimum of 30 credits, though many of the masters programs require more than 30 credits to complete. Undergraduate students must complete at least 30 credits and no less than 50% of their major requirements at FSU. Graduate students must complete a minimum of 24 credits at FSU and can transfer a maximum of six credits into their program. Course descriptions are available on the academic department websites and in the online catalog and four-year plans of study are used to help undergraduates complete their degrees in four years. FSU also uses DegreeWorks software that allows individual students to see which requirements have been completed and which are still needed. Interviews with undergraduate students indicated that they experienced difficulty getting the courses they needed, particularly upper-level courses in their major, which could hinder their ability to graduate on time. Graduate courses are offered with sufficient frequency and in modalities that allow working adults to complete their degrees in the time advertised.

Authority for and oversight of courses are provided by academic departments, department chairs, deans, and the Provost. Each academic department has a curriculum committee that approves proposals for new courses and programs, and changes to existing courses. Proposals are submitted to the AUC for review by its Curriculum Committee, approval by the AUC and ultimately the President. Courses offered through contractual partnerships are overseen by the School of Graduate, Online, and Continuing Education and the appropriate academic department. The number of off campus and online programs have grown significantly in the last five years, and FSU acknowledges that student support in these programs needs to be expanded, as does assessment of student learning outcomes. Evaluation of student learning in courses occurs via many criteria such as exams, papers, presentations, and labs. Learning outcomes assessment data by major is not yet available, and assessment of learning in General Education is expected to begin in 2023.

Credit awards and course content are reviewed and approved through the governance process. A review of syllabi indicates an appropriate number of contact hours, content areas, and academic content such as number and rigor of readings and assignments and is in compliance with the NECHE definition of a credit hour. The policy is posted on the website under "Policy on Credits and Degrees." The number of hours of contact time is appropriate. For all courses, faculty give assignments requiring students to spend at least 2 hours on coursework outside of class for each hour in class. For online courses, interviews with faculty, administrators, and students indicate that student work hours and faculty contact hours are held to the same standards as on ground courses and a review of a sample of online syllabi confirmed this. Credit for prior learning is available to undergraduates for a maximum of 30 credits and is overseen by the appropriate academic department. Procedures for applying for "Prior Learning Assessment" are available on the website.

Requirements for admissions, retention, and graduation are published on the University website and follow appropriate criteria. Interviews with deans and faculty indicate that the admission standards are uniform across all modalities in each program. Students are held to an Academic Integrity Policy which is available on the website, included in syllabi, and must take an online tutorial as part of their First Year Experience course.

FSU uses a variety of means to ensure the student registered for the course is the same who participates and completes the course. First, all online courses use a learning management system that requires each student to log-in with a unique username and password. Further, several programs use a blended approach, where the class meets in person several times per semester.

5. Students

Student Enrollment

Like most regional public universities in their peer group, FSU has experienced enrollment challenges in the last decade. As reported in the self-study, undergraduate enrollment has declined 21.6% since 2011. The decrease has been concentrated in their full-time undergraduate population. In addition to the normal demographic trends within this population, the pandemic has accelerated the decline in the last two years. Prior to the pandemic, enrollment was down just slightly from 2011 at 5.2%. While acknowledging that the overall enrollment decline is concerning, FSU has plans in place in the coming year to further develop their strategic enrollment and marketing plan guided by their enrollment management leadership team to strengthen their numbers and build for the future.

FSU serves a very diverse student population. Populations of historically underserved students have grown since 2011 from 14% then to nearly 32% in the fall of 2021. The efforts being made by the university to embrace, support and nurture a growing population of students from diverse backgrounds is clear from the self-study and through interactions with the campus community. The strategic plan has a number of initiatives in play that should result in continued positive enrollment trends within these populations. The campus community is a true reflection of the larger region that it serves.

FSU serves local high school students through dual enrollment programs, traditional undergraduate “day” students; some of whom live on campus and some who live in their homes and commute to campus, and students served by the School of Graduate Online and Continuing Education (SGOCE). The institution is taking the success of all their students very seriously and has created this new division of the university to focus on the student experience in these “non-traditional” learning modalities. While staff readily admit that the past has been focused on traditional day student services, it is widely known that the university needs to monitor the effectiveness services provided to the growing number of non-traditional and online students.

Graduate student enrollment has grown substantially since 2011 by nearly 900 students or 36%. Most face to face teaching occurs on the main campus, but there are a few remote locations around the state where learning occurs. It should be noted here that the self-study speaks to some unknowns of how graduate students in particular are utilizing their current support services and further work needs to be done to assess if certain services are effective with these populations of students. With a graduation rate of 85-89% in this population, there is evidence of successful outcomes. Anecdotally it was shared that many online graduate students will attend commencement exercises each year because of the close relationships that are developed with FSU faculty through their program. The current strategic plan anticipates growth to continue in both the online and graduate student division in the near future.

The university’s mission is historically rooted in serving the traditional undergraduate day student. Further work is underway to assess the alignment of the mission with the SGOCE. Quoting from the self-study, “FSU is committed to providing a high-quality educational experience that is also inclusive, integrated and equitable. Our vision is founded on the principles of social mobility and economic prosperity for all.”

Admissions

The activities of the admissions office are in line with best practice and prospective students can easily find whatever information they may be looking for on the website or by contacting an admissions staff member. Given that most of the enrolled students come from the region, (92% Massachusetts residents) the admissions effort has been responsive to needs of the local community. In 2020, the position of Associate Director of Multicultural Outreach and Recruitment was created to focus on outreach to key community stakeholders and influencers to form partnerships that can be mutually beneficial to the community and university by creating pathways to higher education.

Admission standards are transparent and set by the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education (DHE). FSU follows these as minimum guidelines. The nursing program does have different admission standards due to the rigor of the curriculum. In the past there were additional programs with more stringent admission requirements, but they have since been brought in alignment with others. Students who do not meet minimum admission standards may be offered a seat in the Summer Bridge Program where successful completion will then equate to the standards set by (DHE). Recently an

online version of the Summer Bridge Program was launched to serve students who cannot be present for an on-campus experience in the summer. Admissions communicates regularly about the success rates of the various student populations served to be sure that feedback is incorporated into future recruitment initiatives to allow for the best chances of student success. Balancing access and success is a high priority.

Student Support Services

There are several practices in place to make sure that students are advised into appropriate coursework. Placement tests are administered to students with below a 2.7/4.0 and/or who are entering programs with rigorous math and writing components to assess skills in these areas. Students for whom English is a second language have the opportunity take language placement exams remotely prior to arrival. The administration of the University Student Inventory (CSI) to first-year students prior to enrollment and the Mid-Year Student Assessment (MYSA) to the same population of students demonstrates the university's commitment to student success. The survey data is analyzed and integrated with the campus-wide retention alert system Navigate. First-Year Experience faculty advisors have access to the risk level data for their students. Any student, new or returning, who is struggling for one reason or another can be referred to the Community Assessment and Risk Evaluation (CARE) Team by a concerned member of the community where they will be evaluated and then assigned a case manager in the appropriate area of concern who will help the student get back on track.

In addition to the general support services offered by the Academic Coaching and Tutoring Center and the Career Service and Advising Center, FSU is demonstrating a commitment to increasing retention and graduate rates of traditionally underserved students by supporting programs like the Hispanic Male Mentoring Program and TRIO Student Support Services. Improving outcomes and growing these populations is part of the strategic plan and is representative of the regional communities served by the university.

From library services to commuter student services, it is clear that there are many efforts being made to engage with all student types. The Office of Student Development sponsors a robust number of opportunities for involvement on campus and beyond. There is a clear sense that through the university's commitment to civic engagement, student government and leadership development that that learning outside the classroom is an integral part of the FSU student experience and is in alignment with the mission. Recent surveys administered in 2020 to FSU students validate the commitment to this success with 75-90% students reporting that they believe the institution is committed to their success. There is currently a co-curricular model in development that will measure learning outcomes and assist student affairs departments in developing institutional learning priorities.

Health and wellness initiatives are a key focus of student success. Students are introduced to a number of these topics as part of new student orientation. Counseling services are available on campus and additional staff were recently added to keep up with the increased demand on these services. The university recently partnered with an off-campus provider for health services. While it was reported that some students were not happy with this change and were concerned about accessibility, it will be assessed in the near future to see how it is going. The SGA raised this issue at a meeting during the visit and pointed to it as an example where the administration rendered a decision without consulting with the SGA. Student leadership reports that since this incident, the administration has worked more collaboratively with them around decision making.

In the past few years, there has been a focus on assessing new student orientation to see how effective the programming has been with introducing services and how well the content was received by students. Based on the positive results of the assessment, the decision was made to expand the orientation program from ½ day to now a full day including an overnight on campus that blends an introduction to academics, student life and other key enrollment service areas. This appears to be a strong program for traditional "day" students. During the meeting with students on campus, it was mentioned by many that it would be helpful for FSU to remind students about the many support services that are in place for them beyond the orientation program. Many felt that they are learning of valuable services provided by the university later in their academic careers and wish they had known from the start.

Recent surveys on campus have indicated that certain groups of students are not experiencing the same sense of belonging as others. Recognizing the importance of embedding the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion in student services and beyond, the university created the new position of Director of Student Diversity, Equity, and

Belonging Programs. This position oversees the Center for Diversity and Inclusiveness which is the hub of DEI programming. There is evidence of support for a number of diverse student groups and alliances, programming to raise awareness of DEI issues, and assistance for faculty and staff who wish to integrate programming across the institution. FSU should be commended for the good work that is being done in this area. Visible actions are being taken to provide training for faculty and staff and it continues to be an institutional priority. During the team visit, it was mentioned that the position of chief diversity officer has been part of many conversations recently. Adding this position would help elevate and prioritize the many initiatives currently underway.

The number of students living on campus has dropped significantly in the past ten years. The pandemic has certainly played a role in this, but a number of students shared their dissatisfaction with the student experience in the residence halls during the campus visit. There is new leadership in the department and it was reported that current policies are being evaluated in order to see how to better attract and retain more students to the on-campus living experience.

The Office of Financial Aid operation is in alignment with industry best practice. Students can receive most of their information from online sources that are easily found on the institution's website. Most communications to students and families are sent out through email and clear and timely information on cost of attendance and funding options (including loans and repayment disclosures) is provided to students. Staff are available to help students who need additional assistance. Recognizing the importance of access and affordability as it relates to financial aid and student billing, the office has representation on the Student Success Task Force. Student services staff undergo trainings in the areas of bias and discrimination, DEI, conflict of interest, data security, and FERPA.

Athletics play an integral role in the student experience. All student athletes are held to the same standards of admission as non-student athletes. The awarding of financial aid follows NCAA D-III regulations. Concerns with academic support of student athletes were raised in the self-study by the athletic department due to the number of part-time coaches. More consideration is being given to how student athletes can be better connected with support services. During the visit with the student support team, it was clear that FSU is aware of this concern and will research it further.

Policies related to student services; specifically, around student rights, responsibilities, conduct and grievance procedures are easily found in the student handbook and on the FSU student affairs website. Information is publicly available on what is included in a student's permanent record and the policies of retaining records. This is all done in accord with the Massachusetts Retention Schedule that is aligned with state standards.

6. Teaching, Learning and Scholarship

Faculty and Academic Staff

It is clear from the self-study and the site visit that Fitchburg State University (FSU) faculty and academic staff are committed to the mission statement of the institution and are engaged in teaching, scholarship, and service across campus. The team applauds the close and warm relationship among faculty, academic staff, and other staff as well as a deep awareness of others' contributions to the institution that was noticeable during the site visit. Interviews and discussions with students show warm and informal relationships between students and faculty, and students appreciate the availability and enthusiasm of the faculty and academic staff to assist in curricular, co-curricular, and career-related issues. Additionally, conversations with the BOT, the President's Cabinet, and the Provost Council reflect that FSU's faculty go beyond to assist students as well as other university initiatives.

The contract between the Board of Higher Education and Massachusetts State Universities Association (MSCA) covers various aspects of full-time and part-time undergraduate day faculty (PTD) as well as librarians including a clear definition of faculty categories. The MSCA Division of Graduate and Continuing Education (DGCE) contract covers the same for the faculty and adjunct faculty teaching for the School of Graduate, Online, and Continuing Education (SGOCE). The collective bargaining agreements outline hiring and evaluation process, ranks, qualifications, as well as working conditions of faculty and librarians. Further, the contracts set salary ranges as well as promotional and post-tenure raises. FSU is a predominately teaching/learning institution, focused on a small university environment serving North Central Massachusetts populations (mission statement 2010). Aligned with its mission, FSU's full-time faculty

have a base teaching workload of 12 credits per semester, allowing faculty time to provide individual attention to students, serve on committees, and engage in scholarship. Full-time faculty may be granted release time and /or additional compensation for various reasons (department chair, coordinate of honors program, union officers etc.), which allows them to balance administrative duties with other time demands.

FSU faculty play a very important role in governance. The faculty at large elects the eight faculty members on the All University Committee (AUC). There are other committees (e.g.: Graduate Council, Academic Policies Committee) that are filled by faculty through the process of self-nominations and appointments by the MSCA. The collective bargaining agreement details faculty rights including academic freedom as well as responsibilities. During on site interviews, some faculty displayed enthusiasm to engage more with strategic planning and budget allocation process. The Faculty Handbook and contracts, which are easily accessible, define faculty expectations and processes to ensure that faculty act responsibly and ethically.

Full-time and part-time faculty are qualified for their positions in educational credentials and scholarship. According to the data first forms, for fall 2021, 193 faculty, 160 have doctoral degrees, 33 have master's degrees, and 1 has a bachelor's degrees. According to the data first forms, full-time faculty teach 80 % of the courses (fall 2021). The teaching, advising, and governance workload of full-time faculty has remained mostly stable from 2018 (200) to 2021 (191), the number of part-time undergraduate day faculty has decreased noticeably (about 21%), and SGOCE faculty has increased by about 31% (75 to 98). The team identifies an increasing ratio of part-time to full-time day faculty from 0.95 to 1.01. All of the seven librarians have master's degrees.

FSU uses a typical process to recruit tenure-track faculty positions. The Office of Human Resources (HR) in collaboration with departments perform needed assessments and identify appropriate advertising platforms. HR also offers trainings and resources to the search committee and department chair about DEI and EEO. The departmental search committee forwards three names to the department chair and the chair forwards the committee's recommendation together with a personal recommendation to the dean. The dean also makes a recommendation to VPAA and the VPAA makes the final recommendation to the president. The president makes the final decision and the dean makes the offer and sends the appointment letter. Processes for the hiring, evaluation, and renewal of adjunct/part-time faculty are described in the respective contracts.

The number of full-time faculty has remained almost at the same level since fall 2018. Percentage of Female faculty have ranged from about 52% to 57% during the same period (see Data First forms). According to the Data First forms (Fall 2021) the ratio of female-to-male faculty (about 1.16), except in the part-time rank (1.57), which is female-dominated (61%). The team appreciates candid appraisal of the FSU self-study that indicates faculty ethnic/racial diversity has not increased (about 12% to 14%). It is clear from the self-study and team's conversations with various campus communities that FSU is committed to increasing diversity within the faculty and staff ranks. For instance, FSU has explored the creation of a Center for Faculty/Staff Equity and Inclusion to address Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion across campus. In 2020, a group of faculty and staff began this work and reported results and recommendations at the 2021 January Faculty Development Day, outlining proposed short-term and long-term goals. The team appreciates FSU's sensitivity and efforts on positive initiatives surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion of faculty and academic staff. As reflected by the data first forms, FSU periodically evaluates sufficiency of and support for academic staff.

Full-time faculty have the opportunity to earn tenure after a maximum of 6 years of service as specified in the collective bargaining agreement. Tenure of an assistant professor usually results into a promotion to Associate professor. Associate Professor or Professor may be appointed for an initial one (1), two (2) or three (3) year term without tenure, or may be appointed initially with tenure. The MSCA contract outlines the criteria for tenure and promotion that include student and peer evaluations of teaching, peer evaluations of scholarship, service and professional conduct, with teaching evaluations being conducted via formal student evaluation and peer evaluation documents.

MSCA contract specifies minimum and maximum starting salaries. The contract also details supplemental benefits and holidays (e.g., Tuition Waiver, Insurances). As mentioned in the self-study, the salary history of full-time faculty between 2012 and 2021 reveals a consistent gender difference, with male faculty (including Instructors) earning \$6958

on average per year more than female faculty. Further, the self-study states that overall difference ranged from a low of \$4518 (AY14) to a high of \$10519 (AY21), and the salary gap was most strongly reflected at the Professor level. In contrast, at the Assistant Professor level, the gender pay gap was much smaller, with female faculty often earning slightly more than male colleagues. In fall 2021, the numbers of full-time faculty that are male/female by rank are: professor 39/25; Associate 35/36; Assistant 16/28. FSU is taking initiatives to address these salary gaps.

Each faculty/librarian is housed in one of the sixteen departments (Data First Forms). Number of members in these departments ranged from 6 to 21 (fall 2021). FSU provides a mentoring program for new undergraduate day faculty in conjunction with their departmental integration. Departmental supports include assigning seasoned faculty as mentors. The New Faculty and Librarian Academy provides orientation to new faculty intended to build a cohort model. Through monthly sessions, the Academy provides opportunities to network, discover new teaching strategies, and learn about student advising, academic integrity, and the evaluation process.

FSU follows the MSCA evaluation process and criteria for undergraduate day programs faculty and the DGCE contract for all SGOCE undergraduate and graduate programs faculty. Using these processes and criteria FSU ensures its faculty and librarians are carrying out the responsibilities (teaching, service, scholarship) effectively. Further, FSU is committed to the regular evaluation of its academic staffs' efficacy. The majority of academic staff members are part of the Professional Administrator bargaining unit. FSU uses self-evaluations, and regular reviews by supervisors to ensure academic staff's effectiveness.

The MSCA Professional Development fund is available to all faculty who apply. FSU faculty use most of the funds every year. Further, faculty can apply for Special Projects Grants from Academic Affairs for professional growth and development. The Center for Faculty Scholarship (CFS) reviews the proposals and makes recommendation. Eligible faculty can apply for sabbaticals. FSU has granted 30 sabbaticals a year in the recent past (AY 21/22). Faculty may participate in Faculty Development Day three times a year. The Center for Teaching and Learning provides additional professional development opportunities. The Office of Digital Learning also offers workshops for adjunct and full-time faculty throughout the year. In addition, SGOCE offers workshops and professional development specific to online and SGOCE programs.

Teaching and Learning

The team appreciate FSU's commitment to teaching and learning as reflected by its mission statement and student interviews during the site visit. The Office of Institutional Research and Planning (OIRP) gathers and shares data to help improve academic programs.

FSU has made the continued assessment and enhancement of teaching and learning a priority. Faculty and librarians report feeling supported by the university in the area of teaching and learning. Specifically, in the February 2021, faculty/librarian Survey with 102 responses, 90% of the faculty indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed that FSU endeavors to enhance the quality of teaching and learning whenever and however courses and programs are offered and 85% of faculty and librarians indicated that FSU provides adequate support to improve instructional effectiveness. It appears that some work is needed towards information accessibility because about 37 % of the respondent disagree that the University policies and procedures are easy to find. During site visit interviews, part-time faculty expressed that they are fully supported with the needs related to teaching and learning.

The Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) provides opportunities and support for undergraduate day and SGOCE program faculty to innovate and improve instruction. Approximately 70% of the CTL budget has been earmarked for pedagogical grants. The mission of CLT is: "The Center for Teaching and Learning enhances the teaching and learning experiences of all faculty, librarians, and students by sustaining, promoting, and celebrating pedagogical practice, innovation, and excellence." FSU awards "The Vincent J. Mara Excellence in Teaching Award" to faculty who have demonstrated a sustained excellence in teaching, a notable impact on student learning, and a dedication to innovative instruction, each year.

As noted above, in fall 2021, there were nearly as many part-time faculty (188) as full-time faculty (191) and 20 % of credits were taught by part-time faculty; therefore, students have the opportunity to be exposed to a wide variety of faculty. FSU offers multiple sections of general education courses taught by a variety of faculty using various modalities. For example, the first-year writing courses, Writing I and Writing II, are taught by both full-time and adjunct faculty and offered in various modalities such as online, hybrid, and face-to-face. In order to ensure flexibility of content and focus, departments offer the First-Year Experience (FYE) course. Each FYE instructor must incorporate the same program learning outcomes, two of which meet General Education learning outcomes, and participate in focused professional development. According to the self-study, in Fall 2021, FSU offered 31 FYE sections, taught by different instructors / faculty. The Online Accelerated MBA program have multiple sections of each course taught by different faculty.

A review of syllabi indicates faculty use a variety of in-class methods of pedagogy including lecture, discussion, and student presentations, and assessment of learning is conducted via exams, papers, and book reviews, etc. FSU has an annual undergraduate research conference where students present work related to course research, creative work in the visual and performing arts, study abroad trips, community service, and more. Each year, STEM faculty host a research fair where faculty present a poster about their research and invite students to work with them. Finally, as part of the new General Education curriculum, one of the High Impact Practices emphasized are faculty-student research projects. FSU acknowledges that such opportunities need to be expanded across the different Schools.

Advising

FSU puts a lot of emphasis on academic advising. Advising services were enhanced by combining various offices to create two Centers: Career Services and Advising (CSA) and Academic Coaching and Tutoring (ACT), in order to better coordinate academic and professional advising. Academic Coaches are available for all students through ACT who provide tutoring and peer mentoring to support students. Each undergraduate day student is assigned an academic advisor within their major. Further, students indicated that there is room for improvement on career advising. Pre-major students are assigned a professional academic advisor through CSA. These students are provided career guidance in conjunction with advising to identify a major that fits their personal and career goals. Program chairs are responsible for providing advising for enrolled students in SGOCE programs. Larger programs (e.g., Online MBA) provide additional academic staff to support students. Some larger licensure programs (Moderate Disabilities and Severe Disabilities) have additional academic staff to support advising. The CTL has created a committee to explore additional advising support and training for all undergraduate day faculty. By adding faculty leads to assist the CTL coordinator, additional professional development opportunities have been created as well as expansion of the CTL website to include advising resources. These initiatives and resources will continuously help students with course scheduling conflicts as well as career advising needs.

FSU is committed to share and review data and experiences on student advising for improvements. DegreeWorks facilitate monitoring each student's academic progress on all degree requirements. FSU has also adopted SSC Navigate, which enables advisors to identify at-risk students, monitor their progress, and easily communicate with them.

Overall, it is evident from the self-study and the site visit that faculty are dedicated to the institution and are deeply involved in teaching, scholarship, and service across campus, often being accountable for multiple areas of responsibility. Further, it was evident that faculty and staff have close relationships with each other and an awareness of each other's contributions to campus life. Additionally, discussions with students indicate their relationships with faculty are warm and informal, and that faculty are available to assist and guide students in curricular, co-curricular, and career-related issues.

7. Institutional Resources

Human Resources

The qualifications and numbers of faculty and staff are enough to support the mission of FSU. Terms of employment are clear, and compensation and benefits packages are adequate to attract proper personnel. The current employment market, along with outdated salary ranges set by the Commonwealth, is hindering efforts to attract qualified personnel for some administrative positions. The University operates under four separate collective bargaining agreements for faculty and staff resulting in approximately 93% of FSU's workforce being unionized. Hiring materials are prepared for each union group in according to policy and collective bargaining requirements. These materials include guidance on the importance of diversity and inclusion when assessing candidates. Onboarding new employees includes online training on diversity, harassment, bias, security and ethics. Employees' performance is evaluated per specific guidelines as defined in each collective bargaining unit. Opportunities for professional development is offered and delivered by contracted trainers and inhouse experts. Topics of University-wide professional development are determined by surveying campus community to identify interest and needs. Employee related policies are reviewed annually to ensure compliance with state and contractual requirements.

Financial Resources

FSU is fiscally challenged and is working to implement strategies to utilize available resources to support its mission in the best way possible. At the end of FY21, the University, including the Foundation, had positive balances in all three net asset categories: Unrestricted, \$129.1 million, Temporarily Restricted, \$25.4 million, Permanently Restricted, \$13.1 million, all totaling to \$167.7 million in net assets.

The University is very tuition dependent. Tuition and fees, net of financial aid, are the largest sources of operating income at \$43.3 million, accounting for 61.8% of the total operating revenues in 2021. State Appropriations of \$45.8 million are a critical component of the University's funding structure, providing approximately 38.4% of the total annual income and covering approximately 40.1% of operating expenses. Other sources of income in 2021 were auxiliary enterprises (including room and board) at \$8.6 million, government grants and contracts of \$15.7 million (including CARES), private gifts and grants of \$900 thousand, \$3.2 million of investment return and \$1.6 million of other miscellaneous income.

In 2021, operating expenditures totaled \$115.1 million which consisted of \$46.4 million for instruction and academic support, \$28.8 million for institutional support and operation and maintenance of plant, \$19.9 million for research, public services, student services and scholarships/fellowships, \$8.5 million for auxiliary enterprises and \$11.5 million for depreciation. Total results for FY21 were a surplus of \$13.4 million, including capital appropriations of \$10.4 million. The surplus would have been significantly decreased if not for the \$11.3 million of federal relief funds from the CARES Act. These federal funds have been able to provide a brief bridge for FSU to partially fund their structural deficit, but they need to use this time to plan for the future and right size the institution to ensure long term sustainability.

The University's financial statements clearly show financial resources are used for, or in support of, academic teaching and learning with 40.3% of operating expenses spent to support instruction and academic support.

The University employs finance professionals with the necessary experience and credentials to properly manage the finances. The Vice President for Finance and Administration has over 30 years of experience in higher education and the Associate Vice President and Comptroller both have been in higher education for over 25 years. The Comptroller also is a Certified Public Accountant.

The Assistant Vice President for Financial Planning and Analysis oversees the development of annual operating budgets by each vice president and department. These budgets are guided by principals to achieve the goals of the Strategic plan and parameters set by the President and Executive Cabinet including assumptions and enrollment goals. Due to significant fiscal constraints, budgets have primarily remained flat over the last few fiscal years, with a focus on reallocation rather than enrollment growth. Each vice president can reallocate resources within their own areas and a small pool of new funding is available and allocated by the President and Executive Cabinet for strategic initiatives. Budgets are compiled into a proposal detailing enrollment projections and use of reserves if necessary. This proposal, along with tuition and fee rates and multi-year projections, are submitted to the Board of Trustees

for their approval.

Budget managers have on demand reporting available to them for monitoring results and progress through Banner, the University's ERP system. Systematic controls and review mechanisms for management are in place to prevent overspending or unauthorized use of funds. Quarterly financial reports are prepared and submitted to the Board of Trustees Finance and Facilities Committee. Annual financial statements are audited by an independent external auditing firm and presented to the Board of Trustees for review and acceptance.

FSU has experienced a significant decline in undergraduate enrollments. The loss of approximately 1,000 undergraduate day students from 2015 to 2021 had placed significant pressures on FSU's operating budget causing a structural deficit. Enrollments in graduate and online programs have increased and are aiding bridging the gap, but FSU is aware that right sizing the day program will need to occur. The University is planning on utilizing excess HEERF funds, now as part of reserves, to bridge the budget gap for the next 3-5 years as the right sizing plan is implemented.

FSU Institutional Advancement team's fundraising efforts in FY21 were impacted by the pandemic. Private support and Annual Fund gifts, including pledges, totaled over \$990 thousand in FY21. A decrease in excess of \$1.1 million over FY20, primarily due to a \$1 million pledge to establish an endowment for a Global Ambassadors Scholarship program, specifically for first generation students to have an international experiential educational opportunity. New grant funds of \$1.4 million were awarded in FY21, not including HEERF awards, a decrease of 36% over prior year.

Financial stewardship and stability are a specific goal of the University's 2020-2025 Strategic Plan. Increased transparency on financial decisions, alignment of enrollment expectations with market demand, increased philanthropic support, and investment in facilities and technology are strategies FSU will employ to meet the financial goal of the plan.

Information, Physical and Technological Resources

FSU is comprised of 59 serviceable buildings with almost one million gross square feet of academic and administrative space, 450,000 residential space and 280 acres of land.

FSU partnered with the Commonwealth's Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance (DCAMM) and Sightlines to conduct a facilities condition assessment. This assessment catalogued a backlog of deferred maintenance, identifying approximately \$80 million of needs still to be addressed with \$4.5 million specifically in Conlon Hall. FSU has invested in renovating their facilities as identified in the Master Plan and Sightline analysis, addressing deferred maintenance as part of the projects. Management has been creative with project planning, implementing a phased approach allowing for increased collaboration with DCAMM and leveraging of state appropriation funding.

The Amelia V, Gallucci-Cirio Library supports the needs of FSU with access to print collections and online materials. Librarians teach key information literacy skills the assist users in effectively and efficiently utilize all the resources the library offers. In addition, the library assists faculty with developing an understanding of open resources and pedagogy, supported with a grant from the Davis Foundation. The library has also assisted with efforts to advance the DEI initiatives on campus with creating a specific DEI plan for the library, focused on children's literature and intercultural competency training.

Information Technology is an important component of the workings of the University to support administrative, teaching, and learning needs. Many FSU programs are highly dependent on technology and are well supported by the IT department. IT Leadership has been innovative in choosing administrative support systems, such as the migration from Microsoft Office 365 to G Suite Enterprise for Education. This migration not only provided cost savings but also assisted with the ease in shifting to remote operations during the pandemic. Applications such as Google Meets and Hangouts allowed for faculty, staff and students ease in communication while at a distance along with document sharing aided in increased collaboration and online storage capabilities. IT provides a walk-up helpdesk that is available to students, faculty and staff six days per week and also contracts with a third-party vendor for 24/7/365 support. IT's policies and information security protocol are up to date and reviewed on a regular basis.

8. Educational Effectiveness

Assessment of Academic Programs

FSU has worked to create a robust culture of assessment across the University. The University Assessment and Research Committee (UARC), established in 2017, approaches assessment systematically by reviewing university-wide data including student learning outcomes, student success measures and other metrics. Composition of the UARC includes faculty assessment liaisons, Director of Assessment, the Assistant Vice President for Institutional Research and Planning, and an academic dean. The UARC makes recommendations on assessment processes for departments and supports academic programming and accreditation requirements.

Most, but not all, academic programs have learning outcomes/objectives clearly posted on the program website. As mentioned in the self-study significant progress, particularly at the undergraduate degree program level, has been made in publishing SLOs on program websites in a consistent and easy to understand layout. More work is needed at the graduate level and about one-half of the certificate programs, both undergraduate and graduate, have SLOs posted on their website.

Every program is expected to submit an annual assessment report that includes the assessment of student learning outcomes (SLOs) from the prior year, a curriculum map that details the relationship between SLOs and courses, and an update to the program assessment plan. Annual reports, which are posted for public view on the website, are reviewed by the Director of Assessment and the UARC. In addition, programs that have been externally reviewed openly post their feedback letters (reviewers reports), or reaccreditation letters alongside their annual report or program review self-studies. One-hundred percent of departments submitted reports and a sampling of the reports confirms that most departments provided information on their baccalaureate programs. The majority of reports that were sampled provided the required information for the undergraduate degree programs, which included, but was not limited to, a description of the assessment activity(s), when the assessments were administered, student population assessed (e.g., entire course), criteria for success, how the data were used to close the loop, and aggregate information on how well students performed on each learning outcome. Collectively, nearly all the reports included the required content and incorporated one or more surveys about the student experience. However, there were occasional reports, such as Sociology and Mathematics, that were incomplete and others that conducted their assessments using indirect methods only (Economics). Assessment for undergraduate certificate programs and degree and certificate programs at the graduate level is largely or entirely missing. While the Office of Institutional Research and Planning is charged with assessment, the Director of Assessment has no recourse when an academic department does not comply with the policies in place.

The assessment process itself, appears to be robust, and the results shared with the team demonstrates that when the process is followed, it yields quality information, incorporates feedback from the external reviewer (e.g., Criminal Justice Action Plan), and is linked to the budgeting process (e.g., Exercise Science). However, not all programs are assessed. Additionally, the ability to differentiate which learning outcomes have been mastered by students within a specific program has been masked as results for several programs appear to have been combined. Examples include:

- The Annual Report for Education only lists the SLOs for the Early Childhood Education, BSE program. There is no mention of the other BSE programs (e.g., Educational Studies or Elementary Education) and it is unclear if the data are aggregated across all programs within the department or restricted to the one program.
- The education reports titled “Assessment Data 2020-2021 Graduate Aggregate” and “Assessment Data 2021 Undergraduate Aggregate” are unit reports providing data on SLO assessment and survey results. The SLO data are aggregated across programs at either the undergraduate or graduate level, while the survey data are disaggregated by program. There is no way to differentiate the data between programs or to confirm that students are learning what the institution says they should be learning for a given program.
- The Annual Report for Criminal Justice only lists and describes assessment of SLOs for the baccalaureate program; no information was available at the graduate level.
- Assessment of certificate programs is not apparent.
- Assessment of graduate programs is in the developmental stage with the exception of the accredited MBA program (per interview). The other graduate programs, have limited, if any, data on assessment.

- Within in the Self-study, the E-Series reports have an incomplete listing of academic programs (e.g., no certificate programs are listed; Educational Studies, BSE; Occupational/Vocational Education, BS; Special Education, BSE; Curriculum and Teaching, MEd; Computer Science, MS; etc.).

In addition, when reviewing the report for History, it became apparent that the SLOs for the baccalaureate and master's programs are nearly identical. The expectation is that programs at the graduate level are more rigorous than undergraduate programs and this differential should be apparent in the SLOs.

FSU not only offers a wide variety of programs for students to select from, but several programs are offered in different modalities and in accelerated formats. Students interested in programs like Curriculum and Teaching, MEd can choose from an on-campus/hybrid format (per website), or they can select from five different partners through the Extended Campus such as the Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators, Lowell Public Schools, and Collaborative for Educational Services. The program appears to be consistent in course offerings, however it is unclear if the quality is similar amongst the various program partners. Per interviews with representatives at Collaborative for Educational Services, rubrics are used to evaluate almost every assignment at the course level. Program-level assessment at Collaborative for Educational Services is done through a series of surveys where students provide feedback on the pace of the program, if they expect to use what they learn, etc.; there is no evidence that non-externally accredited programs taught via the Extended Campus have any direct assessment of student learning. It remains unclear how FSU oversees the assessment of these programs.

Some programs at FSU, are offered in multiple modalities (online and on-campus), multiple partners (Extended Campus entities and on-campus), or different timeframe offerings (accelerated programs and traditional length programs). With the exception of the Master of Business Administration (per interview), at this time, there is no evidence that online and on-campus programs have been evaluated to confirm they are of similar quality. The same evaluation has not been conducted to confirm that the different educational vendors in the Extended Campus and the corresponding on-campus programs are similar in their achievement in student learning. Lastly, the accelerated programs have not been evaluated to ensure they are of similar quality as the traditional offerings. For example, the Academic Department Chairs openly questioned whether or not students should be able to take mathematical courses in the accelerated format as they don't seem to do as well.

FSU has allowed its NCATE accreditation to expire (December 2021) and is in the process of applying to become accredited by AAQEP (2023), however, education programs continue to be covered by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. In addition, according to the Data First Form, 8.3, education students who participate in the Massachusetts Test for Educator Licensure (MTEL) have a licensure rate in the mid-to upper 50 percentile, however it is important to recognize that this rate includes students who have not yet completed their program of study. According to the MTEL website, the licensure rate for program completers is 100 percent. In addition to tracking the MTEL pass rates, FSU tracks the licensure rates of students in their nursing programs. The NCLEX pass rates are consistently in the mid- to upper 90 percentile.

General Education

The General Education program was last revised in 2007 and assessment of the old curriculum continued from 2008 to 2014. FSU revised their General Education curriculum to align within the faculty collective bargaining agreement (per interview) and to improve student success and retention; during the restructuring period, no assessments were conducted. In AY2021, the General Education Subcommittee, a standing committee of the AUC Curriculum Committee, was established. This new committee oversees the approval of learning outcome designations for the General Education curriculum and curriculum revisions in response to assessment and student success data. In August 2021, a proposal to assess the new General Education Program Area was created and a sustainable five-year assessment cycle was introduced. General Education Ambassadors have now been appointed and the appropriate governance structure is expected to pass the assessment plan this year so that implementation can begin in AY2023 followed by program review in AY2028.

A significant component of the revised General Education program is a new First-Year Experience (FYE) seminar with emphases on student transition to university and retention. The assessments are still being developed but the foundation is based on the VALUE rubrics for Information Literacy and Reading. Data from Fall 2019 FYE participants indicate

that retention increased by two percent over students who did not participate in FYE and male LatinX participants experienced a four percent increase. Impressively, FYE students who participated in peer mentoring programs, outside of class, retained at nearly 19 percent higher than FYE students who did not take advantage of this opportunity.

Co-Curricular Assessment

In 2018, the relatively new Vice President for Student Affairs (VPSA) laid the foundation to begin setting and then assessing annual goals and key performance indicators. Assessment in Student Affairs is led by the VPSA and a division-wide assessment team. Now, departments within Student Affairs must have at least one learning outcome that focuses on student-learning and one that focuses on effectiveness.

The University administered campus climate surveys in 2018 and 2020. In general, students felt welcome on campus, but the diverse student population reported a lower level of belonging. This led the VPSA and Provost/VPAA to conduct a listening tour in 2020 of identity-based student clubs. As a result, staffing changes were made to the Center for Diversity and Inclusion, including hiring the first 12-month Director.

Housing and Residential Services set a goal whereby student staff will learn to engage in dialogue on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Training was provided during the onboarding process and student staff were expected to engage in DEI discussions regularly; this was incorporated into their evaluations. A survey was used to gauge progress toward these goals and student staff reported high ability to engage in diversity-related topics; these results informed future trainings. Results of the survey were not available to verify the survey results.

The Office of Student Development also conducts assessment. They used results from a Belonging Study in AY 2021 to compare students who were actively engaged to those who were not actively engaged. Results of the survey showed that students who were actively involved felt a deep sense of belonging. These results were shared with the Student Success Center and the Center for Teaching and Learning. It is worth noting that the sample size, which included Residential students (six Involved and six Uninvolved) and Commuter students (10 Involved and seven Uninvolved) was very small; conclusions may not be reliable.

In addition to assessments administered in Student Affairs, Athletics and Recreation conducts their own. In AY2020, they administered a pre/post-test to student athletes regarding sportsmanship. Almost all teams decreased by two points in the post-test, and this was presented as evidence that student-athletes developed a more complex understanding of sportsmanship through this assessment. Unfortunately, no additional information was provided that would clarify if a two-point decrease in the assessment represents meaningful change.

FSU reports they are making progress in their focus on equity. In April 2021, the Associate Director for Counseling Services, who was trained as a facilitator for the 21-Day Racial Equity Habit-Building Challenge, led the staff in this project. Staff in the Office of Student Development completed Harvard's Implicit Bias Inventory and as a result are in the process of creating individual Intercultural Development Plans. Additionally, the Dean of Students is working with Institutional Research and Planning to disaggregate data by race/ethnicity; Housing and Residential Services will be doing the same with student conduct data. In AY2022, equity reviews will be conducted by the departments of Counseling, Housing and Residential Services, and Athletics and Recreation.

Institutional Assessment

Institutional Learning Priorities (ILP), which are broad learning outcomes covering both curricular and co-curricular objectives, were adopted in 2021. The ILPs align with the University's Vision and academic departments are currently examining how their curriculum aligns. FSU has participated in the Multi-State Collaborative, now the VALUE Institute, since 2016. This provided an opportunity for national and peer comparison of senior-level student work on Critical Thinking and Written Communication. The most recent data discussed in the self-study is from AY2019, where results from Critical Thinking were similar to the average of four-year institutions. Results from AY2020 were not yet available. In addition to submitting authentic student work to the VALUE Institute, 12 FSU faculty and staff were trained as national scorers.

In AY2020, the NILOA Excellence in Assessment application was reviewed. This was an innovative idea, and the process was very informative, revealing the need to develop an institution level assessment plan.

The Student Success Task Force used an inclusive process to define student success, which included qualitative and quantitative measures. In Spring 2021, a survey was administered to students, faculty and staff to gather different perceptions as to how they defined student success (results not shared). This was followed by focus groups to further the discussion. It is anticipated that an institutional definition for student success will be finalized and implemented in Fall 2022.

As exhibited in the Data First Forms, FSU collects data on student retention and graduation rates disaggregated by demographic information. However, it appears that only aggregated data on first-year retention and six-year graduation rates are made available on the website. First-year retention, according to the OIRP website, has been somewhat variable with a high of 78.4 percent (2016 cohort) to a low of 67.9 percent in the 2020 cohort. Six-year graduation rates have been more consistent, fluctuating between 57 percent (2015 cohort) to 61 percent (2012 cohort). As discussed in the Self-study, when the data are disaggregated by race/ethnicity, the LatinX population has experienced an improvement in the six-year graduation rate, going from 32 percent (2009 cohort) to a high of 55 and 54 percent in the 2012 and 2013 cohorts, respectively. However, more recently, the 2014 and 2015 cohorts have declined and now have rates are at 49 and 39 percent, respectively (source: IPEDS query). It is worth noting that smaller cohort sizes tend to have greater variability in retention and graduation rates.

Resulting from the 2018 campus climate survey results which led to productive discussions, the Biology and Chemistry department launched peer-led focus groups and collected data to evaluate barriers for BIPOC students studying STEM. However, it should be recognized that the student participation in this climate survey was very low; only 258 students provided feedback which makes it challenging to form reliable conclusions.

Revisions to the Academic Standing policy were made in response to an analysis consisting of ten years of data on student academic standing. Students who had grade point average (GPA) less than 2.00 had a four percent chance of graduating and were placed on Academic Probation. In comparison, students who had GPAs between 2.00 and 2.50 had a 35 percent chance of graduating. As a result of this analysis, a new academic standing was created, Academic Warning. Students on Academic Warning have a GPA between 2.00 and 2.20, are still in Good Standing, but they are required to meet with a coach who will help them identify other services they need to help them succeed.

FSU has implemented several student-oriented changes in the past few years. For example, in response to learning that students who did not select a major graduated at significantly lower rates than students who had declared a major (19 vs 52 percent), a policy was created whereby students would need to declare their major by the time they earned 45 credits. This policy went into effect in AY2016. Another example is the 15 to Finish policy which was implemented in AY2015 when the data revealed higher outcomes for students taking a full load. Other examples of changes that put students first include improved faculty participation in identifying at-risk students (11 to 88 percent) and increased use of mid-term grades or grade deficiencies (46 to 70 percent). Several of these improvements were associated with the transition to SSC Navigate

Assessment Tools

The Office of Institutional Research and Planning (OIRP) uses both internal and national surveys to collect information. Student surveys range from incoming students participating in the University Student Inventory (CSI), to the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE), to home-grown surveys designed to collect information on student learning outcomes and alumni satisfaction. Student Affairs also administers surveys and focus groups to help measure the effectiveness of programming. The national surveys not only provide needed information on students, whether it be level of engagement or the number of hours a student works, but also provide benchmark information to help put the results into context. Information from the NSSE prompted FSU to take a closer look at the advising experience (data not available) for freshmen which resulted in encouraging freshmen to more fully participate in advising meetings.

The Self-study reports the campus climate surveys, administered in 2018 and 2020, yielded robust information for students, faculty, staff, librarians, and administrators. While it appears the response rates were strong for employees, the student response rates were quite low with only 258 and 669 students participating in 2018 and 2020, respectively. The student data were then further disaggregated by demographic information, which resulted in even small sample sizes. The low response rates make it difficult to draw conclusions from, possibly leading to erroneous decisions.

In addition to surveys, FSU also uses software to help coordinate and collect data for use in assessment. The TK20 application is a powerful tool that is available for use but is inconsistently applied. SSC Navigate was adopted several years ago, and through tailored reports, departments are able to assess key trend data. For example, SSC Navigate can serve as a repository for student attendance, midterm grades (grade deficiencies), registration status, etc. The departments of Biology and Chemistry and Exercise Science effectively used SSC Navigate to identify a needed curricular change. Students who performed poorly (earned a D or lower) in select lower-level major courses were statistically unlikely to complete the program. This information resulted in setting minimum grade requirements, such as a C or higher, and in the case of Biology and Chemistry, limiting the number of times the course could be repeated. However, it is unclear how impactful this change has been and if it has resulted in improved student success.

FSU is intentional in its use of CSI data, uploading survey results on risk related to potential dropout, predicted academic difficulty, and educational stress into SSC Navigate. Faculty and advisors now have access to these data and can better support individual students.

9. Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure

Fitchburg State University demonstrates integrity, transparency, and public disclosure through data driven policy development with a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); comprehensive future-oriented planning (e.g., strategic planning) that engages all constituents; and candid public communications.

Integrity: The institution deploys four strategies to assure institutional integrity: thoughtfully recruiting, selecting, and on-boarding new members to the FSU Community; inclusive planning, shared implementation, and accountability for strategic initiatives; communicating core values; and publicly addressing future sustainability. FSU supports the core values of freedom of inquiry and expression, equity and inclusion in contractual obligations, and policies including those relevant to hiring.

Academic Honesty policies are explicated on the FSU website, in course syllabi, in grievance procedures, and academic integrity regulations. The library has created an academic honesty module that has been integrated into the First-Year Student Experience Class. Integrity is framed in terms of both individual conduct and collective responsibilities and is best expressed in the campus's "student ready" philosophy. At the graduate level, FSU received State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA) approval in 2018 which requires annual review and renewal. SARA approval requires institutions to meet national standards for online programming and provide a compliant reporting portal for students.

FSU is fully accredited and has the prerequisite operating authority to function as a university. The institution has successfully completed numerous external accreditations and institution level reviews. It complies with federal and statewide higher education mandates (e.g., Equal Employment Opportunity, Diversity and Affirmative Action Plan) that are in turn monitored by Human Resources. Policies assuring the fair treatment of employees, such as grievance procedures, are outlined in the faculty and staff Collective Bargaining Agreements. The institution has begun a comprehensive review of all policies for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusiveness (DEI) deficits and plans to complete a Policy Directory by 2024. Research review practices (e.g., Institutional Research Board, Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee) contribute to maintaining standards of academic integrity.

The university aspires to maintain a working environment embodying fairness in compliance with state and federal laws, internal policies, and collective bargaining agreements. All university employees are required to regularly engage in relevant professional development activities related to compliance (e.g., conflict of interest, FERPA). To advance its strategic priorities, the university has instituted a wide range of efforts to meet both its workforce and campus diversity and equity goals.

Consistent with the faculty contracts, the institution supports academic freedom (Massachusetts State University Association Collective Bargaining Agreement). The need to balance individual rights are balanced to assure respect and safety for community members. FSU affirms the need for freedom of expression and concurrently recognizes the necessity of having a safe learning environment. The Student Government Association (SGA) passed legislation to create a Bias Related Team and is in discussions with the administration regarding next steps.

The university is committed to providing prospective students with information about both costs and outcomes associated with program completion. It continues to provide this information in ways that are both accessible and tailored to the students' need. Further, each semester, students are reminded of the Academic Integrity policy as it is a required syllabi element.

The Student Conduct and Case Management staff is primarily responsible for the oversight of matters relating to the student conduct process. The goal of the conduct system is to support the educational mission of the university by ensuring that an atmosphere of acceptance, curiosity, and integrity is maintained on campus. FSU's Student Conduct Code is accessible and includes definitions of misconduct, due process procedures, sanctions, etc. and regularly distributes information about student life (e.g., guidelines about hazing, drug, and alcohol abuse, etc.). As stated above, Student Conduct Policies are currently under review for DEI deficits. Pre-enrolled and enrolled students are introduced to the Conduct Code and these documents include contact information allowing students to obtain further advisement or guidance.

The All University Committee (AUC) on Academic Policies is charged with regularly reviewing academic policies and the AUC publishes an annual report each year which summarizes its work. The president will convene a committee with representatives from all the major divisions to develop a master calendar for policy review and updates due by spring 2023.

Transparency: FSU utilized information from a project which engaged local high school students to discover important information on the FSU website to institute the current, ADA compliant, website in 2020. The Marketing and Integrated Communications department designed the new website primarily for prospective and enrolled students interested in diverse professional, graduate, and undergraduate programs. Marketing and Integrated Communications created an online form for campus constituencies to provide updates to webpages and partners with departments on larger scale projects. This approach ensures that the website communications are in "one voice" and are appropriately branded. Turn around for most updates is less than four hours.

In the past few years, the challenge of balancing the need for transparency without overwhelming diverse users has been acknowledged. This has been compounded as a result of remote learning/working due to the COVID-19 pandemic response. There is general agreement on campus that the website is for outward-facing audiences and that there is a need for an as yet-to-be-established internal portal for faculty and staff. Students interviewed reported feeling overwhelmed with campus email communication and struggled to sort critical information from events.

In the academic areas, catalogs are tailored for undergraduate and graduate programs. The OIRP and SGOCE lead efforts to assure that catalogs are current and complete.

Public Disclosure: Descriptions of the student body, campus settings, and campus life are included in the Undergraduate Viewbook "We Discover" found on the undergraduate admissions webpage and through a variety of links on the graduate admissions page. The university's accreditation information is available for both the institutional and program levels on one accreditation page.

Institutional reports required by the Department of Higher Education and supplemental data on admissions, enrollment, retention, and employment data are included on the Institutional Research and Planning Website.

Historical comprehensive audited university and foundation financial reports are available off the Vice President for Finance and Administration webpage. Public records request links are embedded off the University Police Website. The institution's desire for greater transparency is also manifest as it reboots social media channels and begins an annual review of branded social media accounts in fall 2020. These social media accounts including Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube and Twitter.

Within the Academic Catalog, department and programs include the unit description, learning outcomes, program requirements, courses offered, program policy, and specialized accreditation information is included as appropriate.

Academic support information is accessible using multiple paths including "one stop shopping" centers on the academic support website, within the Hammond Student Center, and in the Anthony Student Service Center.

The university recognizes that it needs to thoughtfully systemize its methods of continuous improvement and communication as it strives to become student ready.

Affirmation of Compliance

To document the institution's compliance with Federal regulations relating to Title IV, the team reviewed Fitchburg State University's Affirmation of Compliance form signed by the CEO. As noted in this report, Fitchburg State University publicly discloses on its website and other relevant publications its policy on transfer of credit along with a list of institutions with which it has articulation agreements. Public notification of the evaluation visit and of the opportunity for public comment was made by the University one month prior to the visit in *Contact*, the Fitchburg State University Alumni Magazine, and on the University's website. The University's grievance procedures for faculty and staff are emailed to employees annually and integrated into the on-boarding of new employees. Grievance procedures for students are shared during orientation and welcome-back sessions held at the start of both the fall and spring semesters.

For its online programs and courses, Fitchburg State University uses a system of secure logins and pedagogical approaches to verify students' identities to ensure the integrity of the programs.

Summary

Fitchburg State University used the self-study process, including the effective use of relevant data to review several key aspects of institutional functioning. The reviews conducted as part of self-study led to measurable enhancements and commitments for improvement in several areas, including program review, assessment, and a review of how well the university makes key information available to the public.

In general, it is the view of the visiting team that FSU is focused on the quality, integrity and effectiveness of its professional academic programs and the success of its students. It is accomplishing its mission and vision under the leadership of an involved and committed Board of Trustees, a capable and experienced president, and a well-qualified faculty and staff committed to serving the needs of its students.

The following summary provides a highlight of observations and recommendations for each standard:

Standard I - Mission and Purpose

The FSU mission was updated by the BOT in fall of 2010 to reflect university status, is also in alignment with the MA Board of Higher Education Mission Statement and the MA Department of Higher Education's mission for the State Universities. It is our observation that the institution has successfully integrated the mission across campus as the vast majority of students, faculty and staff have indicated they are familiar with the mission. Additionally, there is visible marketing collateral throughout campus.

The mission also supports an institutional vision that emphasizes: Excellence in Teaching and Learning as well as Transforming lives through education as reflected in the institutional learning priorities, General Education program and academic offerings. There is also a strong commitment to public service as demonstrated through an assortment of community partnerships including the Reimagined North of Main Project and other projects through the Douglas and Isabelle Crocker Center for Civic Engagement.

FSU has also established 5 core values including Accessibility, Affordability, Community, Enrichment and Excellence. Additionally, FSU has powerfully affirmed the important of diversity, equity and inclusion throughout the campus ethos.

The university should establish a regular review of the mission statement in alignment with strategic planning. It is anticipated the university's mission will be reviewed no later than May 2024, in advance of the next Strategic Plan. The timing is ideal to clarify the balance and sustainability of undergraduate, graduate and online offerings.

Standard II - Planning and Evaluation

Development of the 2020-2025 strategic plan was an inclusive and thoughtful plan that engaged the entire campus, students, faculty and staff. There is an awareness of the plan at a high level as well as annual reports highlighting implementation of the plan.

Budget requests have to be linked to the strategic plan and new requests should be aligned with the plan as well. Resources have been identified to encourage innovation and support identified campus priorities. The plan itself has good benchmarking metrics and targets. The comprehensive nature of the strategic plan in addition to the NECHE accreditation recommendations will present an opportunity for the campus to reassess appropriate outcomes and timelines.

The Office of Institutional Research and Planning is running at full capacity and has significantly advanced the value of evidence-based practice on campus. This office will be essential with successfully executing the strategic plan and NECHE accreditation recommendations going forward.

Standard III - Organization and Governance

The Board is committed to the success of FSU and has a good working relationship with the administration. Similarly, internal governance is strong and collaborative. There have been extensive benefits with implementing the new Deans structure including more collaboration with interdisciplinary programs and more strategic thinking about new programs and budget alignment.

Interviews with faculty indicate additional discussion about how university budget decisions are made would improve transparency and enhance awareness of the institutions financial standing.

Standard IV - The Academic Program

Admission and transfer policy and processes are clear and effective. The implementation of the Early University program, assisting first generation university students, is admirable. The Multilingual scholars mentor program is another distinctive approach of co-curricular support with a particular focus on multilingual learners. The review team would like to highlight the quality and strength of the teacher training module supporting online teaching as well as the promotion of experiential learning opportunities.

We recognize that accredited programs are regularly assessed, however, assessment of student learning outcomes in other programs is inconsistent particularly with School of Graduate, Online, and Continuing Education.

Standard V - Students

The recent restructure of enrollment management created a more effective organization for future enrollments. The “student-ready” philosophy will serve the institution well for future enrollments, retention, degree-completion and student success.

The passion for serving students manifested across staff, faculty and administration. At the same time, providing wrap-around services will need adequate resources to be effective.

Students we met were generally satisfied with their collegiate experience and greatly valued the sense of campus community and sense of belonging. Students identified Hammond Hall as a particularly welcoming and safe space. Student concerns emerged with diversity of faculty and staff, access to health services and quality of residence life.

Standard VI - Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship

Faculty are deeply committed to the teaching and learning of the FSU student profile. Faculty distribution across departments is well balanced and full-time faculty teach more than 80% of the undergraduate courses. The engagement of the School of Graduate, Online and Continuing Education (SGOCE) faculty is different from the day faculty. These differences may cause a disconnect with the institution as well as with the students it serves in the long run. These concerns may be further exacerbated if the SGOCE programs continue to grow and become a larger proportion of students.

Students expressed concern about having limited access to faculty advisors and many indicated they relied primarily on DegreeWorks for their advising needs.

Standard VII - Institutional Resources

The longevity of the Administration and Finance leadership team is an organizational strength and it is admirable that they have begun succession planning.

The university has sufficient reserves to bridge the anticipated 3-5 year financial gap while implementing a strategy to right size the institution. Enrollment decline in undergraduates and long-term stabilization in day programs is driving the overall structural gap.

IT support and infrastructure investments have been sufficient to support data driven decision making and capital investments with creative phased-planning have addressed a significant component of the master plan and deferred maintenance.

School of Graduate, Online and Continuing Education growth and profitability have become a significant revenue source to support overall university operation.

The administration is thinly staffed due to significant turnover. Their refill rate has been hindered by the employment climate, complicated by salary compression and outdated Commonwealth defined salary levels. Although the university has come far in their financial planning, the institution still has a \$80 million in deferred maintenance.

Standard VIII - Educational Effectiveness

Academics have a robust and well-developed process in place for the assessment student learning outcomes. However, while many departments embrace this process, not all departments ensure the process is completed. Departments have access to useful qualitative and quantitative data. The integration of student support tools such as SSC Navigate combined with faculty participation was strong. A culture of innovation was evident through their participation in the Value Institute and the use of the NILOA application to identify strengths and weaknesses.

There is an over-reliance on student surveys to assess student outcomes. This over-reliance may lead to survey fatigue and limited student participation. Programs offered in multiple modalities, online vs. on campus, accelerated v. full semester, or location do not appear to be evaluated for comparable quality. The high volume of work generated by OIRP should be reviewed.

Standard IX - Integrity, Transparency and Public Disclosure

Personnel onboarding processes at FSU are strong including good emphasis on high ethical standards and comprehensive FERPA, TITLE IX training.

The website provides adequate information for prospective student and families to make well informed decisions about enrollment and affordability. There is general agreement that the website serves an external audience and internal web portals need revision and or need to be established. The website is newly designed and has efficient and effective protocols to be updated. The current single editor model is a strength, providing a common voice and consistent branding.

OIRP has current factual data but limited historical or archived data. They have begun a process to review all policy and procedures for DEI deficit language and they have a plan to have an online policy directory.

STRENGTHS:

FSU has done an admirable job creating a transparent and inclusive planning process. The representation from faculty, staff, students and alumni highlighted the guiding principles of inclusivity, transparency, respect, broad perspective, and consensus decision making. This is further evidenced by broad community awareness of the mission statement, vision and strategic plan.

FSU benefits from stable leadership and strong Board of Trustees support and investment. During the review, it became evident the Trustees take their role very seriously as they were well informed and knowledgeable of both opportunities and challenges at the university.

The administration and campus community have excelled in creating a vibrant and welcoming campus ethos. In faculty and staff forums, there was a consistent and compelling energy about the university's commitment to being "student-ready" and deep dedication to students. This was also affirmed in student forums among both undergraduate and graduate students. The team applauds the extensive work to elevate issues of diversity, equity and inclusion across the community in response to the emerging diversity within the student body.

Financial stewardship and stability are a specific goal of the university as highlighted in its 2020-2025 Strategic Plan. In response to declining undergraduate enrollments, due in part to COVID, the university will increase transparency on financial decision, align enrollment expectations with market demand, increase philanthropic support, and invest in facilities and technology to meet financial goals. The strategic and robust growth of graduate programs has significantly buffered the financial strain.

Evidence-based practices have evolved well on the FSU campus. FSU has made it a strong practice to use surveys particularly as it relates to the student experience, retention, and success. For instance, FSU intentionally uses CSI data by uploading survey results on student risk for potential dropout, predicted academic difficulty and educational stress into a shared staff platform, SSC Navigate. This work has resulted in faculty and staff having access to critical data to better support and address students' needs.

CONCERNS:

It appears the recent changes in the university's organization has resulted in inconsistent long-term planning as the division level. Specifically, the lack of plans in finance can hamper broader strategic planning efforts as it relates to budget processes, new investments, spending decisions and budget allocation. As the university navigates through its current financial challenges, having clarity in this area will assist greatly with future planning. Federal funding has provided a much-needed bridge in support of their structural deficit. Even so, now is the time to plan for the future and right size the institution for long-term sustainability.

The Board of Trustees have five standing committees including Academic Affairs, Student Life, Administration and Finance, Personnel and the Executive Committee. However, there is only material evidence that the full Board and the Finance and Administration committees have met. Their review indicated that many of the other committees rarely meet, if at all.

The courses offered in the School of Graduate, Online and Continuing Education (SGOCE) are regularly vetted by the appropriate academic department, however the assessment of student learning outcomes is inconsistent. Despite robust online learning at both undergraduate and graduate levels, the team did not see evidence of evaluative measures for learning outcomes in the non-externally accredited online degrees,

programs, and offerings. With most programs included in the e-series, there should be additional clarity to the assessment activities in these programs as well as a general consistency with the use of data and reports for evaluation and improvement. Moreover, assessment for undergraduate certificate programs and degree and certificate programs at the graduate level is largely or entirely missing.

FSU's emphasis on issues of diversity, equity and inclusion has illuminated additional work needed in this area. As evidenced in student forums, some underrepresented students felt the university should do more to support their experience. Recent surveys have also indicated that some affinity groups are not experiencing the same sense of belonging as other student communities.