



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

W A S H I N G T O N , D C

CORNELIUS M. KERWIN  
PRESIDENT

April 21, 2014

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

Dear Dr. Sibolski:

American University thanks the entire evaluation team for the careful, comprehensive manner in which it reviewed our self-study and all aspects of our compliance with the 14 standards articulated in the *Characteristics of Excellence*. During the campus visit the team held over 30 separate meetings and met with hundreds of people on campus including trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, and students. The team reviewed an extensive array of documents, both on line and in person. We appreciate the time and effort that went into understanding the university, critically reviewing its progress and writing the report.

The university agrees with the recommendations and appreciates the insights provided throughout the detailed team report. The accomplishments listed in the report recognize the strength of AU's governance structure and the centrality of its strategic plan. AU is described as a transformed institution and is commended for the rate and extent of positive change that has occurred thanks to the efforts of the entire university community. We welcome the opportunity to build on these successes by moving forward on the suggestions provided in the report. This letter contains American University's formal response to the report of the visiting team:

## RESPONSE TO SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendation One: In light of the changing demographics of the undergraduate student body, the University as a whole-inclusive of Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, Enrollment, schools and colleges, and business units- should carefully consider how best to support the more diverse student body and ensure that its engagement in AU's special opportunities, sense of belonging, degree of satisfaction, and retention and graduation rates is carefully monitored and regularly assessed.**

We agree with the importance of supporting AU's diverse student body and ensuring its success. In fact, the self-study emphasizes the many ways in which this is already occurring. Examples of efforts by Academic Affairs, Campus Life and the AU community to support the diverse student body include the implementation of the recommendations of the Undergraduate and Marketing

Enrollment Team, the continuation of the Undergraduate Experience Council, expansion of programs to foster engagement (such as the University College) and financial resources for needy students to participate in study abroad and internships. Most importantly, the university made a significant investment in financial aid in order to provide more need-based aid to students. AU has a robust system of monitoring students at-risk and mentoring students in ways that help them feel welcome and able to complete their degree. Although the research questions for the self-study design led to greater emphasis on specific services designed to help with student success and retention, the university agrees that all student services can contribute to a student's overall experience.

The changing demographics of the undergraduate student body warrant more attention to the effectiveness of university services and AU is positioned to meet this challenge. The university is proud of its long history of robust assessments in this area. The Office of Campus Life, for example, has an extensive assessment program that uses a wide array of data. All Campus Life units have extensive assessment plans and, where appropriate, articulated learning outcomes. The commitment to assessment is evidenced by the Campus Life annual report (provided in AU's supporting documentation) which details the impressive assessments done by each Campus Life department. Moving forward, the goal is to build upon the assessments already conducted by Campus Life, the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, and others.

AU is also positioned to meet this recommendation because divisions and offices work well together to ensure student success. The self-study highlights some of these mechanisms, such as the Care Network, MapWorks, and the Undergraduate Experience Council. We look forward to deepening our commitment to supporting students by building on these relationships and working together to help students achieve their goals.

In the years ahead, the university will focus on the implementation of new programs that will benefit not only the diverse student body but all undergraduates. Such programs include the completely revised honors program, the enhanced general education program, a new community based research scholars program, enhanced year-round study programs, and efforts to ensure deep high impact learning as defined by the AAC&U. The university plans to focus on expanding the use of innovative technology enabled teaching methods so that students have satisfying and meaningful learning experiences and it recently has partnered with ETS to explore original approaches to evaluation of student writing.

The university has already begun a cutting edge retention research program designed to identify areas where retention can be improved. It is exploring implementation of strategies to ensure students stay engaged with the university during the summer and it plans to identify ways to remove financial barriers (when possible) that hinder student progress. It is committed to providing a supportive and academically challenging environment to all students.

In sum, the work ahead is challenging. More needs to be done to enrich the quality of the academic experience, the level of student support and the ability of students to complete their degrees in a timely manner. Difficult questions need to be addressed. How do we best allocate limited resources so that students have fulfilling experiences and complete their degree? How can we better coordinate services in order to meet our goals? How does the change in AU's student population change the services that are needed? What services are missing or could be enhanced? AU is committed to fulfilling this recommendation.

**Recommendation Two: The increased investment in the Scholar-Teacher ideal brings with it greater expectations for scholarly impact and, as a result, the University should establish clear goals and detailed assessment protocols at the individual and the unit levels to ensure that the University's expectations are being realized.**

AU's academic units have done extensive work in the past few years to articulate expectations for individual faculty scholarship. These expectations are outlined on the Dean of Academic Affairs website:

<http://www.american.edu/provost/academicaffairs/unit-guidelines.cfm#ten>. While the articulation of scholarship and teaching expectations have helped to clarify faculty goals at the unit level, more can be done to sharpen and clarify the ways in which overall teaching and scholarship at the unit level are evaluated. What does it mean to be a premier department in a discipline? How can unit level expectations for scholarship also reward and promote high quality inter-disciplinary work? The university will focus on these questions in the coming years.

A number of important initiatives related to this recommendation are already underway. A task force is reviewing the ways the university evaluates teaching and will revise the student evaluations of teaching and offer suggestions for more direct measures of excellent teaching. We recognize that the change in assessment protocols is especially important given the change in our pedagogy. At the individual level, we want to be better able to provide faculty with constructive information that will help them meet the "teacher ideal." At the institution level, we need to better understand the impact of technology and new teaching methods on student learning. Equal emphasis needs to be given to enhancing and supporting faculty research activities, including externally funded research. A task force has been created to examine ways to enhance high impact research.

In sum, this recommendation is at the heart of AU's mission. It will be given our full attention as we strive to more fully realize our vision of being a college-centered research university.

**Recommendation Three: The aggressive move to a new mix of tenure-line and term faculty also bears attention and careful tracking both for long-serving faculty and those who will enter American University under this new paradigm. AU should monitor the evolving faculty perceptions and degree of satisfaction in this new environment and make adjustments in the model as necessary over time.**

The move to a new mix of tenure-line and term faculty has led to many positive changes, including opportunities for adjunct faculty to achieve term appointments and reduced teaching loads for many tenure line faculty. Efforts have been made to help associate professors strengthen their scholarly portfolios in order to qualify for promotion to full professor and faculty committees are examining term faculty issues and overall faculty work-life balance. The university recognizes the importance of creating an environment that leads to faculty success. American University has used a variety of assessment measures such as the HERI faculty survey, a faculty designed survey and focus groups to gather information on faculty opinion.

The university looks forward to tracking not only faculty satisfaction but also faculty viewpoints on the direction of the institution and the effectiveness of AU policies. The new model challenges the university to find effective ways to handle issues such as service obligations, for example. How do we ensure that the important work of improving the institution, which requires committee work, include varied perspectives? How can long term faculty members feel that their work is respected even as the university begins to focus on new disciplinary areas? The university wants to ensure that the new environment provides a positive professional experience for its faculty while also advancing the university's mission.

## **CONCLUSION**

American University is a transformed institution. The self-study provided AU with an opportunity to document these changes and to reflect upon areas where further work is needed. The visiting team provided an invaluable external perspective on our progress. We look forward to implementing the self-study recommendations and the team recommendations. By doing so, we know that AU will become stronger, more innovative, and more entrepreneurial.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cornelius M. Kerwin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'C'.

Cornelius M. Kerwin  
President  
American University

cc: Dr. Eric Spina, Vice Chancellor and Provost, Syracuse University