Accreditation Team Praises OU as a Leading Public Research University

Excellence in research and creative activity is a way of life at the University of Oklahoma.

That excellence most recently has been validated by The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, which reaccredited the University and called OU "one of the country's leading public research universities that is committed to quality in its research, instructional and service missions."

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The accreditation team, led by chairman W. Randy Smith, Vice Provost for Academic Programs at The Ohio State University, noted that OU recently was awarded the highest tier of research activity, the "Very High Research Classification" from the Carnegie Foundation. The Carnegie Classification system is a widely used framework for grouping U.S. colleges and universities. Its primary purpose is for educational research and analysis.

"The Carnegie Foundation's Very High Research designation is one of the most important measures that distinguish among institutions of higher education," said Kelvin Droegemeier, OU vice president for research. "The classification greatly increases OU's stature and visibility nationally, opens doors of opportunity for increased external funding, improves the University's ability to recruit outstanding faculty and students, and has a positive impact on numerous other rankings that utilize the Carnegie designation as a metric."

Another key indicator of the university's research excellence, the HLC-NCA accreditation team said, is Aspire 2020, a research program initiated by OU in 2010 to address, develop and pursue ways and means of increasing the research intensity characteristic of the University.

Through Aspire 2020, groups of faculty, staff and students have developed suggestions and proposals for increasing participation of undergraduate students in faculty research, levels of support for and the academic qualifications of graduate students recruited by the University and the number of external grant proposals submitted by University faculty for research support.

"Aspire 2020 committees created energy, enthusiasm, engagement and new ways of considering research, particularly multidisciplinary research," the accreditation team reported. Referencing recent awards that include a U.S. Department of Interior Regional Climate Science Center and a five-year, $25 million National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration cooperative institute, the team noted, "Awards such as these have enabled OU to recruit top scholars in atmospheric sciences and related disciplines."

In all respects," the team concluded, "[Aspire 2020] aligns quite closely with the University's overall mission to pursue and achieve excellence in teaching, research and service."

continued on page 2
At the Health Sciences Center in Oklahoma City, the accreditation team pointed to research strengths in core laboratories, health services and clinical trials, Native American populations, and the primate center. The team also noted that National Institutes of Health awards for OUHSC-based research, which includes such areas as cancer, diabetes and metabolism, neuroscience, geriatrics, and infectious disease and immunology, is at an all-time high. The number of patients served in OU medical clinics also is at its highest level ever.

In addition, the accreditation committee recognized OU-Tulsa's strong research facilities, which include simulation and engineering laboratories.

Higher Learning Commission Calls OU Retention, Graduation Progress “Quite Impressive”

“Quite impressive” is how the commission that reaccredited the University of Oklahoma termed OU’s efforts to improve undergraduate retention and graduation rates over the past few years.

The University has achieved clear and measurable success in increasing both the first-year student retention rate and six-year undergraduate graduation rate, an accreditation team of the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools said in its recent report.

Increasing undergraduate retention and graduation rates was noted 10 years ago by an accreditation team of the Higher Learning Commission as an area to which the University should devote additional resources, and the evidence for increases in these rates over the last few years is clear, the HLC-NCA accreditation team reported. “At the same time, the University has seen an increase in the measurable aptitude of and achievement levels of its entering classes of undergraduates, which also contributes to elevated rates of retention and subsequent graduation,” the accreditation team wrote.

When OU President David Boren came to OU in 1994, the first-year retention rate was 79 percent. It has held steady at 84 percent since 2000. In 1994, the graduation rate was 42 percent. By 2000, the rate had increased to 59 percent, and over the next decade rose to 68 percent. The University’s current goal is a graduation rate of 75 percent.

The President’s Graduation and Retention Rates Task Force, created in 2000 and comprising 39 faculty, staff and students, is charged with ensuring that there are no University-created barriers to successful student persistence. Among its many comprehensive recommendations was establishing a single location for central tutoring programs, summer bridge programs, learning centers for study skills, learning communities and supplemental instruction programs. The ultimate result, Lissa and Cy Wagner Hall, opened in 2009 and houses such key academic resources as University College, the OU Writing Center, Graduation Office, Center for Student Advancement and Project Threshold.
President's Top Priorities Propel OU Forward

With widespread support from faculty and top administrators, University of Oklahoma President David Boren has successfully advanced his top priorities – teaching quality, research expansion, globalization, and creation of community.

GLOBALIZATION
- An increase in undergraduate participation in education abroad experiences from 2 percent to 25 percent
- Creation of the College of International Studies
- 2,000 courses and activities in more than 30 different program formats offered through University Outreach to more than 200,000 nontraditional learners throughout the world

“This is a research university that values teaching as a major component of faculty responsibility,” the HLC-NCA team reported. “University leaders regularly and openly describe the University of Oklahoma as a research university that cares about teaching.”

RESEARCH EXPANSION
- OU’s Very High Research Classification from the Carnegie Foundation. OU is the first public institution in Oklahoma to receive this prestigious classification.
- Support for interdisciplinary research initiatives as stimulating for individual faculty research and as a way to challenge traditional academic insularity through cross-curricular connections
- The 277-acre University Research Campus, where the growth of public-public and public-private partnerships has the potential to transform the university and the economic landscape of Oklahoma

“Strategies to invest in OU’s strongest research programs, grow other areas of complimentarity with research strengths, continue to recruit outstanding talent, and fully realize what it means to be a comprehensive institution all contribute to the development of OU,” the report stated.

CREATION OF COMMUNITY
- Twice being honored with the Templeton Foundation Award as a “Character Building College” for stressing the value of community
- The Faculty in Residence program, which faculty and students indicate is mutually beneficial
- Responsiveness to constituencies that depend on OU for services, notably the partnership between OU and the Oklahoma Climatological Survey that trains Oklahoma emergency management officials, and the K20 Scholars Program that offers scholarships to Oklahoma students entering OU to pursue STEM degrees

“OU’s outreach efforts to the state, region, nation and the world are outstanding,” the accreditation team said.

That was the conclusion by The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools accreditation team during its recent reaccreditation of the University.

In its report, the HLC-NCA team cited a number of examples of OU’s ongoing efforts to advance Boren’s priorities. Among them are:

TEACHING QUALITY
- Creation of a task force of faculty to explore developing a core curriculum, with one of the stated purposes being to ensure that the University supports effective teaching, especially for first-year students
- University-wide evaluation and recognition that supports and rewards effective teaching through a number of programs
- Support of professional development designed to facilitate teaching and learning

Photo by Sherry Williams & Associates
University's Bold Program Investments Improve Education and Prepare for Future

OU's bold investment in new initiatives and programs is improving the quality of education and preparing the University for future opportunities and challenges without compromising the University's financial strength and stability, The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools found during its recent reaccreditation of the university.

The HLC-NCA accreditation team identified a number of such OU initiatives and programs, including:

- Outsourcing infrastructure maintenance and monetizing the returns from that effort
- Developing profitable relationships between the University's research personnel and major private sector companies
- Building substantial faculty endowment funds
- Enhancing physical facilities and creating the kinds of indoor and outdoor spaces to encourage the formation and sustaining of community
- Successfully deploying computing systems to streamline operations that make the University's Web presence more friendly and functional
- Organizing or re-organizing administrative and academic units to enable faculty and staff to respond to new opportunities in teaching, research and service.

OU's Outstanding Learning Resources Serve Students Well

In its reaccreditation of the University of Oklahoma, the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools praised the role of the university's outstanding learning facilities in enhancing the educational experience of its students.

"Learning resources are a strength of this University," the accreditation team reported. "Students benefit from research facilities such as the University Research Campus, which ... has as its foundation the Stephenson Research and Technology Center and the National Weather Center."

The HLC-NCA team singled out OU's "impressive performance and arts centers as well as [the] outstanding Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art and Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History" and praised the state-of-the-art ExxonMobil Lawrence G. Rawls Engineering Practice Facility and Sooner Engineering Education Research Center for providing superior support for teaching and learning.

Other facilities, programs and initiatives that received special recognition include the University's:

- comprehensive library system
- School of Nursing's simulation laboratory
- strong classroom, library and research facilities that include simulation and engineering laboratories at OU-Tulsa
- course management system migration from Blackboard to Desire to Learn, which was accomplished through thoughtful evaluation and analysis that incorporated faculty, staff and student input.

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The HLC-NCA Assurance Report is available at http://www.ou.edu/accreditation.html.