Middle States Self Study
Executive Summary

The Middle States Self Study process of the past two years is completed, the Self Study document is posted on the board website, and the final steps in preparing for the visit are underway. As a result of the team chair’s preliminary visit to campus on November 3 the self-study design has been reorganized from the approved self-study design by Middle States from last spring. The evaluation visit is scheduled for February 8-11, 2015. The members of the evaluation team are listed below:

Margaret Mary Fitzpatrick, Team Chair
President
St. Thomas Aquinas College

Charles G. Mann
Vice President for Finance and
Treasurer
Hood College

Kathryn P. Doherty
Associate Vice President for Academic
Affairs
Notre Dame of Maryland University

Robert Miller
Dean of Institutional Research and
Assessment
Centenary College

Peter M. Gotlieb
Associate Dean, Experiential Learning
and Career Services
Saint Peter’s University

Stacy K. Sewell
Professor of History
St. Thomas Aquinas College

Richard Alan Greenwald
Dean, School of Humanities and Social
Sciences
Brooklyn College of the City
University of New York

Todd Slater
Instructional Technologist
Point Park University

The steering committee originally recommended that the self-study process be structured around the five institutional priorities of the Strategic Plan and formally organized in seven chapters. Following the preliminary visit, in response to the suggestion of the Visiting Team Chair, the structure of the self-study report was altered to follow the sequential order of the 14 Standards of Excellence. The following pages include the Introduction of the self-study as well as the summative Strengths and Suggestions that have emerged from the process.

The university community will be notified as further details about the February schedule are developed.
Introduction

The heritage of Alvernia University can be traced to the growth of three religious orders that owe their origin to the preaching of St. Francis of Assisi. The Bernardine Franciscan sisters, founders and sponsors of Alvernia University, are members of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis. Franciscan education recognizes the importance of love complementing understanding and learning and the primacy of works-oriented active love that gives the intellectual life a practical context for implementation. As pioneers in the field of Catholic education, the Bernardine Sisters were part of the 20th century movement in the Catholic Church to serve the poor and immigrant populations in America by founding and staffing schools, colleges and hospitals throughout the United States. In 1926 they opened an orphanage housed in what is currently Francis Hall up on Mount Alvernia. As the order grew and education became a priority, the congregation founded a liberal arts college for women religious in 1958, receiving its charter from the commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1960 and graduating its first class of four sisters in 1961. Shortly thereafter, they admitted laywomen, and the first male students were enrolled in 1971. Alvernia received final accreditation from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education in November 1967.

Within a few years, consistent with its founding mission, the college added professional programs to complement a strong liberal arts core. New programs such as nursing, business, allied health, criminal justice and social work responded to workforce demand and the needs of underserved populations. This distinctive service commitment afforded the college local recognition for combining liberal learning and practical application and has provided the impetus for continued growth. Today, Alvernia calls together students diverse in age, background, beliefs and educational interests to pursue academic excellence in a range of undergraduate, graduate and non-degree programs.

Alvernia currently enrolls more than 2,900 students, including 2,442 undergraduate and 475 graduate students, with 2,432 attending the main campus in Reading, Pennsylvania. There are two other major locations: one in Philadelphia, with average enrollment of about 270, and the other in Pottsville, which serves more than 140 students per year. In addition, Alvernia is approved for 16 other locations and two sites and for online education. Faculty and administration on the Reading campus maintain oversight of academic quality and provide support for all hiring, financial oversight, registration and technology support. The number of offsite locations has decreased dramatically in recent years as a result of changing external forces, including greater competition from neighboring and online providers. There are currently 12 inactive approved sites.

Alvernia’s programs are accredited by a number of national accrediting agencies. Those recognized by the United States Department of Education are the American Occupational Therapy Association, Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education and the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education. Other accreditation agencies include the Council on Social Work Education, the State Board of Nursing, the Association of Collegiate Business Schools and Programs, and the Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education. The Medical Imaging Program (in partnership with the
Reading Hospital School of Health Sciences) is accredited by the Joint Review Committee on Education in Radiologic Technology.

Alvernia also features an innovative Seniors College for several hundred women and men of post-retirement age. The programs provide a unique service to the community. The lives of seniors are enriched through active participation in a wide range of activities that enhance social, cultural and intellectual interaction. Until June 2014, Alvernia also operated a Montessori School founded by the Bernardines in 1963 as part of their mission to help area parents who had few options for high-quality preschool and kindergarten education. A recent assessment found that with many other choices for parents today, what started as a well-intentioned community service is no longer needed by most families.

Alvernia’s learning philosophy is guided by the ideal of “knowledge joined with love,” which shapes our strong campus community. The emphasis on developing the next generation of leaders is blended with a commitment to city and county that encourages all students to engage in lifelong community service. The university takes pride in offering life-changing educational opportunities to students from all backgrounds. Many first-generation students and those from underserved populations successfully balance work and significant economic challenges in earning their college degrees.

The university values the transformational impact it has on students who upon graduation go out into the world and make a positive difference in their professions and communities and in the lives of others. Rooted in the legacy of the Bernardine Franciscan Sisters, our mission calls on us to graduate “engaged citizens and ethical leaders with moral courage.”

**Progress Since 2004-2005 Self-Study**

Myriad changes have occurred in the decade since the last self-study. Alvernia has evolved from a still-small college into a regional, comprehensive university — featuring doctoral as well as masters programs and a thriving undergraduate residential community. There has been significant growth in the size, quality and diversity of full-time undergraduates, with 25-30% coming from outside Pennsylvania. More than 900 students now reside on campus, with 60% of them housed in special living-learning communities. There has been even more substantial expansion in the number and quality of full-time faculty, with a 50% total increase and with more than 60% of the current faculty hired in the last decade. A comprehensive “Framework for Faculty Excellence” was established in 2008, with major subsequent initiatives undertaken that have strengthened standards for tenure and promotion and increased faculty salaries and support for faculty scholarship and teaching excellence.

Over the last decade, new academic programs have been added, and others have been revised. A new General Education program is being implemented. Experiential “real-world” learning has become a signature; recently, both formal global learning and undergraduate research programs have been launched. Two named centers of excellence
— the Holleran Center for Community Engagement and the O’Pake Institute for Ethics, Leadership, and Public Service — have been established and funded by major endowments. Both of them have helped attract considerable attention and acclaim to Alvernia, with national recognition for the institution’s leading role in civic engagement from the Carnegie Foundation and other organizations.

The physical campus has more than tripled in acreage, with both grounds and facilities transformed. There have been 10 consecutive years of budget surpluses, even after full budgeting of depreciation, and the endowment has doubled. The first-ever comprehensive fundraising campaign greatly exceeded its goal, raising almost $32 million, almost eight times the amount of the previous effort. Alvernia is now far better known and respected among academic peers. Now a university, Alvernia strongly emphasizes its Franciscan mission and identity, rooted in the Catholic and liberal arts traditions.

While Alvernia has created an Institutional Research Data Resource Book to span a decade’s progress, a brief profile of changes is identified in Table 1. Such changes are among the most notable results of a comprehensive planning process launched by President Thomas F. Flynn upon his selection as president in 2005 and involving contributions from countless faculty and staff.

### Table 1. Institutional Changes Since 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Real Estate</td>
<td>50 acres</td>
<td>188 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Buildings</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Majors</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minors</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree Programs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral Degrees</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Resident Students</td>
<td>537</td>
<td>914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Full-Time Faculty</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Daytime Undergraduate Students</td>
<td>1325</td>
<td>1599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Adult Students</td>
<td>612</td>
<td>843</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Graduate Students</td>
<td>703</td>
<td>475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locations</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 2008 Alvernia celebrated both its 50th anniversary and the achievement of university status. Its first 50 years had witnessed the development of an associate degree, four undergraduate degrees with more than 40 different majors, nine master’s degrees, and a Ph.D. in Leadership, with other programs in development. The marketing and communications team led a successful launch of university status through a new wordmark, an effective advertising campaign, and a new website. In addition, the faculty and Board of Trustees approved two colleges and a school as the divisions of this new university. Alvernia simultaneously launched a plan to become a regional rather than
local institution, even as it reaffirmed its commitment to being an educational and cultural resource for its surrounding community. Most notably, in 2008, Alvernia was recognized by the prestigious Carnegie Foundation as a national model for community service and civic engagement, an honor shared with only 118 other colleges and universities nationally, including schools like Duke, Penn, Michigan, and Georgetown.

With a College of Arts and Sciences and College of Professional Studies, Alvernia today offers more than 70 undergraduate majors and minors that include a range of traditional programs as well as a comprehensive range of health and human services majors, including programs in nursing, occupational therapy, health sciences, social work, counseling, behavioral studies, and athletic training. In addition, tracks for pre-med, pre-dental, and pre-pharmacological studies are available for early admission into Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine. The university offers nine masters’ degree programs and one doctoral program – with a new practice doctorate in Physical Therapy in the School of Graduate and Adult Education (formerly the School of Graduate and Continuing Studies) awaiting approval by its accrediting body.

Self-Study Design and Process

As noted above, the landscape and culture of Alvernia has changed significantly since the appointment of Dr. Thomas Flynn as president in 2005, guided by the Strategic Plan. Stretching out 10 years and divided into two five-year phases (2008-2013 and 2013-2018), the plan articulates Alvernia’s aspirations— ranging from the vision to be a “distinctive Franciscan university” to the development of resources necessary to enhance educational quality and the student experience. Alvernia’s Strategic Plan is guided by five main themes: (1) Preserving and Promoting Our Franciscan Heritage; (2) Building Academic Strength; (3) Enhancing Student Satisfaction and Success; (4) Development Expanding Community Engagement and Institutional Visibility; and (5) Improving Operating Effectiveness and Resources, and is organized around five corresponding strategic priorities.

The major goal of this plan—to achieve university status—provided the focal point during the initial stage of implementation. In September 2008, following a comprehensive application process, self-study and visit by a state team, the Pennsylvania Department of Education granted Alvernia a change in status to university. The change to university status was accompanied by a set of helpful recommendations to be addressed in annual reports for three years. A number of changes were implemented following the recommendations from the state visiting team (See Appendix I.2).

As implementation of Phase I of the Strategic Plan neared completion, the unexpectedly rapid progress in achieving key goals, combined with equally dramatic changes in the economy and the competitive environment, led the president to call for a revision and updating of the plan. Building on a detailed report at the 2010 State of the University address, the customary annual assessment of progress was broadened to include an analysis of key external trends, an assessment of major opportunities and challenges, and the development of new or modified goals. Trustees, senior administrators, faculty and
staff on the Alvernia Planning and Advisory Council (APAC), and other groups conducted mini-environmental scans, or SWOT analyses. Subsequently, new goals were identified, all within the framework of the Strategic Plan’s original five priorities and the university’s mission and vision statements. Following campus-wide discussion and feedback during early fall 2011, the revised plan was reviewed and approved by both the trustees’ Executive Committee and the full board in 2012 (See Appendix I.3).

Reflecting both its integrated approach to planning and the transformational changes of the institution in the last decade, Alvernia elected to complete a comprehensive self-study. After an intense review of the connections between accreditation requirements and institutional priorities, the steering committee selected the comprehensive design as the most appropriate as it “will be useful, attuned to current and future institutional needs and priorities, and focused on the teaching and learning process” (Self-study Guide, p.18). This design also afforded more opportunities to engage the entire campus community in a meaningful dialogue and self-reflection, a basic tenet of Alvernia’s Franciscan tradition.

The steering committee originally recommended that the self-study process be structured around the five institutional priorities of the Strategic Plan and formally organized in seven chapters as shown in Table 2. The self-study design approved by MSCHE in April 2013 followed this format and enabled Alvernia to assess every aspect of its programs and services, governing and administrative structures, resources and educational outcomes in relation to its mission and vision in the context of the Strategic Plan.

**Table 2. Original Structure of Self-Study Report Approved in Design Document in April 2013.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. Identity</th>
<th>II. Educational Quality</th>
<th>III. Student Communities</th>
<th>IV. Community and External Engagement</th>
<th>V. Resource Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission (Standard 1)</td>
<td>Leadership and Governance (Standard 4)</td>
<td>Faculty (Standard 10)</td>
<td>General Education (Standard 12)</td>
<td>Student Admissions and Retention (Standard 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity (Standard 6)</td>
<td>Administration (Standard 5)</td>
<td>Educational Offerings (Standard 11)</td>
<td>Assessment of Student Learning (Standard 14)</td>
<td>Student Support Services (Standard 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Assessment (Standard 7)</td>
<td>Related Educational Activities (Standard 13)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following the preliminary visit, in response to the suggestion of the Visiting Team Chair, the structure of the self-study report was altered to follow the sequential order of the 14 Standards of Excellence as reflected in Table 3.
Table 3. Final Structure of Self-Study Report.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mission and Goals (Standard 1)</td>
<td>Planning, Resource Allocation and Institutional Renewal (Standard 2)</td>
<td>Institutional Resources (Standard 3)</td>
<td>Leadership and Governance (Standard 4)</td>
<td>Administration (Standard 5)</td>
<td>Integrity (Standard 6)</td>
<td>Institutional Assessment (Standard 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Student Admissions and Retention (Standard 8)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Student Support Services (Standard 9)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Faculty (Standard 10)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Alvernia’s recent progress reflects improvement during the last decade and the goals established in the 2007 (2012) strategic plan. This success has, quite naturally, led the entire campus community to have greater expectations for the future. The overall goal of the self-study is to provide an opportunity for the university to examine its successes and challenges in a comprehensive and systematic way that not only meets accreditation requirements but also specifically assesses the university’s performance in reference to institutional aspirations and the challenges and opportunities of environmental conditions. In the context of the 14 Standards of Excellence of MSCHE and Alvernia University’s strategic priorities, seven goals were developed for the self-study (See Appendix I.4). In December 2012 and January 2013 campus-wide meetings were organized, emphasizing representation from all key constituencies: faculty, students, and staff, to develop self-study questions. The meetings were attended by more than 150 faculty, staff, and campus leaders and generated a total of 998 specific questions aligned to each of the standards and their fundamental elements. The questions from the workshops were then analyzed using ATLAS.ti software to identify emerging themes. The Office of Institutional Research and Assessment compiled the results.

To facilitate information-sharing, a self-study site was created on the MyAlvernia portal that includes working spaces for the steering committee and each of the 14 research groups with coordinated calendars, discussion/announcement boards, and email groups. In August 2013, a comprehensive electronic repository of institutional documents, report and meeting-minute templates, MSCHE publications, and other relevant materials were added to the site. The repository currently includes about 2,000 documents used as supporting evidence in the self-study process.

A 29-member steering committee, including two co-chairs for each of the 14 research groups for the standards and the provost, guided the self-study process (See Appendix I.5). Regular monthly meetings assured information-sharing and prompt feedback supplemented by individual group meetings as needed. Meeting minutes, calendar updates, group announcements, and discussion threads on special topics on the SharePoint site allowed a very large team to manage the process efficiently and effectively with active involvement of all 127 members.
Since the aim of the self-study process is to improve the institution, it is essential that individuals throughout the Alvernia community realize how their talents are gifts to the university. Authentic reflection and conversation are critical components of the Franciscan tradition. This has been a guiding principle to a comprehensive and inclusive self-study process. Following the completion of the compilation of research into a rough draft, members of the steering committee will hold feedback sessions with members of the community at large to ensure that the results of the work are understood. This will help divisions continue to address suggestions and recommendations that emerge from the work.
Summary

Listed below are the major institutional strengths and suggestions for improvement that have been identified as a result of the self-study process. Progress on these suggestions is already well underway.

Strengths
1. The integration of mission in planning, programs, and educational offerings reinforces our identity, contributes to institutional transformation, and drives our branding and marketing processes so that Alvernia’s mission and identity are compelling to internal and external constituencies.

2. A comprehensive, ongoing planning process continues to shape institutional renewal through a well-integrated framework for setting annual goals and assessing the use and allocation of resources. Supported by an excellent institutional research operation, extensive data are collected, analyzed, and used across the university.

3. Effective institutional governance policies and procedures and a formal recruitment plan for new trustees have shaped a high performing Board of Trustees. The Board has been essential in guiding the strategic direction of the institution over the past decade and enjoys excellent relationships with administrative, faculty, and student leaders. Trustees work seamlessly with the leaders of the sponsoring congregation, the Bernardine Franciscan Sisters, as exemplified by the Sponsorship Covenant, which has been featured nationally. Many current and former trustees have provided philanthropic leadership and are also recognized leaders in the local community.

4. Educational offerings have been enhanced through impressive growth in a) the size and quality of faculty; b) professionalized processes for curriculum oversight and governance; and c) enhanced opportunities and funding for faculty scholarship and professional development.

5. The university has established a culture of assessment focused on improving educational quality as evidenced by a significant volume of data and improved quality of assessment of student learning.

6. As an institution with modest endowment, a keen focus on budget planning has been critical to the institution’s dramatic progress over the last decade. The overall operating results have been consistently strong due to data-driven enrollment analysis, targeted investments, continued monitoring of revenue, and multiple layers of contingencies.

7. Institutional renewal has been rooted in Alvernia’s change from college to university status, accompanied by the physical transformation of campus and facilities and the enhancement of the student experience on an increasingly more residential campus.
Suggestions:

The self-study has formulated 6 integrated suggestions that emerge as common themes and address key areas of improvement across the institution. The integrated suggestions reflect the collaborative nature of operations in a complex institution as well as the natural interconnectedness of the Standards of Excellence.

1. Enhance and deepen the shared understanding of our Franciscan intellectual tradition across all constituencies by developing and implementing a university-wide plan for mission education that will pervade the student experience in both the curriculum and co-curriculum. The framework for this effort was begun last year; a plan has been drafted and, following feedback, will be completed in March 2015. (Standards 1, 2).

2. Enhance the consistency of academic, student life, and technology support for all sites, locations and delivery systems as part of the continued growth in curricular and co-curricular programming since the last decennial report. There has been continuous improvement in infrastructure and academic support systems, especially in the past two years, that has increasingly helped meet the needs of a diverse student population. (Standards 8, 9, 11, 13).

3. Continue and enhance the comprehensive and systematic assessment of student learning outside of the classroom by strengthening assessment by non-instructional departments and units by further integrating TK20 and Campus Labs. This work is now underway. (Standards 9, 12, 14).

4. Enhance and broaden the intentionality of institutional assessment by a) formalizing the role of Extended Cabinet in the data collection and analysis processes and b) creating an annual data report to be shared across all units. This change is already being implemented and will serve to further improve the application of data already being used in both divisional and institutional goal setting and assessment. (Standards 2, 7).

5. Develop a comprehensive deferred maintenance plan to build on the annual capital improvement process and the current Life-Cycle Facilities Management Plan, both already under the purview of the Board of Trustees Facilities and Technology Committee. (Standards 2, 3)

6. Strengthen the clarity, consistency, and timeliness of communication processes between and within divisions of the university—especially the academic departments and colleges—in order to improve shared understanding of budget planning, decision-making, and oversight. Formal communication from administration is seen as an overall strength, but inter- and intra-divisional communication and engagement on budget issues needs renewed emphasis in recognition of the increased complexity of the demands on institutional resources. (Standards 2, 4, 5, 10)