

Report to the  
Faculty, Administration, Trustees, and Students  
of

Sullivan County Community College  
Loch Sheldrake, NY 12759

by  
A Team Representing the  
Middle States Commission on Higher Education

Prepared After a  
Follow-Up Visit to the Institution on:  
September 17-19, 2013

The Visitors:  
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Working with the Visitors:  
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At the Time of the Visit:  
President/Chief Executive Officer:  
Dr. Karin Hilgersom, President, Sullivan County Community College

Chief Academic Officer:  
Robert Schultz, Ph.D.

Chair of the Governing Board:  
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## I. Institutional Overview

Sullivan County Community College (SUNY Sullivan) is a public, associate's level postsecondary institution serving the citizens of Sullivan County in the Catskills region of New York State, some ninety miles northwest of New York City. The College was initially accredited by the Commission on Higher Education in 1968. Situated on an attractive 405 acre campus in Loch Sheldrake, NY, enrollment as of March 1, 2013 is reported as 1,134 fulltime and 571 part time students. About 500 students are enrolled in community education or other non-credit bearing courses. The faculty consists of approximately 50 full time and 63 part time professional staff.

SUNY Sullivan has experienced declining enrollment and budgetary stress for both structural and other reasons. First, the College was built with the understanding that the local population would not be sufficient and so students would be recruited from outside and from the New York City area. Second, the College also exists in an economically disadvantaged area. Moreover, while trustee support has remained solid, the College has been constrained by general declines in state revenues; variances in "chargeback" revenues from the state based on enrollment; and steady, but not increasing, funding from its local sponsor. So, it follows that enrollment and retention plans, student services, and alternative revenue are of vital concern in the new Strategic Plan.

The College also has seen turnover in senior officers. A year-and-a-half-long interim presidency followed the retirement of a long-time president in 2011. An Interim President appointed by SUNY improved relationships with local sponsors like the County Legislature, began several innovative enrollment initiatives and prepared the institution for the arrival of the new President, who began her duties on February 18, 2013. A strong supporter of planning, she was in office only nine weeks at the time of the team visit spring 2013.

SUNY Sullivan has had challenges of long standing with regard to strategic planning, institutional assessment and collegial governance. Following its MSCHE decennial evaluation spring 2012, the College was placed on warning for non-compliance with Standard 2 on Planning, Resource Allocation and Institutional Renewal and Standard 7 on Institutional Assessment. A monitoring report on those standards was followed by a Follow-Up team visit in April 2013.

The 2013 team found that the planning model the administration used had improved campus communication and trust. The consultative process they chose was thorough, but it did not produce an approved or implemented plan by the time of the 2013 team visit. Only one of four stages had been completed and the team did not find sufficient evidence of implementation and evidence of using data or studies to improve quality.

Finally, during the visit a major theme for the current team emerged: the extent to which the engaged leadership of SUNY Sullivan at all levels will protect and extend the momentum built over the last months with regard to planning and quality assurance.

The team thanks the SUNY Sullivan community for the candor, warm hospitality and helpfulness extended us during all parts of our review and visit.

## **II. Nature and Conduct of the Visit**

On June 28, 2012, the Commission acted on SUNY Sullivan's accreditation as follows:

*To warn the institution that its accreditation may be in jeopardy because of insufficient evidence that the institution is currently in compliance with Standards 2 (Planning, Resource Allocation and Institutional Renewal) and 7 (Institutional Assessment). To note that the institution remains accredited while on warning. To request a Monitoring Report due March 1, 2013, documenting that the institution has achieved and can sustain compliance with Standards 2 and 7. To request that the report include but not be limited to (1) evidence of the development and implementation of an institutional strategic plan that is linked to institutional mission, goals and resource allocation, that is developed with constituent participation, that is clearly communicated to all constituencies, and that includes realistic and measurable objectives, the assignment of accountabilities and the use of assessment results (Standards 2 and 7). To request that the Monitoring Report also document (2) steps taken to strengthen the institution's finances (Standard 3). To further request that the Periodic Review Report document evidence of the assessment of program-level student learning outcomes in all programs (Standard 14). A small team visit will follow submission of the monitoring report. To direct a prompt liaison guidance visit to discuss the Commission's expectations for reporting. The due date for the Periodic Review Report will be established when accreditation is reaffirmed.*

The liaison guidance visit was conducted September 2012.

The small team visit in April 2013 resulted in the following Commission action:

*To accept the monitoring report and to note the visit by the Commission's representatives. To continue to warn the institution that its accreditation may be in jeopardy because of insufficient evidence that the institution is currently in compliance with Standard 2 (Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal) and Standard 7 (Institutional Assessment). To note that the institution remains accredited while on warning. To request a monitoring report, due September 1, 2013, documenting that the institution has achieved and can sustain ongoing compliance with Standards 2 and 7, including but not limited to evidence of (1) continued development and implementation of the institutional*

*strategic planning process, including evidence that the process is clearly communicated, provides for constituent participation, and includes realistic and measurable objectives and the assignment of responsibility for improvements (Standard 2), and (2) that assessment results are used to inform planning and budgeting (Standards 2 and 7). A small team visit will follow submission of the monitoring report. The due date for the Periodic Review Report will be established when accreditation is reaffirmed. To remind the institution that the Periodic Review Report should document evidence of the assessment of program-level student learning outcomes in all programs (Standard 14).*

The team met with the following groups and persons:

#### Strategic Planning and Institutional Assessment (SPIA) Committee

- Christina Buckler, Facilities Support Technician
- Larysa Dyrszka, Member, Board of Trustees
- Iman Elginbehi, Asst. VP for Academic & Student Affairs
- Mike Fisher, Chair, Division of Professional Studies
- Janet Halprin, Director, Institutional Research
- Susan Horton, Controller (Finance)
- Adrianna Mayson-Greco, Director, Student Activities
- Stephen Mitchell, Assoc. VP Planning, HR and Facilities
- Beth Murray, Administrative Assistant to the Assoc VP
- Klu Padu, Admissions Counselor
- Paul Reifenhiser, Chair, Division of Liberal Arts & Humanities
- Susan Rogers, Assistant Professor, Psychology
- Jill Somers, Division Secretary, Health Sciences
- Cheryl Welsch, Director, Institutional Computing

#### Executive Committee

- Cindy Bennedum-Kashan, VP Institutional Advancement and Enrollment Management
- Susan Horton, Controller
- Karin Hilgersom, President
- Stephen Mitchell, Assoc. VP Planning, HR and Facilities
- Robert Schultz, VP Academic and Student Affairs
- Sara Thompason-Tweedy, Dean of Student Development Services

#### Board of Trustees

- Larysa Dykstra
- Joan Farrow
- Josphine Finn
- Russ Heyman
- Lyman Holmes
- John Lopez, Student Trustee
- Nick Speranza, Chair

#### Student Services Group

- Cindy Bennedum-Kashan, VP Institutional Advancement and Enrollment Management
- Chris Depew, Director of Athletics
- Rose Hanofee, Director of Learning and Student Development Services
- Sara Thompason-Tweedy, Dean of Student Development Services

#### Executive Committee (subgroup)

- Susan Horton, Controller
- Stephen Mitchell, Assoc. VP Planning, HR and Facilities
- Robert Schultz, VP Academic and Student Affairs

### **III. Affirmation of Compliance with Requirements of Affiliation under Review**

Based on a review of the Monitoring Report and appendices, interviews, and other institutional documents, the team affirms that the institution continues to meet the Requirements of Affiliation under review.

### **IV. Commendations and Summary of Institutional Strengths**

1. The team's review was made much easier by the exemplary candor in the Monitoring Report and campus discussions.
2. Highly participative planning has rebuilt collegiality and stimulated new ideas and energy for change.
3. The College benefits from effective leadership by the Board, the administration, and faculty leaders, and especially the hard work of SPIA over the last year.
4. As a result of strong leadership, the campus community seems energized by the planning and has recommitted to the mission and its values.

### **V. Compliance with Accreditation Standards under Review**

#### **Standard 2: Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal**

*An institution conducts ongoing planning and resource allocation based on its mission and goals, develops objectives to achieve them, and utilizes the results of its assessment activities for institutional renewal. Implementation and subsequent evaluation of the success of the strategic plan and resource allocation support the development and change necessary to improve and to maintain institutional quality.*

The visitors' judgment is that, at this time, the institution is in compliance with the standard.

## **Summary of Key Evidence and Developments:**

Intensive planning has been led by the Strategic Planning and Institutional Assessment Team (SPIA) that has a cross-section of the campus community, including administrators, faculty members, clerical staff, and board members. This group meets about every month or more for much of the year. SPIA has led an intensive, highly collaborative process, especially over the last two years, increasingly so to respond to MSCHE requirements and visits.

The College chose an innovative planning method, Appreciative Inquiry, which comes from positive psychology where challenges are acknowledged but the focus is on creative, collaborative problem solving. Two foci are finding collective strengths and building common vision.

The Strategic Plan has all the requisite elements from mission and vision statements through measurable objectives to metrics. In the Operating Budget Overview, core values and themes distilled from Appreciate Inquiry are cross referenced against program goals, outcomes means, target dates, and needed resources. At the same time, the plan would be made stronger if the responsible person or office were identified in the document—that information was given to the team at our request in a separate document.

SUNY Sullivan has new energy and ideas for decentralized, opportunistic change. A new president has brought considerable energy and she values planning, assessment, and action. For example, having only a few months on the ground and facing a difficult budget, she made difficult budget decisions and encouraged entrepreneurial planning underway to renovate the food service area as well as the student space, which are attractive and seem to have increased participation. In this way, the administration leveraged the Chartwell food service contract to get their support, new private funding, and matching funds from SUNY. We cite this creative funding as an example of how an institution can, with the right spirit, parley modest resources into dramatic change.

Moreover, today planned change is in the air. People talk about all they want to accomplish. The new president and her chief planning officer both have a theory of change with which to guide campus improvement.

The Monitoring Report spoke to improved campus communications and energy. It detailed numerous overlapping feedback loops to improve campus communication, including access points on the College's web site, which are working well.

In interviews the team heard about a “sea change” in organizational culture from a top down, compartmentalized ethos where persons were afraid to make decisions to a culture today that values broad consultation, transparency, and action with responsibility taking. That characterization may be too dramatic, but mood on campus seems optimistic and self-confident, and the team found copious evidence of different forms and venues of consultation that seems sustainable. A new openness began with the original self-study and the candor was carried

forward in the Monitoring Report. Visitors cannot miss the frank discussion of challenges in a context of “we can change this.”

In response to concerns expressed by the Commission, planning has been intensive and their work has many moving pieces. It is not easy to change direction with a ship in uncertain waters, but the leadership has changed course. Now, with a plausible plan approved by the board, to maintain momentum becomes the challenge.

SUNY Sullivan has made good use of external consultants for planning as well as SUNY resources and expertise.

Enrollment projections are now data-based with wide consultation rather than anecdotal or coming from one office. Managers collaborate on major institutional decisions and the team saw numerous examples of how specific objectives in the plan are tied to budget and assessment. Published projections from 2013 forward to 2018 are notably conservative, showing negligible growth in FTE or credit hours. Similarly, the new president reduced enrollment projections for fall 2013, which then were tentatively exceeded, a fact which may contribute to growing institutional self-confidence.

The team also learned about innovative changes made in both student services and in academic programs because of assessment and data. For instance, efforts to reduce “no shows” may be helping budget planning as well as looking to clear students financially early in the semester based, in part, on best practices from other SUNY colleges.

The Strategic Plan has been approved and published. The Board has become involved over the last year and formally approved the plan in August 15, 2013. In fact, ten changes in the plan were made as a result of productive discussions between the Board and SPIA. At least one trustee is an *ex officio* member of SPIA, thus to improve communication between campus and board. The approved plan was distributed to the campus community on August 20, 2013.

Progress, dramatic as it is, brings new puzzles. The amount and depth of planning now underway poses questions for campus decision making as well as collegial governance. The Appreciative Inquiry model and other changes seem to have energized many persons who now feel empowered to advance new ideas. At the same time, the building wave of ideas for change may raise questions of boundaries and accountability among the several committees on campus such as SPIA, Faculty Council, Executive Council, Cabinet and others. Who, exactly, makes which decisions in what time frame?

Both the College and its engaged Board are considering improvements in governance as a result of the planning process—also, under review is a new committee structure for the Faculty Council that aligns with the plan’s strategic concerns. The spirit of collaborative inquiry also seems evident in a proposal to form new sub-committees within both unions to track core issues from the strategic plan. The team supports these creative initiatives.

So much about the new spirit and structure of strategic planning is estimable. One area of concern is whether or not a perennially hard pressed college has, or can find, the resources both for its good ideas and for measuring the results of various changes. SUNY Sullivan, which is located in a rural and poor region of the Catskills, needs new revenue and to address this need is a central focus of the plan. The leadership seems nimble with regard to opportunities for new revenue or to create much needed jobs for the region. They are finding resources in creative fashion.

Finally, a new challenge for SPIA, the board and the administration, in general, is managing the hard-won momentum built over perhaps two years and not showing signs of slowing. So many pieces are now in place; but the leadership needs to be vigilant with regard to the first wave of institutional assessment. The team also reminds the institution that the Commission has asked for a report on Standard 14 in the Periodic Review Report.

**Recommendations:**

1. Various planning documents would be stronger if the office or role responsible for accomplishment were explicit in the document rather than implicit.
2. After due deliberation, it would seem useful for the administration to write a description of the purview and reporting lines of major standing committees, especially because of the several changes now underway.
3. Given that a number of the strategic plan objectives are dependent on finding funding, it is suggested that the institution make the prioritization of the strategic objectives a written part of the plan. This will help to ensure transparency when discretionary funds are available.

**Suggestion:**

1. Because so many change efforts are underway on campus, consideration might be given to offering in-service education to staff and faculty leaders on managing planned change.

**Standard 7: Institutional Assessment**

*The institution has developed and implemented an assessment process that evaluates its overall effectiveness in achieving its mission and goals and its compliance with accreditation standards.*

The visitors' judgment is that, at this time, the institution is in compliance with the standard.



## **Summary of Key Evidence and Developments:**

As discussed under Standard 2, the institution has a standing committee entitled Strategic Planning and Institutional Assessment Committee (SPIA). Its charge is to periodically review and revise the college's mission, vision, and strategic plan. The committee is further charged with accountability for the plan with a special concern to review and audit both planning processes and outcomes. The SPIA committee is well represented by faculty and personnel from around the institution including trustees.

Each element of SUNY Sullivan's plan has at least one metric. In a few instances, the means to measure the objective are not yet developed. But, in most instances, the plan relies on standard measures that the College has used for some time. For example, they use a SUNY-ACT standardized assessment to survey students, and are also using graduation questionnaires, and headcount data.

In addition, the College has moved forward to become a beta site for the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA). These measures, along with some financial measures, define institutional success, and closely align with the strategic plan's goal of improving student success that, in turn, aligns well with the institution's mission of educating and empowering students. The College has chosen a distributive, decentralized approach to assessment in which objectives are assessed by the individual department/unit with the support of the institutional research officer. In this manner, evaluation of program and goal effectiveness is at the department level.

The institutional research office provided additional documentation during the visiting team's time on campus. These documents clearly define the calendar of assessments occurring over the next year, as well as cyclical assessments.

During the team's time on campus, it was abundantly clear that evidence and data were tools the College regularly shares and uses as it conducts its business. The team heard frequent mention of multiple reports and measures used for change.

In sum, the College has developed a comprehensive, intensive process through which its latest strategic plan was created and vetted. The team saw numerous examples of using studies to improve administrative and academic processes. The entire planning process was notably collaborative and each objective is clearly connected to a metric.

## **Recommendations:**

1. The planning has identified goals and objectives that follow a distributive, decentralized approach where primary responsibility for data collection and analysis is at the department level. Still, the workload of the Institutional Research office should be monitored to ensure that data analyses plans for the institution are realistic.
2. Written policies/plans should be developed to specify when data will be shared, what data will be shared, and with whom. While data and reports are shared with a broad

range of individuals on campus (e.g., Board, Executive Team, SPIA), no written policies ensure that this collaboration will be routine.

**Suggestion:**

1. Documentation directly connecting specific measurement instruments to plan objectives and other elements should be published. During the team's visit, the Institutional Research office provided a draft template. This document should be completed and used as a "map" of what is being measured and why.

**VI. Summary of Compliance**

Based on a review of the Monitoring Report and appendices, interviews, and other documents reviewed during the visit, the team draws the following conclusions.

The team finds SUNY Sullivan in compliance with Standards 2 and 7. Intensive planning has been led by the Strategic Planning and Institutional Assessment committee that enjoys a cross-section of the campus community, including administrators, faculty members, staff, and board members. Highly participative planning has rebuilt collegiality and stimulated new ideas and energy for change. The College also benefits from effective leadership by the Board, the administration, and faculty leaders, and especially the hard work of SPIA over the last year. As a result of strong leadership, the campus community seems recommitted to the mission and its values, and innovative improvements to the governance plan are being discussed. The Board has approved the Strategic Plan, a key step that had not been done before the last visit spring 2013. The team also saw sufficient instances that the administration is using decentralized assessment of several types to improve quality and planning itself. Finally, the next issue is the extent to which the engaged leadership of SUNY Sullivan, facing challenging finances of long standing, will protect and extend the hard-won momentum it has built over the last months with regard to planning and quality assurance.