ADVANCEMENT SECTION

REPORT OF A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION VISIT

TO

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FOR

The Higher Learning Commission
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EVALUATION TEAM

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ADVANCEMENT SECTION

I. OVERALL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE INSTITUTION

The University of Arkansas at Monticello has an historic mission that would challenge any institution: to provide higher education to those with fewer options than some and to be an economic driver in a lagging rural region of the state. Stakeholders expect much of the University, and it is doing its best to meet all these expectations. It is in many ways the strongest economic development hope of its region, and the communities of southeastern Arkansas treasure what UAM does for their families and businesses. Because so much is expected of UAM, it runs the risk of trying to be all things to all people—a position its limited resources challenge it to fulfill. As it plans for the next ten years, UAM needs to pay attention to managing these expectations and developing a plan for its future that makes wise use of its resources. Fortunately, what UAM lacks in concrete resources, it makes up for in the support of business, community and governmental leaders as well as in the commitment and hard work of its staff and faculty.

Faculty and staff strongly support the distinct mission of UAM in southeastern Arkansas as an open admission institution and take great pride in the development and success of their students. They are dedicated to the students and work hard to provide appropriate advising and other services that meet student needs. Students uniformly expressed a high level of satisfaction and appreciation with the faculty to Team members. Faculty and staff also realize the importance of the institution to the economic, social and cultural life of southeastern Arkansas.

Community, faculty, and staff view the merging of the two technical colleges with UAM as a real strength. Community leaders see k-12 education as crucial to economic development, as well, and for that reason view the role UAM plays by producing-teachers as vital to the long-term welfare of their region. The Monticello campus, with its strong program in the arts, plays the leading role in the cultural life of southeastern Arkansas through such activities as the campus-community concert association. In fact, virtually every unit on the UAM campus is involved in the community in their appropriate areas of expertise.

With the appointment of a new Chancellor, there is an abundance of good will and enthusiasm that will be necessary for it to meet its challenges and move forward with the accomplishment of its mission.
CONSULTATIONS OF THE TEAM

At present the University does not engage in strategic planning. Given the lack of assessment and of program review, the expectations of southeastern Arkansas for the University, and the limited resources available, the Team views the need for campus planning as imperative. A SWOT analysis, involving a wide representation of campus and off-campus constituencies, will reveal areas for potential strategic advancement and lead to informed campus discussions about where UAM should go and how it should get there. These discussions, in turn, should lead to a short and focused list of strategic priorities and a plan to move UAM in the desired direction. Strategic Planning should pay special attention to the on-going process of the integration of the Technical Colleges at McGehee and Crossett into the overall University structure and aspirations.

Several other items should be considered in the context of effective planning. The Team encourages the university to ensure appropriate participation of faculty in personnel and other decision-making processes. The University might consider opening up the budgeting process for campus-wide participation and review. Perhaps a standing budget committee should be established. Whatever the precise process, the past opaque budgeting process should be replaced with a participatory one focusing on a system that establishes priorities. Stakeholders will benefit from the knowledge gained of the financial challenges of running a public university and can help build a campus consensus.

Moreover, effective planning requires an effective assessment program. As noted in the Assurance Section, the campus must develop an effective assessment program. Measurable programmatic learning outcomes must be developed that are reasonable, manageable, meaningful and aligned with the institutional mission. The data need to be gathered and analyzed and used to make program improvements. HLC is clear about the importance of assessment and UAM has been weak in its response to this issue. The campus should consider sending some of its academic administrators and faculty to one of the many excellent assessment conferences offered each year.

Likewise, in support of effective planning, UAM should consider enhancing its program review process and using the reviews in planning. Currently, campus program review is perfunctory. When done well, program review is useful because it answers important questions, reveals opportunities and challenges, and assures the public that the campus is actively fulfilling its mission. Planning also helps to make the most effective use of resources. Given UAM's limited resources, for example, the campus could examine its many low enrollment programs that appear to have continued beyond their natural life cycle. External evaluation should be an essential part of program review to ensure that the University does not get out of step with best practices in the disciplines.
The University needs to be concerned about the ability of the campus to attract and retain the most qualified faculty and staff. In addition to preserving the current benefit package, the campus needs to improve salaries and provide more opportunities for professional development, including increased support for research and creative activity. High demand areas, such as nursing, education and business will present particularly challenging circumstances. Faculty development plays a key role in faculty recruitment, retention, morale, and in student learning. The University should consider reestablishing its professional development funding for faculty research and travel. Campus wide funding should be restored, but deans and chairs should also be encouraged to use funds available to them to promote faculty development. The University may also consider regular on-campus faculty and staff development programs that utilize external consultants as well as internal expertise. Hosting faculty and staff development programs on-campus provides an opportunity for the University to address campus wide topics of concern in an effective and cost effective manner.

As an open admission institution, a high proportion of UAM's students must take remedial instruction. The effectiveness of remedial courses and of the remedial program should be assessed with appropriate changes made to increase the likelihood of students successfully completing their degree program.

Although the team views the restricted number of courses available to satisfy a particular category in the general education requirement as a strength (since it ensures an element of cohesion to the program), the Team suggests that the objectives and goals of general education be inserted into the general education section of the college catalogue.

The Faculty Handbook is out of date, contains significant errors and typos, and perpetuates policies not in use or in conflict with actual policies: In short, it needs a thorough review because it is a compact between the University and its faculty members. Models are available on the web sites of many comparable universities.

While development is currently one of many duties of a current administrator, the Team recommends that the University give careful consideration to hiring a full-time advancement professional. Community and alumni/alumnae support for UAM is strong. A full-time staff member could vastly improve the University's ability to capture this potential.

The elimination of the honors program saved money but severely harmed faculty morale. Given the effort of UAM in the area of remediation, many faculty members see the honors program as a symbol of the University’s striving for academic excellence. Moreover, the elimination of the honors program has meant that some of the stronger students are choosing to go elsewhere, depriving the campus of a group of high achieving students. The University should review the budget and consider whether reactivating the honors program might better serve the interests of the campus.
III. RECOGNITION OF SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS
PROGRESS AND/OR PRACTICES

UAM is deeply involved with the off-campus community. Economic development activities include such outreach efforts as those of Forestry Resources, the agricultural programs, and the economic development office of the Technical College at McGehee. Indeed Team meetings with members of the community revealed very clearly that these members look to the University to provide leadership in this respect. Often, in fact, the University convenes meetings of these groups, such as the regional Cornerstone Coalition for Economic Development. Along with its traditional programs, the Monticello campus provides unique and creative opportunities for students through programs such as the "Virtual Internship." In this program students are physically located in an office-like work area on campus while working for a company at another location.