



Middle States Commission on Higher Education

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Report to the Faculty, Staff, Students, and Administration of Gallaudet University

by a Team Representing the Middle States Commission of Higher Education

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accompanied by

Ms. Linda Suskie, Vice President, MSCHE

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Gallaudet University is a private liberal arts institution in Washington DC offering certificate/diploma, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs. Its primary mission is to serve the deaf and hard of hearing. In addition to its Washington campus, it operates Regional Centers at Flagler College in St. Augustine, Florida; Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas; Kapialani Community College in Honolulu, Hawaii; Northern Essex Community College in Haverhill, Massachusetts; and Ohlone College in Fremont, California. It has been accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education since 1957.

This visit followed Gallaudet University's submission of a supplemental information report requested by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education on November 16, 2006, on (1) the effectiveness of shared governance including presidential search process, (2) nurturance of a climate that fosters respect among students, faculty, staff, and administration for a range of backgrounds, ideas, and perspectives, (3) mission review and implementation of a comprehensive institutional strategic plan, (4) implementation of a comprehensive enrollment management plan that addresses student recruitment, retention, graduation, and placement, (5) evidence of the academic rigor of the degrees offered, and (6) procedures for ensuring that changes and issues affecting the institution are disclosed accurately and in a timely manner to the Commission.

During its visit, the team met with:

- Interim President Robert Davila
- President's Management Team
- AAUA and faculty officers
- Faculty Senate
- Committee on Bilingualism
- Six working groups established by President Davila to address six priorities that he has identified for his term in office
- Representatives of the faculty and staff
- Representatives of the students
- Representatives of the Board of Trustees

The team extends deep thanks to members of the Gallaudet University community for their gracious hospitality, for their active participation in the visit, and for their contributions to the Supplemental Information Report submitted to the Commission in April. Special thanks are extended to David Armstrong and Judy Berglund for their tireless, unfailingly cheerful, and superb efforts to coordinate all the logistical arrangements for this visit.

We begin this report by noting three contexts for this visit.

The first context is that, just six months ago, Gallaudet University was a deeply troubled and divided institution, with problems that cannot be resolved quickly or easily. The Gallaudet University community is embarked on a long, difficult journey. We commend the University community for its commitment to Gallaudet University during these difficult times, the energy and enthusiasm with which it has undertaken this journey, and the substantial progress it has made to date in addressing all areas of concern identified by the Commission. The Supplemental Information Report demonstrates that Gallaudet is working very hard to move in the right direction and is showing progress. Many people we met spoke with great pride of a new and much improved climate at the University with better communication. Much healing has taken place, and we know that this did not come about without a great deal of hard work. We commend your many accomplishments over the past four months.

On the other hand, however, while much progress has been made, the journey is a long one, full of challenges, and cannot be completed quickly. There is still a significant distance to be traveled for Gallaudet to fully resolve all the concerns of the Commission.

The second context is that Gallaudet University has a long history of isolation from the American higher education community, of management and decision-making based on anecdote rather than on systematic evidence and analysis, and of submitting reports to Middle States with platitudes and assurances rather than substantive evidence and analysis. Given this long history, we commend the University for submitting to the Commission a Supplemental Information Report that is more substantive than its submissions in the recent past and shows progress in obtaining and analyzing evidence.

On the other hand, however, the Commission's standards and expectations have changed and grown dramatically in recent years, and Gallaudet's Supplemental Information Report does not have the level of compelling, systematic evidence and analysis that we typically see in institutional reports today. The Federal government has increasingly high expectations for accountability, and the Commission is now holding institutions to far more rigorous expectations for evidence of compliance with Commission standards than it did just a few short years ago. Reports submitted to the Commission are now expected to convey, through substantive, systematic, detailed and compelling evidence and careful analysis, the institution's compliance with accreditation standards and fundamental elements as well as plans to improve itself. As Vice President Linda Suskie's January 13, 2007, letter to President Davila explained, ***"it is now incumbent upon Gallaudet to provide evidence of its compliance with these standards"*** (emphasis added).

Ms. Suskie's January 13 letter noted that the Supplemental Information Report should include "tangible rather than conceptual plans" and that it specifically should:

- “explain, in concrete terms, plans to systematically analyze, assess, and improve the functionality of Gallaudet’s governance system...”
- “explain, in concrete terms...plans to modify the next presidential search process so that the outcome is more successful.”
- “include an assessment of board effectiveness (or concrete plans to conduct one)”
- “explain, in concrete terms, your plans to analyze, assess, and improve campus climate...include in this section your plans to systematically analyze and assess the effectiveness of policies and processes regarding complaints, grievances, discipline, and academic and intellectual freedom...”
- “explain, in concrete terms, plans to review Gallaudet’s mission to ensure that it reflects the current environment and is viable...”
- “also explain, in concrete terms, plans to analyze systematically the viability of Gallaudet’s strategic plan and, if it is determined to be viable, plans to implement the strategic plan (timelines, accountabilities, plans to assess institutional effectiveness in achieving mission and strategic goals, etc.)”
- “include strategies and processes to ensure that institutional decision makers have timely, transparent access to enrollment management information...along with concrete plans to develop a more comprehensive enrollment management plan...”
- “explain, in very concrete, specific terms, steps you are taking to ensure that all students graduate with college-level knowledge, competencies, and skills, especially in general education competencies such as written communication and quantitative reasoning.”

Given these expectations, the team was disappointed that Gallaudet’s Supplemental Information Report provides largely “plans to plan” rather than the concrete, tangible, and detailed plans requested.

The third context is that the Middle States Commission on Higher Education has a twofold mission: to ensure that its member institutions are in compliance with its accreditation standards and to foster institutional improvement. The purposes of the visit reflect this dual mission; they were (1) to determine if Gallaudet University is currently in compliance with Middle States accreditation standards and (2) to determine if Gallaudet University has the capacity to be in compliance with Middle States standards.

Regarding the first purpose of the visit, determining if Gallaudet University is currently in compliance with Middle States accreditation standards, the team did not find compelling evidence that the University is currently in full compliance with Commission standards and fundamental elements regarding mission, planning, governance, climate, student admissions and retention, academic rigor, and assessment. Indeed, the Supplemental Information Report acknowledges the University’s current shortcomings in these areas. That the University is not yet in full compliance in these areas is completely understandable, given that the challenges facing Gallaudet are so vast and substantial. As we have noted, Gallaudet has begun a long journey. While the University has made Herculean progress, the journey is such that it could not possibly be completed by the time of this team visit.

Regarding the second purpose of the visit, determining if Gallaudet University has the capacity to be in compliance with Middle States standards, the team is optimistic that Gallaudet University has the talent and capability to do so.

The team notes, however, that Federal regulations stipulate that, when an accreditation decision is postponed, the Commission can give the institution no more than 24 months to demonstrate full compliance with Commission standards. Because Gallaudet's accreditation decision was postponed in November 2006, the University must demonstrate full compliance prior to the Commission's November 2008 meeting, just 18 months from now. Furthermore, by April 1, 2008, just 11 months from now, the University must document implementation of a documented, organized, and sustained process to assess the achievement of institutional and program-level student learning goals that includes direct evidence of student learning.

While, as we have noted, the Gallaudet community has accomplished much over the past four months, a great deal more remains to be completed by these deadlines. True, concrete, detailed actions plans must not only be developed but implemented, and tangible, systematic, and compelling evidence of the plans' effectiveness must be documented. ***This can all be accomplished only if the pace of action is aggressively increased,*** and we cannot state this too strongly.

The next steps in the accreditation process are as follow. We will submit this report to President Davila within one week, and he may choose to submit an institutional response by no later than May 18. The Supplemental Information Report, team report, and institutional response will then be reviewed by a member of the Commission on Higher Education, who will recommend a Commission action to the Committee on Follow-Up Activities at its meeting in late May. The Committee's recommended action will then go on the agenda of the full Commission meeting in late June. Recommended actions can and often do undergo significant changes at these meetings, so we cannot predict what the Commission's June action will be.

The team again commends the Gallaudet University community for its hard work and the progress it has made to date. We believe that the University is capable of demonstrating full compliance with Middle States accreditation standards and fundamental elements, and we remain hopeful that you will continue to make good progress on your chosen path.