

# **Final Report – Institutional Distinctiveness Task Force**

## **SUNY Oneonta**

### **Fall 2009**

#### Task Force Charge and Membership

The Institutional Distinctiveness Task Force (IDTF) was charged by SUNY Oneonta’s Strategic Planning and Resource Council (SPARC) to establish the criteria and procedures for “identifying, developing and assessing” those characteristics that set SUNY Oneonta apart from other comparable institutions of higher education. According to the College’s strategic planning website, distinctiveness is defined as “important attributes that are currently or readily achievable; distinguishing strengths.” The IDTF was composed of four faculty members, three administrative staff members, and one student representing a wide range of disciplines, perspectives, and experiences at the College.

Members of the IDTF were as follows: Brian Beitzel, Assistant Professor of Educational Psychology & Counseling; Patty Francis, Associate Provost for Institutional Assessment & Effectiveness (Co-Chair); Dan Payne, Associate Professor of English (Co-Chair); Tom Rathbone, Associate Vice President for Facilities; Zach Silver, Student; Gretchen Sorin, Director of Cooperstown Graduate Program & Distinguished Service Professor of Museum Studies; Roger Sullivan, Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management; and Donna Vogler, Associate Professor of Biology.

#### Process Overview

The IDTF met almost weekly beginning October 1 and continuing through the last week of classes of the Fall 2009 term. Early in the process task force members gathered and reviewed existing information sources from both within and outside the institution; these sources included:

- Oneonta Stakeholders’ Survey results from Fall 2008;
- strategic planning efforts at other colleges and universities, especially those focusing on institutional distinctiveness;
- enrollment management data related to trends in student applications, selectivity, and similar performance indicators;
- comparative results from SUNY- and nationally-normed tests assessing students’ impressions of the College and its academic environment (e.g., Student Opinion Survey, National Survey of Student Engagement) as well as student learning (e.g., Collegiate Learning Assessment);
- recent trends in national rankings of colleges and universities;
- a listing of unique local facilities; and
- a review of distinctive graduate programs at colleges and universities across the country.

The IDTF also collected new information from the campus community, through an e-mail survey distributed to academic program heads and a 3-hour forum held October 29, with interested persons invited to drop by and provide input. Most IDTF members also attended either the strategic planning open meetings held on November 16 in the Waterfront Café or the Stakeholders’ Conference held later that same day in the Morris Conference Center.

## Defining Distinctiveness

Early in its deliberations, task force members acknowledged that, as one of 13 comprehensive colleges in the SUNY system, SUNY Oneonta was unlikely to be characterized by many programs or features that, by themselves, are truly distinctive. Indeed, most of the SUNY comprehensives were intentionally established to deliver similar programs in different geographic regions of the state. As a result many share a common history (e.g., as normal schools) and offer a similar blend of professional and liberal arts programs predominantly to undergraduate students. Further, the task force noted the “danger” of focusing excessively on a single program or feature as distinctive since, over time, there will inevitably be fluctuations in the quality or prominence of any individual program or institutional characteristic.

Still, IDTF members were convinced – based on their deliberations, review of the materials, and own experiences at the College – that SUNY Oneonta does stand apart from other institutions in significant, enduring ways. Ultimately, the Task Force reached consensus regarding what it termed SUNY Oneonta’s “themes of distinctiveness,” that is, qualitative clusters of programs and activities that permeate much of the institution’s functions, to the extent that they have actually come to define SUNY Oneonta for members of the campus community, both past and present.

In attempting to define distinctiveness, task force members also agreed that any characteristic so identified would have to:

- be corroborated by empirical evidence, especially that derived from comparisons with other colleges and universities;
- be integrated across functional areas of the institution (i.e., not just idiosyncratic to a few programs); and
- represent an area of strength at the institution.

Finally, the IDTF concluded that, while its review should focus primarily on the College as it exists at present, a strategic planning initiative necessarily intends to guide the institution’s future, making it important for the Task Force to provide an analysis and recommendations that are aspirational, not simply actual. This decision was consistent with SPARC’s charge to the IDTF, which encouraged the group to consider attributes that are “currently *or readily* achievable” [*emphasis added*].

As such, this report concludes with a brief discussion of four potential areas of growth and excellence. Although they cannot be considered institutional strengths currently, the IDTF feels strongly that the College is poised to make advances in all these areas, and in fact has already expended considerable effort and resources toward doing so. More important, the IDTF views strengthening these areas as vital to the College’s overall success in the coming decade.

### Oneonta’s “Themes of Distinctiveness”

The Task Force reached consensus on the following four “themes of distinctiveness.”

#### **1. Reputation**

There is overwhelming evidence that SUNY Oneonta is an excellent academic institution recognized for its strong commitment to teaching and learning. Corroborating evidence for this conclusion is summarized below.

- A. SUNY Oneonta students benefit from unusually low student-faculty ratios (i.e., 17 to 1), especially for a public institution. Reflecting this fact, on the 2009 SUNY Student Opinion Survey (SOS), students rated SUNY Oneonta #1 compared to the other 23 participating SUNY colleges in terms of their satisfaction with availability of faculty outside class and with class size considering the type of class.
- B. SUNY Oneonta is clearly an institution in high demand. Since 1996 freshman applications to SUNY Oneonta have grown 97% (from 6,411 to 12,644) during a time when the number of New York State high school graduates grew by approximately 12%. Over that same time period the mean combined SAT score for entering freshmen at Oneonta has increased by 137 points (997 to 1134) and the mean high school average has grown from 81.99% to 90.30%. At the same time the College's acceptance rate has decreased from over 70% to 39% while its undergraduate enrollment has grown 11.2%, to 5,711 from 5,136.
- C. The College offers two innovative graduate programs that are distinctive in American higher education.
  - i. The Cooperstown Graduate Program (CGP) has been referred to as "the premier program for the training of museum professionals in the United States" by Bruce Cole, the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The CGP's distinctiveness stems in part from the fact that it is one of only two Museum Studies programs in the country that are located on the campus of the museum instead of the campus of the university with which they are affiliated. As a result, students have the opportunity to become a part of the museum community and are in fact treated as staff. In addition, classes are held in the collections facility and students use the galleries and the work spaces of the museums as their learning laboratory.
  - ii. The College's online masters program in Nutrition & Dietetics is one of only three such degree programs in the United States that are accredited. Further, it is the only 12-month accredited online program that combines the masters degree and the dietetic internship into one program.
- D. SUNY Oneonta has established a rigorous assessment program for student learning, in line with recently heightened calls for accountability in higher education. To illustrate, Oneonta has far exceeded SUNY System Administration's requirements for general education assessment, and is one of the very few SUNY institutions to assess all general education attributes every semester.
- E. Similarly, the College was an "early adopter" with respect to the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), and continues to be one of only five SUNY institutions participating in the VSA (<http://www.collegeportraits.org/NY/Oneonta>).
- F. Oneonta students have performed very well on national tests of student learning. On the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) administered in 2008-09, Oneonta freshmen performed higher than 76% of 189 comparison institutions. That same year, Oneonta seniors performed higher than 89% of 189 comparison institutions.

- G. The College has demonstrated a remarkably rapid ascent in institutional position in national ranking systems. *U. S. News & World Report* named SUNY Oneonta 45<sup>th</sup> in the top tier among “universities masters-north” in the 2010 rankings of “America’s Best Colleges” (compared to 49<sup>th</sup> last year, 57<sup>th</sup> two years ago, and 83<sup>rd</sup> three years ago). Also in the 2010 rankings, Oneonta was named 10<sup>th</sup> among the top public colleges in the north in the “universities masters” category.

As another example, *Kiplinger’s* named the College to its “100 Best Values in Public Colleges” listing for 2009, ranking SUNY Oneonta 54<sup>th</sup> (compared to 75<sup>th</sup> in 2008 and 98<sup>th</sup> in 2007). According to *Kiplinger’s*, the College earned this position based on “a combination of outstanding academic quality and an affordable price tag.”

- H. SUNY Oneonta enjoys exceptionally robust support from alumni, no doubt in recognition of their impressions of the extraordinary quality of the education they received at the College. For seven successive years, Oneonta has led all SUNY comprehensive colleges in the percentage of alumni who make a gift to their alma mater, and at present is third in the nation among peer institutions in alumni giving rates.

## 2. Engagement

In virtually every area examined, the IDTF found high levels of participation, involvement, and engagement on the part of SUNY Oneonta students, with respect to both academic and extra-curricular activities. Corroborating evidence for this conclusion is summarized below.

- A. There is extensive and growing involvement of SUNY Oneonta students in research activity with faculty mentors. This trend is evidenced by participation in the College’s two annual research day exhibitions, one for students (with 152 participants in 2008) and one for faculty (with 70 presentations in 2008). Taken together, these numbers rank highest among comparison SUNY institutions with similar exhibitions focusing exclusively on research.
- B. Student responses on commonly-used instruments of student engagement, notably the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), provide convincing support that the College provides multiple and deep opportunities for student engagement, compared to both other SUNY institutions as well as to colleges and universities across the nation. The Spring 2008 administration of the NSSE showed that, for four of the five NSSE clusters (Active & Collaborative Learning, Enriching Educational Experiences, Student-Faculty Interaction, Supportive Campus Environment), SUNY Oneonta seniors assigned significantly higher engagement ratings compared to students from the other 20 participating SUNY institutions. Further, for those same four clusters, SUNY Oneonta seniors’ engagement scores were significantly higher compared to average scores from the other 713 participating institutions.
- C. The 2008 NSSE results from individual items also support the conclusion that SUNY Oneonta students are highly engaged in learning and in co-curricular activities relative to students at other institutions. To illustrate, SUNY Oneonta seniors reported significantly higher levels of participation compared to average scores at the other 713 participating institutions (including 20 SUNY schools) with respect to: working with faculty members on activities other than coursework (e.g., committees, orientation, student life activities); attending an

art exhibit, play, dance, music, theatre or other performance; taking part in a practicum, internship, field experience, or clinical assignment; and participating in co-curricular activities (including organizations, student government, fraternities or sororities, intercollegiate or intramural sports).

- D. These results are also corroborated by outcomes from the 2009 SOS, as SUNY Oneonta students ranked the College highest compared to the other 23 participating SUNY institutions in terms of their satisfaction with college social activities, cultural programs, and opportunities for involvement in campus clubs and activities as well as the extent to which the College had contributed to the development of their leadership skills.

### 3. Service

The concept of “learning through service” has long been one of the educational cornerstones at SUNY Oneonta, and the Task Force found an impressively high level of participation on the part of faculty, students, and staff in this area, manifested by both institutionally-driven initiatives and by individual/small group efforts. Corroborating evidence for this conclusion is summarized below.

- A. Now entering its 15<sup>th</sup> year, the College’s Center for Social Responsibility and Community (the Center) promotes student volunteerism and service learning, serving as an information and referral resource for community organizations and for SUNY Oneonta students. Since the establishment of the Center in 1994, SUNY Oneonta students, working individually or as groups, have contributed almost 607,000 hours of service to the community, representing an estimated investment of \$12.3 million in the community. During the 2008-09 academic year, the Center increased student volunteer hours by 37% to 51,000 hours, representing an estimated investment more than \$1 million in the community. Overall, 20% of the College’s student body volunteers through the Center.
- B. In Spring 2009 the College was named for the third time to the Higher Education Commission Service Honor Roll by the Corporation for National and Community Service. Being selected for the Honor Roll is the highest federal recognition a college can achieve for its commitment to service learning and civic engagement. Honorees for the award are chosen based on a series of selection factors including scope and innovation of service projects, percentage of student participation in service activities, incentives for service, and the extent to which the College offers academic service learning courses. Much of this work is coordinated by the Center for Social Responsibility and Community described immediately above.
- C. On the 2009 SOS, SUNY Oneonta students ranked the College #1 compared to the other 23 participating SUNY schools in response to the question “How frequently have you been involved in community service through a program at this college?”
- D. On the Spring 2008 NSSE administration, SUNY Oneonta freshmen and seniors indicated significantly higher levels of participation in a community-based project as part of a regular course compared to students from the other 20 participating SUNY institutions. Oneonta seniors also indicated significantly higher levels of participation in this regard compared to average scores from the other 713 participating institutions.

- E. The College’s Center for Economic and Community Development (CECD) performs a vital service function on behalf of SUNY Oneonta in enhancing the quality of life in the greater Oneonta community. The CECD engages in community development by applying college resources – students, faculty, staff, funds, and property – to create mutually beneficial partnerships. In particular, it undertakes projects to improve educational attainment, public safety, health, public infrastructure, and housing in the area. Although many institutions have a comparable unit, the CECD is distinctive within the SUNY system due to the role it plays in a small, rural city.

Specific initiatives implemented over the last two decades by the CECD include city-town discussions of inter-municipal cooperation, city-wide comprehensive planning, downtown improvement studies, and economic development town hall meetings. CECD staff also co-chaired the latest comprehensive plan task force and served on the resulting Zoning Task Force. Finally, in 1997 CECD developed and implemented the Leadership Otsego program, which brings together community members to help improve the social capital and civic capacity of future leaders.

#### **4. Environment**

Although the IDTF recognizes that the term “environment” conveys a wide range of meanings, and therefore may be problematic when attempting to establish it as an area of institutional distinctiveness, there are indeed a cluster of important attributes unique to SUNY Oneonta that are difficult to label in any other way. Overall, this cluster includes both physical and psychological characteristics that appear to be very important to members of the campus community and that, in fact, strike a deep emotional chord in individuals. Corroborating evidence for this conclusion is summarized below.

- A. SUNY Oneonta boasts a large number of unique and high quality facilities that contribute significantly to the College’s educational mission and in fact serve to elevate the quality of many academic programs. As one example, the College’s music recording studio has “tunable walls” which allows Music Industry students not only to record sound but to “shape” the sound for higher fidelity. Other examples include the College Camp and observatory (home to the largest telescope in New York State), which is within walking distance of the campus, and the Biological Field Station on Otsego Lake in Cooperstown.

Students’ satisfaction with the College’s facilities is clear. On the 2009 SOS, Oneonta students ranked the College highest compared to the other 23 participating SUNY schools on the following items: classroom facilities, library facilities, and study areas. Compared to the other SUNY comprehensive colleges, Oneonta was also ranked first with respect to fine and performing arts studios and course-related laboratories.

- B. The geographic location of the campus is one of the College’s most appealing features. Situated in the rolling hills overlooking the beautiful Susquehanna River valley, the College is located at the edge of the Catskills region, and is only a short drive north to the Adirondack Park. This close proximity to some of the most beautiful wilderness areas east of the Mississippi is augmented by the fact that the institution is also within easy driving distance of major cities such as Albany, Binghamton, New York, and Boston.

- C. Oneonta's small town setting is a great advantage as well, making it possible for the College to establish a close relationship with the community and provide a safe and welcoming atmosphere for students and other members of the community. On the 2009 SOS, SUNY Oneonta students ranked the College #1 compared to the other 23 SUNY colleges in terms of their satisfaction with personal safety and security on the campus.
- D. SUNY Oneonta has a robust technology environment, with respect to facilities, services, and the use of technology to enhance learning. The College's digital theater is truly remarkable, and much more than a planetarium, incorporating highly advanced digital equipment, including an IMAX-style theater. This facility supports interactive video instruction for a wide range of disciplines including art, astronomy, biology, chemistry, and physiology.

There is considerable evidence to support the quality of SUNY Oneonta's technology services and educational efforts in this area.

- i. On the 2009 SOS, SUNY Oneonta students ranked the College first among the 24 participating SUNY campuses in terms of satisfaction with computer support services and third in terms of satisfaction with the college computer network. SUNY Oneonta also received the highest ranking by students when asked to indicate the extent to which the College had contributed to their growth and learning in using computer and information technology effectively.
  - ii. On the 2008 NSSE, SUNY Oneonta seniors indicated significantly higher frequencies compared to students at the other 20 participating SUNY institutions with respect to: using an electronic medium to discuss or complete an assignment; using computers in academic work; and using computing and information technology.
- E. There is good reason to believe that SUNY Oneonta students establish central and enduring relationships during their time on campus, which certainly is an important component of their educational and emotional environment. On the 2009 SOS, Oneonta students reported the highest level of satisfaction with their social support network on campus among the 24 participating SUNY institutions. On the 2008 NSSE, both SUNY Oneonta seniors and first-year students assigned significantly higher scores compared to students from the other 20 participating SUNY schools when evaluating the quality of their relationships with other students, faculty members, and administrative personnel and offices.

### Aspirational Areas of Growth & Excellence

As indicated above, the IDTF identified four areas at the College that, while not strong at present, have great potential for growth, and will likely become an important part of SUNY Oneonta's ongoing mission in future years.

#### **1. Graduate Programs**

After decades of decline, SUNY Oneonta's Fall 2008 graduate headcount (179) placed the College 10<sup>th</sup> out of SUNY's 13 comprehensive colleges, ahead of only Purchase (145), Geneseo (134), and Old Westbury (48). As a percent of overall institutional headcount, Oneonta's graduate headcount

(3.1%) ranked 11<sup>th</sup> of SUNY's 13 comprehensive colleges, ahead of only Geneseo (2.4%) and Old Westbury (1.4%).

There are many good reasons to make graduate program growth an institutional priority. First, such a strategy would have positive revenue implications since graduate students pay higher tuition rates. Second, an increase in the graduate student population would lessen pressure on admissions to bring in more undergraduate students in order to meet enrollment targets (it is also important to note that increasing the number of undergraduate admits necessarily has negative consequences for student selectivity). Finally, the presence of robust graduate programs brings a certain amount of prestige to a predominantly undergraduate institution, which may in turn help attract and retain highly qualified faculty, including those from under-represented groups.

## **2. Diversity and Inclusion**

Over the four to five years, SUNY Oneonta has clearly invested heavily in establishing diversity and inclusion as institutional values and priorities. Although the College's rural location – and lack of ready access to urban shopping and culture – places it at a disadvantage in this regard, the institution has made progress recently with respect to student enrollment, faculty recruitment, and promoting an inclusive campus climate. As examples, Diversity Scholarships increased from 10 to 15 for Fall 2009, and enrollment of AALANA students has increased to 13.87% of new student enrollment for Fall 2009, compared to 10.54% in 2006. With respect to faculty, a Dissertation Fellow program was created specifically for AALANA scholars, with one position filled in each of the last two academic years.

Certainly the College has taken many significant steps toward this objective, including the creation of an Office of Equity and Inclusion overseen by a director who was hired three years ago; hiring a consultant to conduct focus groups and to develop and administer a Campus Climate Survey in 2006; development of a comprehensive Strategic Action Plan on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion with full implementation of the plan initiated in 2008-09; and the second administration of the Campus Climate Survey in Fall 2009. Indeed, it is reasonable to suggest that the College's extensive efforts in this area, especially given its rural geographic location, are truly distinctive. Further, if these efforts turn out to be highly successful, it would be a remarkable case study in higher education.

## **3. International Programs**

A thriving international program benefits an institution in many ways, and given SUNY Oneonta's increased academic stature as supported by national rankings, this program is a promising area for increased visibility and expansion. There are also numerous students at the College who would like to experience a term abroad. While this option is available in coordination with other SUNY institutions, the feasibility of a local study abroad program, perhaps offered in conjunction with specific academic programs, should be explored.

Recent work in this area coordinated through the Office of International Education (OIE) indicates that SUNY Oneonta could be very successful in this area. After hiring a new full-time OIE director in 2008-09, the College enrolled 51 new international students in Fall 2009, representing a 67% increase compared to the previous year. Further, the 2009 SOS confirmed student interest in study abroad, with 15.8% of respondents indicating they planned to participate in this program.

#### 4. Sustainability/Environmental Initiatives

Over the past several years, the College has made significant progress in this area by implementing better conservation/sustainability practices on campus, many of which have arisen out of the joint efforts of the facilities officers of the campus and the President's committee on sustainability. For example, Oneonta ranks second among fifteen measured SUNY four-year colleges and universities in thermal performance, fourth in electrical performance, and sixth in water conservation. Given the environmental and fiscal benefits of these programs, they should be continued and expanded wherever feasible. At the programmatic level, numerous departments at SUNY Oneonta have faculty who have developed courses or who conduct research on environmental issues. More interdisciplinary work – to complement the existing Environmental Sciences program, which exposes students to topics in biology, earth sciences, and environmental planning – should be encouraged.