

St. Olaf College 2022-23 Comprehensive Evaluation for Reaffirmation of Accreditation by the Higher Learning Commission

HLC Peer Review Team Report: Summary of Commendations and Recommendations

Overall findings of the Peer Review Team:

- St. Olaf was found to have met all 18 Core Components of the five [Criteria for Accreditation](#), with no recommendations for interim monitoring.
 - The college's mission is clear and articulated publicly both on campus and online, and the mission guides the operations of the College.
 - The college provides a quality education to its students.
 - The college has demonstrated responsibility for the quality of its programs, learning environments and services provided to help students learn, and it evaluates their effectiveness.
 - The college's resources, structures, processes and planning support the work to fulfill the College mission, keep strong educational offerings, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.
- St. Olaf was found to have met all requirements for federal compliance and other HLC requirements for accreditation.

Commendations:

Several themes emerged in the Peer Review Team's analysis of St. Olaf's programs, practices, and outcomes in relation to the five Criteria for Accreditation:¹

Commitment to the college mission

- The mission of the College clearly articulates the chief aims and aspirations of the institution and is widely communicated in multiple venues (1.A).
- The mission is clearly reflected in key programs, goals, and plans, such as the OLE Core and other academic offerings, student support services, the STOGGoals, and the Strategic Plan (1.A).
- Enthusiasm for the college mission is evident across campus and is a distinctive component of the college's culture (1.A).

¹ Numbers and letters in parentheses refer to the Criterion and Core Component section where a finding is located; for example, "3.D" refers to the section of the Peer Review Team's report discussing Criterion 3, Core Component 3.D.

- The College's emphasis on a Lutheran understanding of vocation ensures that all students are challenged to reflect on their relationship with others and with their communities in the course of their years at the College (1.B).
- St. Olaf engages students in rich reflection on their meaning and purpose in the world; its commitment to supporting the faith life of students is rare amongst mainstream colleges today (1.C).

Progress on diversity, equity, and inclusion

- The college has worked diligently to address concerns related to diversity, equity and inclusion. One example is the increase in the percentage of students who are students of color, international students, and/or first-generation students (1.C).
- As demonstrated in its Strategic Plan Outcomes Reports, and as a result of continued collaboration at the senior staff level, the college has made great strides in diversifying its faculty and staff; it has established and met high strategic goals (3.C).
- The new OLE Core supports equity and inclusion in a variety of ways, including the practice of inclusive collaboration and dialogue and development of appreciation for living and learning in a diverse community in the First-Year Experience; the new Power and Race requirement that directly addresses equity issues in U.S. societies; and the Christian Theology in Dialogue and Ethical Reasoning in Context requirements (3.B).
- The college has devoted increasing resources to ensuring the success of all students, especially students of color, low-income students, first-generation students, and students with disabilities (1.C, 3.D). Examples include the expansion of student support services (3.C, 3.D), the Summer Bridge program (3.D), financial support enabling equitable student participation in opportunities for research, scholarship, professional conference participation (3.B, 3.D), and preparation for graduate study (3.D).

High quality and strategically significant OLE Core

- The development of the OLE Core is a substantial achievement, providing strong evidence of the College's commitment to achieving its mission in the context of an ever-changing world (1.A).
- The OLE Core was developed through a thoughtful, thorough, and strategic process grounded in mission-based principles and values, sustainable design, shared commitment to the "open, linked, and enduring questions," understanding of student development, and clarity of intended learning outcomes, all reflective of the College mission (3.B).
- The St. Olaf community takes pride in the OLE Core, and detailed awareness of its rationale and learning goals was evident throughout the college, including among Board members and students (1.A). Faculty are committed to and enthusiastic

about the new program, describing it as more flexible, engaging, student-centered, relevant, inclusive, and consistent with the college's institutional goals (3.A).

- The new First-Year Experience will help students understand and achieve the goals of the OLE Core by developing their capacity for dialogue, critical thinking, self-reflection, effective writing, and inclusive collaboration, supported by peer mentoring and strong student support services (3.B).
- As noted above, the new OLE Core provides more opportunities for students to develop knowledge and skills supporting equity, inclusion, and global perspective (3.B).
- The college's program of student learning assessment informed the initial design of the OLE Core and will support its ongoing improvement (3.B).

Highly qualified and professionally engaged faculty and staff

- The St. Olaf faculty is highly qualified, accessible to students, and stable, supporting the college's mission and curriculum (3.C). Rigorous faculty review processes and procedures support the faculty in meeting the institutional mission and goals (3.A), and ensure that faculty quality will be sustained (3.C).
- The college has a faculty culture of significant involvement through its governance structure, its assessment culture, and its curricular/co-curricular collaborations (3.C).
- The college supports the faculty's development as teachers, advisors, governance leaders, and intellectuals and researchers through a wide variety of means, including CILA, sabbaticals, Provost Office grants, IPAT accounts, the Professional Development Grant program administered by the Faculty Life Committee, and external funding with extensive support from GFCR. Resources supporting faculty development and research are readily available, accessible, and inclusive with respect to type of appointment, area of scholarship, and career stage (3.C).
- Academic staff (student support, libraries, etc.) are sufficient in number, well-qualified, experienced, and supported in their professional development, bringing expertise in a diverse array of relevant fields (3.C).
- Numerous instructional programs and resources in the St. Olaf Libraries and Information Technology support student research and classroom learning (3.D).

High quality academic and student support services

- St. Olaf's students have sufficient and accessible resources for academic support outside of the classroom and beyond faculty office hours (3.D).
- The college supports a comprehensive and well-staffed Center for Advising and Academic Support (CAAS) that works with students beginning with the transition to the College through to graduation, with a positive impact on retention and other academic success outcomes (3.D). CAAS programs span a variety of specialties,

including specialties in English language development, writing pedagogies, working with first generation and low-income students, and experience with supplemental instruction. The Center also utilizes a variety of instructional methods, including extensive peer tutoring, Supplemental Instruction, developmental writing courses, and workshops (3.D).

- Faculty appreciate CAAS programs and services, not only those provided directly to students but also those supporting faculty development. Recent expansion of programs, staff, and services demonstrates institutional confidence in the services that CAAS provides (3.D).
- St. Olaf is also home to several TRIO-funded programs, including the new TRIO Student Support Services for Students with Disabilities program, with staff specifically trained in providing academic and wrap-around support services to first generation students, low-income students, and students with disabilities (3.D).
- The St. Olaf Orientation to Academics and Resources program (SOAR) integrates understanding of the academic expectation and resources of the College with important personal and social development opportunities (3.D). SOAR outcomes data show that the program is already making a difference in students' sense of community of campus, and evidence from the supplemental instruction program shows impact on retention and engagement among low-income students and students of color (3.C).
- Academic support in the co-curriculum is also provided by the Piper Center, athletic coaches, and Student Life (3.C).

Effective practices in student learning assessment and program review

- St. Olaf has developed effective processes for assessing student learning using an appropriate variety of national and local assessment tools (4.B).
- The college has established intended learning outcomes at the institutional level (STOGGoals), for the OLE Core, and for each major, concentration, and conversation program, all readily available on the college's website. The development of the OLE Core benefited from the establishment of GE intended learning outcomes first, and then designing a program to achieve those outcomes, rather than the other way around (4.B).
- The new decennial assessment cycle that is integrated with the program review process is welcomed by faculty as both more streamlined and more useful (4.B). This integrated approach will ensure that program-level learning outcomes will be consistently assessed and that programs will use this information to assure program quality (3.A).
- Faculty clearly articulated how intended learning outcomes and the assessment process supported course development and approval, new program development, and new course proposals, and how assessment and other data could be used effectively to obtain resources and provide evidence of the value of their courses

and programs to themselves and to others (3.A). The college uses assessment results to improve both student learning and the assessment process itself (4.B).

- Faculty and staff engagement in assessment is informed, extensive, reflective of good practice, and supported by professional development opportunities. The establishment of a committee-level (rather than subcommittee-level) Assessment Committee has strengthened faculty engagement and the impact of the committee's work (4.B).
- The Co-Curricular Assessment Committee provides support for co-curricular programs to develop effective assessment processes and tools. Co-curricular assessment results are also used to make program improvements, as demonstrated in the Athletics program. (4.B)
- The program review process is well-designed; implemented across all programs; thoughtfully integrated with the assessment cycle, budgeting, and planning; and used to make decisions ranging from program content to hiring (4.A).

Effective leadership and authentic shared governance

- The Board of Regents is committed to the college mission, vision, and values; is well informed and appropriately engaged; and maintains a strategic focus (2.C). The Board and the college's senior leadership collaborate effectively (2.C) and use evidence to reach informed decisions that advance the college's work and outcomes (5.A).
- The college has a history of strong and responsible fiscal management as documented by a variety of financial indicators, such as its Moody's Investors Service ratings, its Financial Responsibility Composite Score, and its composite Financial Index (5.B). Its practices in budget planning, implementation, and monitoring are well developed and effective (5.B).
- The college allocates its resources to align with its mission through strategic planning, which affects budgeting, capital development, and fundraising. The college's Strategic Plan is systematically implemented, monitored, and revised as needed (5.C).
- Thoughtful planning, as exemplified in the 2016 Facilities Framework Plan and associated six-year development plans, has enabled the completion of a variety of high-quality capital projects, including new student housing in 2022, an ice arena in 2019, and major renovations to several academic and administrative buildings (5.B).
- Institutional planning and budgeting are broadly participatory, engaging Board members, faculty, staff, administrators, alumni, and students (5.C).
- Shared governance is facilitated by numerous policy provisions, organizational structures, and decision processes, and faculty, staff, and students participate actively in college decision making, particularly in relation to the academic program (5.A). Consistent with both the Faculty Manual and the college Bylaws, faculty have

primary responsibility for the management of academic matters, with appropriate oversight by the Board (2.C).

- The college's governance structure and administrative systems help to maintain a rigorous, responsive, and appropriate curriculum that supports the college's institutional goals and mission (3.A).

Recommendations:

The Peer Review Team also shared the following recommendations for improved institutional practice.

- *Provide support for OLE Core assessment:* "The College will need to structurally support faculty assessment work to ensure that OLE Core meets its ambitious goals for student learning." (1.A)
- *Revisit the content and integration of the STOGGoals:* "The STOGGoals, while not conflicting with OLE Core, appear to be operating on a separate track and may need to be reconsidered as an expression of the core values of the College for which all constituencies are responsible." (1.A)
- *Ensure learning outcomes are consistently articulated in course syllabi:* "While the courses that support the new general education curriculum have intended learning outcomes consistent with that curriculum on the syllabi, other course syllabi do not consistently have clearly articulated learning goals even though they are consistently supporting the College's mission and institutional learning outcomes." (3.A)
- *Develop an assessment plan for the CAAS tutoring program:* CAAS does "not [yet] have an assessment and development plan for their tutors, so the effectiveness of tutor training and processes is not yet assessed." (3.C)
- *Update and expand communication in implementing For Every Ole:* "The [college] website will need to address changes to the advising model [as For Every Ole continues to be implemented] so that students, parents, and community members can be best informed about what to expect of advisors at the College....Another challenge will be ...effective reporting and communication systems...[such as] the early alert process to support the new collaborative advising model and expectations." (3.D)