Commission on Colleges
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

Report of the Reaffirmation Committee

Auburn University
Auburn, Alabama

February 22 - 25, 2004
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Visiting Committee Members

John T. Casteen III, Chair
President and Kaufman Professor
University of Virginia

C. Frank Abrams, Jr.
Professor of Biomedical Engineering
North Carolina State University

Royal G. Albridge
Professor of Physics
Vanderbilt University

R. Scott Beasley
Dean, College of Forestry
Stephen F. Austin State University

Jennifer S. Cargill
Dean of Libraries
Louisiana State University & A&M College

Marilyn S. Harrington
Dean, School of Allied Health Sciences
University of Texas Health Sciences Center

John J. Hoey
Director of Assessment
Georgia Institute of Technology

Harold R. Holmes
Associate Vice President and Dean of Student Services
Wake Forest University

Marcia J. Isaacson
Associate Dean, College of Fine Arts
University of Florida

Gary B. Jackson
Interim Director, School of Human Sciences
Mississippi State University

Norma MacRae
Vice Provost for Public Service and Dean, Continuing Studies
East Tennessee State University

Catherine A. Maley
Professor of French and Romance Linguistics
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

James W. McFarland
Dean, School of Business
Tulane University

George F. McNulty
Professor of Mathematics
University of South Carolina at Columbia

Clara Myers
Associate Director, Center for Teaching and Learning
Georgia State University

John W. Prados
Vice President Emeritus and University Professor
University of Tennessee

Penny Ralston
Dean, College of Human Sciences
Florida State University
George S. Rent
Associate Provost
Mississippi State University

William H. Riffee
Dean and Professor, College of
Pharmacy
University of Florida

Janice C. Schach
Dean and Professor of Landscape
Architecture
Clemson University

Raymond D. Smoot, Jr.
University Treasurer and Chief
Operating Officer of the Virginia
Tech Foundation
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State
University

Joseph Taboada
Associate Dean of Students and
Academic Affairs
Louisiana State University

Commission on Colleges Staff
G. Jack Allen
Associate Executive Director
Commission on Colleges
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

Staff to the Committee
Cameron Howell
Doctoral Intern
University of Virginia

Kelli E. Palmer
Doctoral Intern
University of Virginia
Introduction

Founded in 1856 by an act of the Alabama Legislature as the East Alabama Male College, Auburn University is today a comprehensive Land Grant university of some 23,000 students, 7,000 faculty and staff members, occupying some 120 buildings (on main campus) and 28,130 acres as well as facilities elsewhere in Alabama and beyond. It awards degrees in almost 100 undergraduate disciplines, masters degrees in 98 disciplines, and 44 doctoral degrees. Its 13 schools and colleges and 132 academic divisions and departments address a broad range of research, teaching, and public service activities.

This report reflects the findings of a visiting committee of the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The committee visited Auburn on February 22-25, 2004. Among the documents prepared for the committee’s review were the Self Study Report for Reaffirmation of Accreditation dated 2003, but prepared a year earlier; an addendum to this report, including summary information about the university’s work prior to the committee’s visit toward remedying deficiencies noted by the university’s self study committee; and various fact books, publications, and other documents related to the visiting committee’s charge.

This report is property of the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and it is prepared for the Commission’s sole use. It represents the visiting committee’s consensus advice in response to the issues put before the committee.

This report does not address certain Criteria normally treated in reports of this kind because these Criteria deal with matters that were, when the committee was originally convened, in dispute between Auburn University and the Commission on Colleges. These disputed Criteria are Section 1.1 (Institutional Commitment and Responsibilities in the Accreditation Process), Section 1.4 (Condition of Eligibility 3—governing board et al), Section 5.5.2 (Intercollegiate Athletics: Administrative Oversight), Section 5.5.3 (Intercollegiate Athletics: Financial Control), and Section 6.1.2 (Governing Board). These sections are to be addressed by a separately constituted visiting committee scheduled to be convened in the fall of 2004. Because the current visiting committee has not been asked to render advice on the university’s compliance with these five sections, this report does not include specific recommendations or advice on the question of whether or not the university meets all Criteria for reaffirmation.

This said, however, we want to acknowledge the dedication and candor of Auburn University’s self-study committee, whose co-directors and members
worked under what must have been adverse circumstances to provide the information and support necessary for our work. The committee particularly commends the co-directors, Drs. Linda Glaze and Eugène Clothiaux, whose commitment to full and fair disclosure and to the principles of accountability embodied in the Criteria, and commitment to Auburn University, have made our work and what we hope is the general quality of our report possible. We commend Drs. Glaze and Clothiaux and their colleagues for moving forward in the two years since the original self study document was completed with remedies to deficiencies recognized two years ago, and indeed for making considerable progress. We acknowledge also the direct participation in our work of Interim President Edward Richardson, appointed less than a month prior to our arrival, and of Earlon McWhorter, Board of Trustees President Pro Tempore, both of whom welcomed us—as indeed did all whom we met in our work at Auburn—answered all questions fully and candidly, and expressed their commitment to resolving problems that may have existed in prior times and to leading Auburn University through the remaining steps in the reaffirmation process.

We are grateful to the many Auburn students, faculty members, and staff members who provided information for us during our visit, took part in public meetings and in private conversations, provided accommodations for us, and in other ways helped make this visit productive and indeed pleasant.

It would be wrong for us to offer our report without acknowledging that we know that controversy has existed about the Criteria not included in our charge, that various persons on the campus have expressed opinions about these excluded sections to us, and that we view this controversy as destructive to Auburn University, its faculty, staff, and students, and indeed hostile to the larger interest of the people of Alabama in excellence at Auburn. We recognize that deep divisions exist within the campus. Not all with whom we talked agree with our assessment that—with regard to the specific Criteria on which we are asked to express opinions—the self study committee’s report and addenda and Messrs. Richardson’s and McWhorter’s commitments merit commendation.

These first things said, certain other things must also be said. The self study is all but silent on the university’s commitment to equity in admissions, in the administration of the university’s affairs, in instruction, and in conditions of work and employment, to racial inclusiveness, to supporting success for persons of diverse backgrounds, and indeed to ongoing attention to the unique challenges faced by persons entering the university (as students or as employees) from backgrounds in which disadvantage, exclusion from privilege, and similar experiences have been customary. We heard complaints about racial and gender equity from employees—complaints perhaps not unlike those expressed by other
employees on other campuses, but troubling in light of the self study’s silence on the university’s commitment to remedy the conditions that lie behind these complaints. These complaints seem to us to be credible. The persons who brought them seem to us to be credible, and also local to Auburn. Because the Interim President has been clear and unhesitating in his commitment to address these issues (and indeed had no role in the writing of the silent self study), we take his words of commitment at face value. It is entirely conceivable that the omissions noted above are accidental—that in the absence of a criterion specifically requiring language to affirm a commitment to fair and lawful accommodation for all members of the university, the issue never occurred to those who wrote, read, and vetted the self study. (See the Addendum, beginning on page 74.)

We heard another complaint also, but this one seems to us more difficult to assess. Many persons allege that it is fundamental to the university’s culture that vacant senior positions (and certain others that are said historically to have been reserved for persons already known to senior managers or hiring officers) are generally filled by interim appointees, persons appointed without collegial conferral with faculty, staff, and students, and that jobs are generally filled by former interims by way of processes in which job requirements are tailor-made to the peculiar qualifications of interims. Some who complained told us candidly that they had themselves wanted positions that went to interims. Others said that they felt concern about what they described as increasing insularity or isolation on a campus where (as they saw it) most leaders come from within. We report this complaint not because it falls neatly within a single criterion or because we found massive statistical evidence to support it, but because we heard the complaint constantly, from all sorts of persons. This being said, we found that numerous recent searches have led to hiring from outside the university, with interims denied appointments.

Allegations of favoritism or cronyism ultimately undermine the collegiality and shared governance that characterize successful universities in the United States. The committee urges the President and Board of Trustees to take appropriate steps to assure that when appropriate (and not necessarily for every position at every level) and when required by law or university policy, genuine, open, and promptly conducted searches ought to be the university’s custom, competition ought to be open, and merit ought to be the ultimate consideration in filling any position.