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GREETINGS AND WELCOME TO CORNERSTONE UNIVERSITY!!!

THE CAMPUS COMMUNITY is excited to partner with the Higher Learning Commission and the group of peer mentors visiting us in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The relationship between the HLC and Cornerstone is one we value as together we work on issues of campus development. The faculty, staff, administration and students have worked for the past two years to systematically evaluate the university – cheering our strengths and acknowledging the opportunities for improvement and growth.

At a foundational level, the university continues to live out the mission that was envisioned by its founders 70 years ago, but we are experiencing a new season. This new season is characterized by a commitment to the future, based upon providing a learner-centered environment in and out of which a connected organization fulfills its distinctive place in American higher education.

The self-study process proved instrumental in inviting the professionals employed by the university to understand the organization, to appraise the organization, to reach conclusions about its strengths and weaknesses, and to show the institutional will and resolve to know what to do in order to improve the organization’s processes and behaviors as it meets the needs of its stakeholders. In essence, the process of reaccreditation helped the university to move forward on a number of fronts of organizational development.

The self-study process provided a reflective campus community an understanding that its mission and the people working for it provide stability amidst great social and economic change. The foundation on which the university is built is solid as the mission remains the cornerstone of all organizational activities.

Cornerstone University is looking at the self-study process, the visit by the evaluation team, and the conversation with the HLC as part of its organizational development and its transition to the Pathways accrediting process.

Sincerely,

Dr. Joseph M. Stowell
President, Cornerstone University
CORNERSTONE UNIVERSITY IS an independent, evangelical Christian institution of higher education with a rich heritage of more than 70 years. The university is located in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a West Michigan city with a metropolitan population of more than 750,000. The total enrollment for Fall 2010 was 3,054, including traditional undergraduate (TUG), Professional and Graduate Studies (PGS) undergraduate and graduate, Grand Rapids Theological Seminary (GRTS), and Asia Biblical Theological Seminary (ABTS) students. Students represent at least 38 different denominational or association groups and come from 32 states and six countries.

The story of Cornerstone University, a small yet wonderfully complex institution of faith-based higher education, is one reflecting a decade of change, growth, maturation and readjustment to the pressures of the marketplace and the stakeholder groups it serves. This self-study describes the ebb and flow of campus events of the past decade as it meets the intent of the criteria for accreditation. Organizational development is a theme of the report as the university enters a new season of “building lives that matter.”

A self-study involves an entire campus community, but a variety of faculty, staff, students and administrators served in specific ways and gave of their time, energy and insights in the process of this organizational evaluation. Specifically, 18 different people attended the HLC-sponsored PEAQ self-study training during the last three years, 48 individuals participated in some way on a criterion committee or in performing a special assignment, and 21 students were involved in HLC focus groups. In addition, the campus memory has seven people from the 2001-02 self-study team and five from the 1991 team who are informed about institutional review. Sufficiency, the campus community has an understanding of the purpose, processes and value of organizational evaluation.
IN CONDUCTING AN EVALUATION OF THE UNIVERSITY, the following items constituted the formal charge which guided the self-study process. The Cornerstone University community worked for two years in the evaluation of its practices, processes and program offerings. Specifically, the following goals guided this organizational evaluation:

1. To render a just and accurate evaluation of the condition of the university to the Higher Learning Commission in light of the five accreditation Criteria and four Themes of high-functioning organizations of higher education.
2. To invite the professionals employed by the university to appraise the organization, to reach conclusions about its strengths and weaknesses and to show the institutional will and resolve to know what to do in order to improve the organization's processes and behaviors as it meets the needs of its stakeholders.
3. To provide the university community with an evaluation of itself with the aspiration of internal ownership of the findings.
4. To allow the reaccreditation process to guide organizational development and provide a scheme for overall maturation as well as a set of specific “next steps” for the university.
5. To assist in the transition of the university to the Pathways accreditation process.

The campus-wide introspection fostered by this reaccreditation self-study is becoming a part of the campus ethos and organizational expectations. With the advent of the new accrediting process, this review will serve the university well as it moves into the future.

In going through the process of self evaluation, in the context of continued organizational development, the self-study team and the administration of Cornerstone University believe that a sufficient case is made for renewal of regional accreditation by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association.

To read the full university self-study report, go to: www.cornerstone.edu/self-study.
Cornerstone University operates with integrity to ensure the fulfillment of its mission through structures and processes that involve the board, administration, faculty, staff and students.

STRENGTHS:
The university’s identity, mission and vision statements guide its activities and provide the organization with the needed energy, stability and strength to move into the future. The self-study found that:

• Cornerstone University has in place a set of core legal documents which allows it to operate fully approved by the State of Michigan and the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association.

• Cornerstone University proclaims who it is publicly via its set of central mission documents.

• The university effectively communicates to its multiple constituent groups its purpose for operation through a variety of mediums of communication.

• The university is aware of the need for it to become increasingly more diverse in all of its levels of operation. Cornerstone has developed a number of strategies to address the issues of diversity it faces as an institution of higher education.

• There is a broad-based understanding of the mission of the university, and it is well-known and owned by many constituent groups.

• The university has a clearly developed organizational structure with attendant responsibilities for each level of operation.

• Through a variety of personal, professional, formal and informal mechanisms, the university holds itself accountable as it upholds and protects its integrity.

DISCOVERIES FROM THE SELF-STUDY

“A NEW SEASON” — With the arrival of a new president and a different team of senior leaders, the revised mission statement needs to mature and fully be the guiding force for all campus activities and needs to be made publicly available through intentional Marketing Office oversight and implementation. This should be measured by university-defined key performance indicators.

“PLANNING FOR THE NEW SEASON” — As part of the strategic plan, specific goals must be written into the planning efforts regarding diversity and the importance it will play to the long-term health and viability of the university. Institutional research needs to be a major component of the university’s organizational structure as it incorporates the practices of a data-guided systems approach to decision making.

“MOVING FORWARD” — As the university transitions to the Pathways format for accreditation, it must remain active in publicly proclaiming its purpose and then aligning all campus activities to that purpose. Specifically, high priority must be given to a regular review of the basic statements of mission, purposes and goals throughout the university and the evaluation of departmental programs and activities. This begins with senior leadership and is disseminated throughout the institution by a variety of personnel tasked and held accountable for providing stability and initiating change as needed.
Cornerstone University’s allocation of resources and its processes for evaluation and planning demonstrate its capacity to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its education and respond to future challenges and opportunities.

**STRENGTHS**

In meeting the accreditation requirements related to mission, planning, funding and organizational evaluation, Cornerstone University exhibits the following strengths:

- The university’s personnel are an important asset to the organization and are to be commended for their dedication to the mission of the university and their willingness to sacrifice on personal and professional levels for the good of the community.

- With the arrival of a new administration, the work of setting strategic targets is now emerging. The current senior leadership team is keenly aware of the need for setting a direction for the university and staying with it for an extended period of time. A 4-step repositioning plan, the University Blueprint, and the 20/20 Strategic Plan are setting the context for fulfilling the university’s mission. Strategic planning processes and documents now better serve to drive the administrative and advancement work.

- While understanding its history and the need to move forward, a number of positive developments are guiding the university, including the following examples:
  1. Rebuilding Cornerstone by developing a strategic plan.
  2. Reimaging Cornerstone by identifying a brand that will succinctly capture and communicate its commitment to the mission and vision.
  3. Resourcing Cornerstone by revitalizing the campus in terms of facilities and the resourcing of key aspects of the educational enterprise.
  4. Reconnecting to various external constituent groups.
DISCOVERIES FROM THE SELF-STUDY

“FOSTERING ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT” – As the organization continues its work, fostering a university-wide mentality of continued “personal and professional” development would provide a stable foundation for the present and future work of the campus community. All university-related personnel should consider development plans to foster individual and communal growth and maturity.

“PLANNING” – A primary challenge for the university is to cultivate a strategic plan, both systemic and systematic where the processes are known by all campus personnel. The sophistication of a strategic planning process for all operational units of the campus is needed. A more intentional dependence and integration of planning, budgeting and implementing the plan is needed, and the strategic planning process should include multiple levels of campus involvement and not come primarily from senior leadership.

“BECOMING RICHLY RESourced” – A more robust funding plan is required, and the appropriate processes to carry out the efforts must be set into place. Identifying new and divergent revenue streams are needed to fully fund the vision of the university. Cash reserves should be increased and the debt burden decreased. The university needs to locate and engage with donors on a wider and deeper level than it has in the past. Specifically, resources are needed for the general fund budget, the capital fund budget, as well as for the endowment.

Future strategic recruiting efforts and goals (for all functioning units of the university) should be balanced with parallel growth in quality of faculty, programs, facilities and adequate budgetary support to advertise and market as is warranted. Campus facilities must be upgraded and added if the university is to continue to develop and to grow its academic programs and its reputation amongst its various constituent groups.
**STRENGTHS**

In regard to the assessment of student learning, it is evident that much work has occurred on the campus in the past decade. The following statements summarize the findings of this aspect of the self-study:

- An “assessment plan” guides each of the educational units of the campus community.
- A name for the “assessment project” provides a theme, consistency and coherence for campus activities related to assessment.
- The campus community understands the full cycle of assessment, including the writing of learning objectives, selecting of appropriate instruments to measure student learning, collecting of data and using the collected data to inform decision making.
- Campus activities support the work of the assessment of student learning.
- Funds have been allocated for the work of assessment and faculty development.
- The university has enhanced its development of the faculty with the work of CELT.
- The campus community understands and is working to foster effective learning environments.
- PGS and GRTS, servicing the adult and graduate student populations, are leading the campus in instituting assessment into the academic operations.

**DISCOVERIES FROM THE SELF-STUDY**

“**PERSEVERANCE IN THE ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING**” – As Cornerstone University continues its transformation into an outcomes-based, assessment-guided learning community, high priority should be given to the continued development of the assessment plan, sustained faculty development in assessment, and the linkage of assessment to academic planning and other decision-making processes. An across-the-campus development of a full cycle of assessment for all programs of study needs to be encouraged.

“**PLANNING AND ASSESSMENT**” – Structures should be built into the institution’s decision-making process promoting the development of a stronger relationship between the institutional strategic plan, the financial and budget plans, the academic strategic plan and the assessment efforts.

“**PARTNERING WITH THE HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION**” – To solidify the development of assessment-related campus activities, the university should consider participating in the HLC’s Academy for Assessment of Student Learning. Such involvement with the HLC will allow the university to better comprehend its own assessment work in the context of a best-practices mentality.
Cornerstone University promotes a life of learning for its faculty, administration, staff and students by fostering and supporting inquiry, creativity, practice and social responsibility in ways consistent with its mission.

STRENGTHS
As the university meets the reaccreditation requirements of this criterion, the following items represent the campus-wide manner in which it promotes life-long learning as guided by its mission:

- The entire university community fosters a life of learning, and this is modeled in a number of ways at a variety of levels of the institution.
- The identity, mission and vision statements create a framework for the implementation of life-long learning. All members of the campus are challenged to put their theory into practice in serving the campus stakeholders, constituents and society in general.
- Academic programs offered by all campus units are sufficiently broad in their scope to adequately prepare students for the future.
- Cornerstone has a maturing process of assessing and implementing changes to the core curriculum, especially since the implementation of a standing Core Committee.
- Collegial and supportive relationships exist between all units of the university which help to develop and maintain an environment that encourages and nourishes life-long learning, creativity and skill development.

DISCOVERIES FROM THE SELF-STUDY
“LIFE-LONG LEARNING” — The dual notions of “life-long learning” and “organizational development” ought to be encouraged at every level of the university. For example, an energized, development-minded Board of Trustees could set the standard and move such activity into the rhythms and practices of the organization.

“ENHANCING JOB PERFORMANCE” — Updating the existing job descriptions and specifications so that duties and responsibilities are clearly defined and understood in light of the mission statements and goals of each department and division will help mature the organization.

“ASSESSMENT GUIDING THE UNIVERSITY” — Now that the assessment of student learning has a solid foundation on which to operate, it is necessary to gain traction and move the entire assessment project forward. The university must maintain the “institutional will” to make program review, evaluation and assessment an expected set of campus behaviors accepted and implemented by all internal stakeholders.
CRITERION FIVE
Engagement and Service

As called for by its mission, Cornerstone University identifies its constituencies and serves them in ways both value.

STRENGTHS
Cornerstone University meets Criterion Five and all of its core components as specified by the Higher Learning Commission. During the self-study process, the following strengths were identified for this criterion using the cross-cutting themes of the HLC:

- Regular evaluations are done related to each of Cornerstone University's primary and secondary constituencies, and the data is used to make needed changes.
- There is higher student satisfaction as a result of investments in university infrastructure, including residence halls, computer services, student activities center and increased financial-need scholarships.
- There are many faculty and staff who engage with students and go above and beyond to meet their constituents' needs.
- Cornerstone staff, faculty and students serve the community well in many areas and through many different programs on and off campus.
- The faculty, staff and administration consider Cornerstone a caring, close-knit community.

DISCOVERIES FROM THE SELF-STUDY

“TELLING THE CORNERSTONE STORY” – Many individuals and/or departments have initiatives on and/or off campus, many of which are not widely known by the campus community. Divisions and departments need to talk to each other, and there is a lack of coordination among those who are communicating with constituents. A venue is needed where those who are communicating externally with constituents can post information to share where or to whom they are presently releasing information. Additionally, there is a need to coordinate “archival data” university-wide.

“COMMUNICATING WITH CONSTITUENCIES” – Serving churches has been a challenge because of numerous factors, but it’s a commitment of the university to find and use new and effective ways to relate to churches of various denominations, especially in the local area, and this initiative has already begun. Surveys should be developed and administered on a regular basis to solicit input from the various university constituencies. This tool would, among other things, provide a means to assess the institution’s effectiveness in job readiness, to determine alumni and parent satisfaction, and to ascertain the effectiveness of Cornerstone’s publications. Also, it would be helpful to have the external constituents evaluate the contribution and impact of Cornerstone programs and students in local and global service endeavors.

“ALUMNI RELATIONS” – The Alumni Office has new direction and focus and is connecting with an important group of university stakeholders. The office has created a system to track alumni information, hired someone to enter data, and issues reports on specific alumni metrics. The Alumni Office is partnering with the Office of Assessment and Career Services to better track and evaluate the Cornerstone education of its graduates.
Cornerstone University:

• Is guided by identity, mission and vision statements.
• Is energized by a new leadership team.
• Is moving forward through a decade of tremendous organizational change.
• Has refined a strategic planning process.
• Is implementing a set of key performance indicators to measure movement toward goals.
• Is working to stabilize and strengthen the financial condition of the university through funding mechanisms and strategic planning.
• Has a growing sensitivity to how social and economic change impacts the university.
• Is expanding its horizons (programming, geographic reach, diversity) to meet the needs of its stakeholders and constituent groups.
• Integrates new technology into the multiple layers of the campus community.
• Is optimistic about the future and its new season.
IN UNDERSTANDING that the primary task is preparing its students for the future, the university community exhibits the following characteristics of being a learner-focused organization.

Cornerstone University:

• Places the student at the center of all of its programs and activities and supports student learning.
• Has developed an assessment plan to guide the campus efforts of measuring the effectiveness of student learning.
• Commits institutional resources to adequately care for the tasks of learning and its assessment.
• Understands that developing an enhanced campus ethos of academic rigor and quality will be of benefit over time.
• Desires to promote life-long learning among not only its students but also among the personnel who grow as persons and professionals in this educational environment.
IN LIVING OUT ITS MISSION, the university is actively involved in its community as an organization serving the common good by serving both its internal and external stakeholders. Cornerstone University is:

- Developing an internal campus culture where employees thrive.
- Maturing communication systems (internal and external) to care for the mission of the university.
- Actively implementing the identity, mission and vision statements.
- Stimulating a culture of service through a sense of cultural engagement (locally and globally).
- Working collaboratively with multiple external organizations in fulfilling its communal and social responsibilities.
IN BEING A CONNECTED, learner-focused, future-oriented institution of higher education, Cornerstone University works on its distinctiveness in a number of ways.

Cornerstone University is:

• Working out its mission clearly and purposefully as a faith-based community of scholarship.
• Staying cognizant of its historical roots but looking toward the future in meeting the changing needs of its constituents.
• Being self-reflective and accountable in its operations.
• Creatively seeking to appreciate diversity and foster more diverse learning environments.
• Proactively seeking organizational development.
SINCE THE START of the institutional self-study, a number of organizational development projects have begun, including the following:

- Developing strategic planning processes.
- Renewing and reinvigorating assessment processes.
- Updating the assessment plans of all academic units.
- Continuing to enhance the application of organizational policies.
- Developing a sense of “community decision making.”
- Developing a more coordinated data and distribution system across the campus.
- Refining the university student grievance policies.
- Maturing budget accountability processes.
- Recognizing university-wide organizational development processes.
- Revising the general education core curriculum (TUG).
- Reconnecting with multiple constituent groups.
- Developing minority student recruitment strategies.
- Continuing to develop the Human Resources Office.
- Implementing the Marketing & Communications Office policy to include the HLC logo on all university publications.
- Understanding better the partnership between Cornerstone, ABWE and ABTS.
- Developing international affiliations and cross-cultural study programs.
- Rewriting university policy documents.
- Changing and refining the faculty governance structure.
In using the work of the self-study, it is important that the Cornerstone University leadership and campus community consider the following “next steps” as it moves into the future:

• Build financial strength and stability.
• Continue organizational development at all levels and for all personnel.
• Develop enhanced academic rigor and peer institutional respect.
• Improve campus morale and trust issues.
• Mature the assessment of learning (systems/processes).
• Foster and implement a strategic planning processes.
• Develop the discipline to stay focused on its mission and goals.
• Coordinate the use of data across the campus.
• Use communication channels more effectively.
• Increase interaction with both internal and external constituency groups.
• Develop a positive organizational “self image.”
• Invest in the development of the Board of Trustees.
• Recognize the importance of stability and longevity of the leadership team.
• Develop a succession plan for senior leadership.
• Clarify the relationship between Cornerstone, ABTS and ABWE.
• Develop a policy to care for archiving the university critical documents.

In summarizing the self-study, Cornerstone University sufficiently exceeds requirements of accreditation. In order to move into the future, making the most progress in a short period of time, the following “next steps” are being implemented:

1. The development of the Board of Trustees as overseers of an institution of higher education. This will enable the university to avoid its reliance on any one president and will promote greater institutional stability in the future.

2. The maturation of a strategic planning process known by and owned by all levels of the university.

3. The enriching of the campus ethos. Such work will provide personal and professional energy for those employed to carry forth with great vigor the identity, mission and vision of the organization. The continued maturation and professionalization of the campus community as to how it perceives itself and the work it does.

4. The continued development of a data-guided decision-making organization. This includes the functions of institutional research, assessment of student learning, economic planning, and individual and committee decision-making processes.

5. The need to develop the ability to raise friends and funds. A plan should be developed to clearly connect strategic planning and fund raising to the mission of the organization.
TRANSITION TO THE PATHWAYS ACCREDITATION PROCESS

Cornerstone University plans to move seamlessly from the PEAQ accreditation process to the Pathways system by allowing these findings to guide it into the future. The intent is to maintain an “organizational development” mentality throughout the organization as a guiding principle of behavior by:

- Using the findings of the 2011 self-study to guide the institution into the future.
- Moving purposefully from the PEAQ to the Pathways accreditation process.
CORNERSTONE UNIVERSITY REQUESTS THAT THE HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION accept this self-study as evidence of an organization able to make reasoned judgments about its collective purposes, worth and future. Thus, the university community is requesting the HLC grant to it reaccreditation with all of the rights and privileges to continue its mission in fulfilling a distinct place in American higher education.
At Cornerstone University, we believe that academics matter. We offer a student-focused learning community that values excellence in education. Our outstanding students, faculty and staff are equipped to excel in their fields of study and be influencers for Christ in a variety of vocations.