

Executive Summary

Sonoma State University – WSCUC Reaffirmation of Accreditation Self-Study

Date of Site Visit: September 10–12, 2025

Institutional Context and Mission

Sonoma State University (SSU), one of 23 campuses in the California State University (CSU) system. With an enrollment of 5,784 students in Fall 2024, SSU blends a liberal arts tradition with professional programs in business, nursing, counseling, and education to meet regional workforce needs.

SSU is a federally designated Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). For the first time in 2023, Hispanic undergraduate students (42%) outnumbered White undergraduates (40%). Nearly 30% of SSU students are the first in their families to attend college. These demographics reflect the University's mission-driven commitment to equity, access, and inclusion.

Enrollment has declined by 37% since 2018, but recent recruitment, marketing, and program redesign efforts have stabilized numbers, with a 5.2% increase in new student enrollment in Fall 2024.

SSU's mission emphasizes educational access and excellence, grounded in the values of Diversity & Social Justice, Sustainability, Community Engagement, and Adaptability. The current Strategic Plan (2018–2025) concludes this year. Development of a new plan has been intentionally deferred until a permanent president is appointed in early 2026, ensuring that the University's next strategic direction is rooted in stable leadership and broad campus engagement.

Major Findings by Accreditation Standard

Standard 1 – Mission and Integrity

- Mission and core values guide academic programs, student support, and community engagement.

- Integrity & Transparency: SSU implemented the OpenBook budget portal and strategic budget forums to increase budget transparency, and published Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs) to model accountability.
- Equity & Inclusion: As an HSI, SSU has leveraged federal grants (PUERTA 2.0; Hawkins Center of Excellence) to expand pathways for Hispanic, first-generation, and underrepresented students. Programs such as the Basic Needs Initiative (BNI) and NOMA Cares Hub address housing and food insecurity.
- Identity & Planning: Through the Academic Master Plan, SSU has reaffirmed its identity as a liberal arts and sciences institution while integrating professional pathways to meet workforce needs. Mission and values will be revisited in the next Strategic Plan, following the presidential transition in 2026.

Standard 2 – Student Learning and Success

- Learning Outcomes: 97% of departments publish PLOs; General Education (GE) has moved to an outcomes-driven model with 13 defined outcomes under review in its first program review cycle.
- Curriculum & Equity: Faculty-led redesign of curricula and courses has closed equity gaps, improved pass rates in high-DFW courses, and expanded high-impact practices (research, service-learning, internships).
- Graduation Initiative 2025: The four-year graduation rate for the Fall 2020 cohort reached 44.7% (third-highest in CSU); six-year equity gaps have narrowed significantly.
- Student Support: Block enrollment, Jump Start, Summer Bridge, expanded peer tutoring, disability services, and co-curricular programming all strengthen equitable outcomes.
- Graduate Education: Degree audits and Graduate Learning Goals improve visibility and timely completion.
- Challenge: Faculty assessment practices vary, with uneven ability to fully close the loop on equity-focused curriculum changes.

Standard 3 – Resources and Organizational Effectiveness

- Fiscal Strategy: Enrollment decline since 2018 has strained resources, but SSU has implemented multi-year strategic budgeting and reserve policies to stabilize finances.

- Facilities Renewal: \$90M LEED Gold renovation of Stevenson Hall and upgrades to water, electrical, and energy infrastructure advance sustainability and carbon neutrality goals.
- Faculty & Staff: SSU maintains the CSU system's second-lowest student-to-faculty ratio and above-average tenure-track density. Faculty leadership has driven program redesign, equity-centered teaching, and assessment initiatives.

Standard 4 – Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement

- Culture of Evidence: Office of Institutional Effectiveness manages over 400 Tableau dashboards supporting decision-making, assessment, and accountability.
- Program Review: Annual program reports and action plans embed continuous improvement into academic culture, though engagement varies.
- Enrollment Management: Cabinet-level SEM unit stabilized enrollment (+5.2% new students in Fall 2024) through targeted scholarships, digital marketing, and AI-assisted recruitment.
- Equity & Climate: Campus climate surveys (2021, 2023) show progress in belonging, though challenges remain in ensuring inclusion and reducing bias across populations. Ongoing DEI work is coordinated through the Office of Institutional Equity and Belonging.

Institutional Strengths

Student Success Gains: Four-year graduation rates rising, equity gaps narrowing.

Equity Leadership: HSI designation leveraged for federal funding, PUERTA, BNI, and NOMA Cares.

Financial Transparency: Strategic budgeting and the OpenBook portal.

Community Engagement: Strong partnerships across the North Bay.

Areas for Growth

Enrollment and Fiscal Pressures: Continued SEM innovation and program diversification needed.

Assessment Consistency: Faculty capacity varies; professional development needed.

Campus Climate: Persistent belonging challenges for some groups.

Strategic Direction: New Strategic Plan deferred until after presidential appointment (2026).

Alignment with CSU Priorities

Graduation Initiative 2025: Demonstrated progress in retention, completion, and equity.

Equity & Student Success: Federal and campus initiatives reduce opportunity gaps.

Fiscal Sustainability: Multi-year budgeting and SEM strategies stabilize resources amid demographic and funding challenges.

Innovation in Teaching: Faculty development in inclusive pedagogy, AI, online, and hybrid learning expands access and academic quality.

Conclusion

Sonoma State University has made significant progress since its last review in strengthening assessment, advancing student success, improving transparency, and reaffirming its identity as a public liberal arts and sciences institution. At the same time, the campus has weathered challenges of enrollment decline, leadership turnover, wildfires, and the pandemic with resilience and adaptability.

Looking ahead, SSU is well-positioned to stabilize enrollment, strengthen its academic identity, and sustain a culture of evidence-based continuous improvement. A permanent president, expected in early 2026, will lead the development of a new Strategic Plan. That process will ensure SSU's next chapter is anchored in stable leadership, broad community engagement, and continued advancement of CSU systemwide values of access, equity, and excellence.