Report to
Faculty, Administration, Trustees, Students
of the
Fashion Institute of Technology
New York, NY 10001-5992

Prepared following analysis of the institution’s
Periodic Review Report

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Fashion Institute of Technology
Periodic Review Report

I. Introduction

We thank the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) for their time and energy in writing this periodic review report (PRR). In the main, the FIT’s PRR meets the standards of reporting required by Middle States and responds to the issues raised by the Middle States decennial review team in 2002. We do raise additional issues or rather reiterate previous issues that need additional commitment from FIT to establish needed progress.

II. Responses to Recommendations from the Previous Decennial Evaluation

A critical component of the PRR is the institutional response to the recommendations emanating from the decennial review. At the conclusion of the 2002 review, Middle States made recommendations in nine categories for additional follow-up.

1. Bringing the FIT Mission to Life
2. Preserving Positive Change in Administration and Governance
3. Planning for the Future
4. Faculty and Staff Development
5. Enhancing the FIT library
6. Streamlining and Enhancing Student Services
7. Improving Outcomes Assessment and Institutional Effectiveness
8. Strengthening Information Technology
9. Sharpening Institutional Advancement and External Relations

Two of these Middle States recommendations (#8 and #9) were treated sufficiently and appropriately in the PRR and need no substantive discussion except to commend FIT for its efforts.

Recommendation #8: Strengthening Information Technology
Information technology initiatives have been strong. We applaud FIT’s foresight in creating a stable revenue stream dedicated to information technology improvements. New technology solutions have been creative and effective.

Recommendation #9: Sharpening Institutional Advancement and External Relations
External relations, particularly in terms of media and public relations, are strong. The sheer volume of articles appearing in the public press relating to FIT is most impressive. The award winning publications are a testament to the quality of design, the quality of staff, and the quality of leadership in this area.

The seven remaining recommendations require additional comment.
Bringing the FIT Mission to Life

An institutional mission does not simply summarize what is occurring in an institution: rather it reflects an intentionality of purpose, a raison d'être. We complement FIT for the progress they have made to infuse the mission into the institution.

Suggestion - We suggest that FIT continue to work to incorporate the mission throughout its academic programming, in particular, paying close attention to assure wide adoption of all of the mission’s essential elements.

Preserving Positive Change in Administration and Governance

Changes made to clarify the role of the Deans seem reasonable and appropriate. However, clarifying the role of Deans by having them report directly to the President may itself muddy the role of the Vice President of Academic Affairs, FIT’s Chief Academic Officer in relation to the academic program and to the President.

Planning for the Future

We applaud FIT for engaging wholeheartedly in institution-wide planning efforts. 2020: FIT at 75 is a strong plan resulting from a strong planning process. With 5 key goals identified through a participative process, FIT is poised for success. It is no small feat to energize a campus into collectively participating in goal setting, strategizing, and re-imagining the future. It takes leadership that is willing to take chances and is willing to share planning authority with its constituencies. Usually, the payoff to institutional momentum is very positive and we are pleased that FIT is moving forward with institution-wide planning.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that other planning processes are still needed. The PRR identifies at least 3 other planning processes that have either initiated recently (i.e. institutional assessment) or will be initiated in the near future (i.e. strategic recruitment). These areas were noted as needing special attention and we encourage FIT to continue with these planning processes. Recruitment and enrollment is projected to remain at current levels but operating deficits are projected for the next three years. Finally, FIT should pay close attention to assessment planning. FIT’s academic assessment planning is good but its administrative assessment planning is still in its infancy.

Faculty and Staff Development

Faculty can be very valuable to a new strategic recruitment initiative. Indeed, faculty involvement and engagement are essential elements of a strong program of student recruitment. FIT’s decision to contract with Stamats for strategic recruitment consultation is an important step and should be applauded. However, institutional leaders
would be wise to re-engage faculty in the recruitment process as soon as possible to encourage faculty buy-in with the new approach.

Communication between faculty, staff and administration was an expressed concern in the decennial review. But, the only place where the concern was expressed as a recommendation was under faculty and staff development, where it was recommended that the President consider including faculty representation on the new Enrollment Management Committee, which was to address “how the school wishes to grow.” (p. ix, FIT Self-Study). Eliminating the enrollment management committee may make operational sense, but it may make strategic sense to develop other mechanisms and other opportunities for faculty and staff involvement in governance.

Enhancing the FIT Library

In reading the decennial review, it seems clear the team viewed resources in the library as problematic. In their report they say... “The library’s collection is too small and too dated to support the curriculum of the Institute” (p. 14, Middle States Report to FIT, 2002). Since 2002, some positive actions were taken with the library, making it more attractive and more functional. The increase in funds dedicated to new acquisitions and holdings brought additional learning materials to FIT’s community, and the new Graphics lab has been a hit with all students, not just FIT’s design students.

But, there are clearly a number of remaining challenges. As the PRR notes, funding remains a challenge so the increase in the library materials and book budget may be insufficient.

At the time of the decennial review “the library...[was] engaged in an ambitious project to digitize images of and from their collection, making them more readily available to students and outside users while creating a permanent record of perishable items” (see p. 13, 2002 Report to the Faculty, Administration, Trustees and Students). Unfortunately, the ambitious digitization plans referenced in the decennial review have not been achieved; indeed...

The challenge for the library will be to find the necessary funding to support the ever-increasing costs of existing database resources as well as to support many databases that we are yet to offer. Informational services are becoming more expensive with each passing year. Existing budget dollars do not adequately fund physical acquisitions, let alone digital acquisitions and holdings (PRR, p. 21).

Of course, FIT is not alone with such library-related issues. Aging collections, digitization, modernization, and collection size are all hot topics of concern amongst senior librarians and academic administrators in even the healthiest colleges and universities. Beyond the additional yearly funding, FIT appears to be managing the issue through FITDIL (FIT’s digital collection) and inter-library loans.
Recommendation: We recommend that FIT complete the new library planning process as expeditiously as possible and that the plan ensure the commitment of sufficient financial resources to provide students and faculty with the information resources needed to support FIT’s programs, including the strengthening of FITDIL.

Streamlining and Enhancing Student Services

Plans to enhance student services, particularly through co-location of enrollment offices (e.g. registration center, academic advisement center, Bursar’s Office), advising changes, and technological improvements are consistent with national trends and norms in these areas. The consolidation of offices ought to immediately raise the level of service to students and inter-office communications.

In addition, current efforts to reinvent academic advising practices also seem appropriate and reasonable. However, there is some concern with the speed of progress in this area, given the recommendation made at the time of the site visit in 2002.

Recommendation: We recommend that FIT develop a plan including a timeframe for the adoption of academic advising changes for each of the remaining schools. While we recognize the work of the Academic Advisement Task Force created by the President in 2006, it does not appear that there is a clearly defined plan for assigning faculty advisors throughout the institution. Regarding the consolidating of offices responsible for enrollment activities, we do understand that the physical relocation of spaces is tied to the implementation of the campus master plan, and would encourage FIT to vigorously pursue the timetable for the campus master plan implementation.

Improving Outcomes Assessment and Institutional Effectiveness

The three specific recommendations regarding outcomes assessment and institutional effectiveness have been addressed appropriately in the PRR. It is worth noting, however, that the need to develop an institution wide planning and assessment process was addressed in several different areas of the decennial review report. This need remains a concern and is addressed in Section IV of this report.

III. Major Accomplishments and Opportunities

Many of the major accomplishments and opportunities the PRR describes also relate to the recommendations made by the 2002 visiting team, evidence of the seriousness with which FIT views the accreditation process. Several planning initiatives, 7 new academic programs, several new international relationships, many information technology initiatives benefiting students and faculty, a commitment to building current assets (e.g. classroom, student services, and the Museum) and a demonstrable commitment to faculty development mark the period beginning with the 2002 site team recommendations. At the same time, FIT acknowledges and seems to be reckoning with the difficulties of managing an aging library in need of upgrades.
IV. Enrollment and Finance Trends and Projections

The enrollment and financial trend picture is challenging. On the one hand, FIT is experiencing substantial growth in associate degree applications. But at the same time, overall associate degree enrollment dropped by over 8%.\(^1\) Enrollment decline is due to a planned decrease in class size owing to collective bargaining agreements governing class sizes (limited to 25) and upcoming building renovations.

All of this is occurring in an environment in which revenues exceed operating expenses by a relatively slim margin. And, going forward, 3 years of operating deficits are projected during which time FIT will draw down from its reserves to fund the shortfall.

It seems then that FIT faces an enrollment conundrum. The solution FIT chooses is to concentrate on rearranging the mix of programs – concentrating on programs relating to market and mission and building additional classroom capacity. The solution could very well be a somewhat complicated mix of building strong academic programs, reducing or eliminating poor performing programs, and developing plans to support the new recruitment initiative. Given the growth in student applications and incoming class size maximums, it does seem to be an appropriate approach to take.

V. Assessment Processes and Plans

The academic assessment process is proceeding well. Student learning outcomes have been established for general education on a 5-7 year review cycle and employ a solid framework for assessing student-learning outcomes. Evidence is provided that action is being taken in light of assessment activities. A schedule has been developed for the review of FIT’s general education program and a review of the majors is also underway.

The length of time between reviews is of some concern. Most programs are on a 7-year cycle without any stated provisions for ongoing assessment and self-study. Assessment should be an ongoing activity and while full-scale program reviews can and should be done using a longer timeframe, checkpoints should be set up to review progress at shorter intervals. This should not be hard to do given the impressive assessment protocol established for academic programs.

The biggest area of concern is the lack of progress made on administrative unit assessment. To be sure, the PRR makes mention of assessment activity – a 3-yr cycled student opinion survey, plans to hire consultants to assess various functions (e.g. recruitment, student services, and business reengineering efforts) and the formation of certain committees to review operations (e.g. registration task force). However, an assessment-informed decision making routine is not in evidence. Assessment should be routine, it should be publicized and reported, it should be required before most decisions

\(^1\) FIT does not provide information on the number of applications to bachelor degree programs but enrollment in bachelor degree programs has increased by over 8%. FIT appears to recognize this opportunity.
are made and it should be part of the campus culture. Reference is made in the PRR (p. 46) to the strategic plan and a “second initiative planned for further down the road...a five year assessment of administrative services that mirrors the five year academic program review currently in place.” But, at this point in time, assessment should not only be planned but implemented institution-wide. At the moment, FIT is “planning to plan” in too many areas. Even FIT 2020, the institution’s key planning document, incorporates plans to “explore” a plan to evaluate whether or not the institution has achieved its five goals. Administrative units may not have specific student learning outcomes but there are certainly quality outcomes that relate indirectly and in some cases directly to student learning.

Recommendation: We strongly recommend that an institution-wide assessment protocol be developed, one that is linked to the institution’s planning and budgeting process and highlights key indicators of success. The lack of progress to ensure high-quality administrative services in student affairs, business processes, and the like is inconsistent with the progress this institution has made since the decennial visit and should be rectified immediately.

VI. Linking Institutional Planning and Budgeting Processes

FIT’s approach to linking planning and budgeting involves identifying specific initiatives and projects that relate directly to institutional planning goals and to fund those specific initiatives and projects. In this way, budgeting is linked to planning with additional dollars being targeted to support plan-related items.

FIT has done an excellent job of identifying strategic goals, tasks, costs and accountabilities. It would be wise, we think, to develop other protocols to supplement the agreed to preset tasks and projects in FIT 2020 and sustain institutional momentum. As time passes, institutional commitment to creating a matrix of preset tasks and projects tends to wane. When this happens or when opportunities present themselves unexpectedly, FIT needs to rely on its mission, its five strategic goals, its sense of strategic intent, and perhaps its own resourcefulness to guide action. Like all institutions of higher education in highly competitive markets, FIT will need to be nimble enough to accommodate subtle shifts in its strategic context.

It might be useful to create a college wide budgeting and planning committee, one that reports directly to the President and one that relies on the same kind of representative input gathered in FIT 2020. The planning and budgeting cycle identified in the PRR (p. 51) is an appropriate process, one that relies on the administrative hierarchy. But, given concerns raised about internal organizational communications, especially between administration and faculty, it might be useful to incorporate a representative vehicle like this into the budgeting cycle. Criticisms of intra-organizational communication are extraordinarily common, especially within institutions of higher education. Outside reviewers need to temper their findings given the commonness of the situation. But even so, this suggestion is made with the overall goal of improving communications whether any concerns or criticism are justified or not justified.
Suggestion: FIT should consider establishing a planning, budgeting, and assessment committee made up of a cross section of the campus community to review annual assessment updates, push various planning initiatives and incorporate necessary activities into the annual budget cycle paying particular attention to critical institutional initiatives.

VII. Conclusion

FIT has made progress since the decennial review, particularly with regard to information technology and institutional advancement, but also with regard to institution-wide planning and we commend them on this progress. However, there are areas in which FIT can improve.

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PERIODIC REVIEW REPORT

FISCAL ANALYSIS

2007

NAME OF INSTITUTION   FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, NY

FINANCE ASSOCIATE
Lisa Maria McCauley

King’s College, PA
The Fashion Institute of Technology is a separate entity located in New York City. It is part of the 64 public institutions of higher education that make-up the State University of NY system and is a public degree offering institution.

The last accreditation visit in 2002 required the documentation of several areas of improvement, with a report due and accepted in 2004. These areas documented included: 1) implementation of an institution-wide planning process, 2) development and implementation of a comprehensive outcomes assessment plan, 3) meeting the goals established in the campus master plan, and 4) improving communications between faculty and administration. Additionally, all of the major recommendations documented in the 2002 report have been implemented.

In the past five years the college has continued to grow and expand to ensure its viability in the educational fashion industry. Accomplishments include but are not limited to: the Strategic Plan, (2020: FIT at 75), new program development, increased global presence, and improvements in student services, technology and facilities, all which represent significant financial resources. The college notes that its “financial condition is solid”. It has kept tuition & fees at an affordable level “while optimizing the revenue stream, managing baseline costs, creating efficiencies, and cutting expenses” (2007 PRR).

A review of the audited financial statements of FY2006 and 2005, confirm the solid financial base. The operational component of the finances that are limited to the specific operation of the college are negative, but are fully supported by ancillary activities such as housing and endowments. This type of arrangement for operational support is customary in many educational institutions. Current projections provided in the PRR indicate that minimal operational deficits will occur through 2011, at which time an equalization is expected to occur.

Capital spending has totaled over $20 million during the past few years and will likely exceed another $108 million in the future. Many of these projects are funded through the major sponsors of the institution – both SUNY and the City of New York.

As noted above the College developed a long range strategic plan which incorporates five major goals. The budget process is integral to the success of these goals. The process has been aligned with strategic and planning objectives.