



UNIVERSITY *of* ALASKA  
ANCHORAGE

University Response to Year 7 Evaluation Committee Report:  
Fall 2010 Self-Evaluation Report and Site Visit

Submitted by  
Fran Ulmer, Chancellor  
Thomas Miller, Accreditation Liaison Officer

Submitted to  
The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)  
December 14, 2010



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Dr. Sandra Elman, President  
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities  
8060 165<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE, Suite 100  
Redmond, Washington 98052

Dear Dr. Elman:

The final institutional report from this pilot accreditation cycle was submitted on September 1, 2010, and UAA hosted an evaluation team from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities during the first week in October. The evaluation team was prepared, perceptive, and well-equipped to evaluate the many important aspects of our performance, amid the complexities of a comprehensive and geographically distributed institution. The discussions that they led on our campuses, and their observations and assessments reveal their extensive experience and deep understanding of the most important aspects of higher education. These, combined with the self-reflection of our preparations and the feedback from the Commission and other evaluators, have allowed us to more clearly define ourselves, organize our functions around mission priorities, and assess our successes and shortcomings.

We found the report to be a thoughtful and accurate review of UAA operations, analysis of the evidence presented, and appraisal of mission fulfillment. UAA is pleased that the report compliments the significant work done in promoting open, inclusive management and leadership of the institution. The Chancellor's Cabinet, governance groups, and unit managers at all levels engage employees, students, and the public when considering institutional objectives, programs, and services. They then proceed through the Planning and Budget Advisory Council on an annual cycle to effectively allocate the resources required to support their work. These processes have been in place for several years and they become more effective and inclusive through each iteration. Stronger alignment of the annual budget development and allocation processes with the evaluation and improvement components of accreditation has been a goal of UAA since the start of the pilot process.

Stakeholders at all of UAA's campuses were actively engaged throughout the pilot process and the UAA leadership team is especially grateful for the direction and work of the faculty-led Accreditation Steering Committee, which oversaw all aspects of our work in the pilot. Their efforts have and will continue to make UAA ever better and, we strongly believe, have had a large positive impact on accreditation across the NWCCU's region.

The recommendations and concerns of the evaluators provide important guidance to further improvement in our work. UAA already has begun to respond to that guidance. Descriptions of some of those activities follow.

## **Recommendation #1**

*The evaluation committee recommends that the institution work quickly to refine the indicators for each core theme, ensure that measures are in place for each, reach agreement on targets for desirable improvements, and collect and analyze data relative to those targets (4.A.1; 4.B.1).*

For most of the last decade, an extensive set of indicators has been employed by the university to inform its many constituents and to guide its management practices. Many indicators have evolved to more meaningfully and reliably measure the conditions and priorities reflected in the strategic plan. UAA acknowledges the need to continue to develop and refine the objectives and outcomes that define our mission, and the indicators that measure our achievements. The Chancellor's Cabinet and the Accreditation Steering Committee are currently engaged in designing the structure needed to ensure ongoing management and evaluation of mission fulfillment. A key component of this discussion is a careful examination of each indicator and the processes for their collection, analysis, evaluation, and use in decision making. In some cases, there will be more complete data collection than was possible in the time available for the pilot. In other cases, tools for data analysis and result reporting will be developed or enhanced.

While UAA continues to have concerns about targets and their use in determining mission fulfillment for accreditation purposes, the university is committed to defining and developing thresholds<sup>1</sup> or targets<sup>2</sup> for objectives or indicators as appropriate. A process will also be defined to identify areas in need of improvement<sup>3</sup>. This work will be accomplished with broad participation within the university, with the aim of establishing their value and meaning for management and improvement processes.

## **Recommendation #2**

*Some artificial boundaries may have been created by classifying specific units and functions within a single or limited number of core themes. The evaluation committee recommends that the institution look holistically at the roles and contributions that units and departments make to multiple core theme and further that the report reflect this holistic view. (3.B.2; 4.A.4)*

Coordinated delivery of programs and services are the norm at UAA. Those who guide activities in each major division ensure that the academic, student, and community perspectives are included in their program designs and operational decisions.

The use of core themes to structure the institutional report led to many conversations about outcomes that require collaboration across the institution, and about indicators that point to accomplishment in several of the core themes. Decisions to list indicators in a single core theme and not attempt to show the web of interconnections that exists among functional units were made to preserve simplicity and readability. The university will develop presentations that more completely describe the roles and contributions of units to accomplishment of objectives across the institution, and institutional leadership from the Chancellor's Cabinet down will emphasize these roles and contributions.

## **Other Issues**

### Assessment of Student Learning

Assessment of student learning at UAA has been occurring at the course and program levels for some years. The evaluation team noted some concerns about the processes used and the results achieved.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roughly defined as a minimum level of performance needed so that mission fulfillment is not endangered.

<sup>2</sup> Roughly defined as a specific desired end state where one can be appropriately identified.

<sup>3</sup> For areas in need of significant improvement to enhance mission fulfillment and for which the desired end state is not yet known, a direction and perhaps desired rate of change might be identified where appropriate.

<sup>4</sup> *"Not all units have taken part in assessment efforts at the institutional level..."*

<sup>5</sup> *"...UAA has not been as thorough and successful in demonstrating that departments are using data to change practice..."*

There is no disagreement about the importance of these areas. A Faculty Senate committee recently assumed responsibility for directing the assessment of student learning at all levels. Since the team's visit, they have published a handbook that clarifies processes, timelines, and expectations of academic units. This work will lead to even broader involvement across all units, will enhance the incorporation of general education and institutional learning outcomes across academic programs at UAA, and will more clearly demonstrate the use of data to change practice.

### Enrollments in Developmental Courses

There is no doubt that developmental course enrollments have been growing. UAA is facing a gap in student preparation<sup>7</sup> that makes the transition from secondary school to college more lengthy and difficult for affected students. This mirrors situations faced by many institutions in the region and across the country. The university continuously evaluates the number, levels, content, and success of its developmental offerings and attempts to deliver a balance that remains within its mission, yet provides for the success of all admitted students.

### Enrollment Growth

The university's careful monitoring and management of enrollment growth will continue. The effectiveness of UAA's efforts is reflected in indicators from the past five years. Since 2005-06 the annual student credit hours awarded at UAA grew by 8.8%. Institutional resources and capacities grew as well during that time as regular faculty increased by 12.4%, the total square footage of UAA buildings increased 11%, and unrestricted expenditures grew by 34% to \$201M. Higher growth rates occurred in a few targeted areas, but these were planned and executed through initiatives that added or expanded programs in those areas. UAA will continue to ensure its capability to serve all students who attend.

### Research and Graduate Studies

UAA is the largest producer of graduate degrees in Alaska, and UAA's strategic plan strongly connects research to undergraduate and graduate learning, to student success, and to the public square. It is not uncommon for this commitment to be overshadowed by the extensive enrollments and accomplishments in undergraduate and workforce development programs.<sup>8</sup>

Those within UAA who evaluated accomplishments within Core Theme #2 were convinced of the sufficiency of the university's performance in research, scholarship, and creative activity. This is true, despite the acknowledged need to further define indicators, systematize data collection and analysis, and incorporate those analyses into plans for programs. Evaluators' comments suggest that UAA's report did not present enough detail for the evaluators to fully share our conclusions.

Some additional points further illustrate the breadth and impact of research, and support the internal evaluation of mission fulfillment for this core theme.

- Strong growth in research proposals, awards and expenditures in areas of strategic focus for UAA such as science and engineering
- Strong records of publication and creative performances for those faculty members with research or creative expression as part of their assignment
- Recent increases in prestigious R01 grant awards from NIH indicating growing strength in biomedical research
- Significant number of graduate programs, graduate students, and graduate degrees awarded
- Continued growth in undergraduate research experiences.

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<sup>6</sup> "...further communication with multiple campus constituencies regarding the GE learning outcomes and ILOs may be needed to facilitate continued improvement in student achievement..."

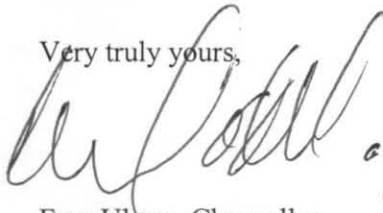
<sup>7</sup> "...number of students underprepared for collegiate-level work who enroll in collegiate-level courses. This places a burden on the developmental course offerings and also on faculty and other students in college-level courses..."

<sup>8</sup> "Because the institution does not currently offer doctoral programs, nor does it have a wide array of graduate programs, undergraduate education is at the core of the institution's mission."

The accreditation report has further highlighted the need for UAA to better measure and communicate to all stakeholders the university's graduate and research vision, activities, and contributions. This is a priority as UAA continues into the next accreditation cycle.

In closing, we again express our appreciation for the fine work of the evaluation team that reviewed UAA. We are also grateful for the strong guidance and support provided by NWCCU's staff throughout the pilot process. Finally, we thank the Commission for allowing UAA to participate in this pilot. This entire process has been remarkably helpful in making UAA better able to fulfill its broad and nearly unique mission.

Very truly yours,



Fran Ulmer, Chancellor

*as acting chancellor  
and for Fran Ulmer*

cc: Members of the Chancellor's Cabinet  
Tom Miller, Accreditation Liaison Officer  
Accreditation Steering Committee