Mid-Cycle Peer-Evaluation Report

University of Alaska Anchorage

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A confidential report prepared for the
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)

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II. Introduction

A two-member evaluation team conducted a Mid-Cycle Evaluation (MCE) of the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) on behalf of the Northwest Commission for Colleges and Universities. The (MCE) serves to assist institutions in determining if their outcomes assessment plan and processes will lead "to a successful Year Seven self-evaluation and peer evaluation." To these ends, the MCE process is collegial and formative, the institution "in conversation" with the Commission and its evaluators. In this spirit of collegial conversation and formative assessment, the terms "recommendations," "commendations" and "compliments" are not used in this confidential report. Instead, the evaluators have worked to assist the institution in identifying whether it presently demonstrates the institutional conditions a successful Year Seven self-evaluation Report will depend on and, if not, what growth will be necessary to foster those conditions. In addition, this report concludes with collegial "suggestions" that may be of use to the University in its preparations for its Year-Seven self-evaluation.

III. Assessment of the Self-Evaluation Report and support materials

The NWCCU guidelines for the mid-cycle evaluation describe a self-evaluation of three parts: 1) an overview of the institution's entire assessment plan, 2) representative samples of assessment processes, and 3) an evaluative overview of parts 1 & 2 to include the steps the institution must take to move forward with respect to the Year Seven self- and peer evaluations.

The evaluators found the Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report clear and well-written, but organized somewhat differently than the outline above. This was clearly a result of the ongoing development of the MCE, the fact that UAA did not have the MCE assessment rubric to guide them in the writing of the report, and that this evaluation was the first experience with the MCE for both the institution and the evaluators.

UAA chose option two offered by NWCCU and began their self-study with brief descriptions of recent institutional activity demonstrating compliance with key components of Standards 2.A, B, C, D, E, F, and G. These demonstrations comprise Part I of the report: "Brief Narrative on Standard Two (Resources and Capacity)." Part II is titled "Progress Toward Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability," with Section I of Part II devoted to "Assessment for Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability," Section II devoted to "Representative Examples of Assessment," and Section III devoted to "Preparing for the Year Seven Evaluation." For the sake of clarity, this report will follow the organization of the UAA self-study.

The evaluators received electronic and hard copies of the report well in advance of their visit. Active links to institutional sources within the electronic version of the self-study provided access to supporting materials and information that aided the evaluation process. Once on campus, the evaluation team was given access to a large amount of useful, supplemental documentation. In one instance we made an additional request for copies of departmental assessment reports. These were promptly provided.

The UAA team assigned to assist the evaluation committee prior to and during the visit was uniformly professional, friendly and responsive. On campus, the evaluators had a clear sense that a wide array of university stakeholders were involved in the self-study and the University's assessment and accreditation activities.

BRIEF NARRATIVE ON STANDARD TWO (RESOURCES AND CAPACITY)

Report on Standard 2.A Governance

The evaluation team finds that UAA demonstrates a widely understood and effective system of governance, with roles and responsibilities that are clearly defined and understood. Responsibility and authority between the institution and the system is clearly delineated, with provisions and processes for the input and consideration of the views of students, faculty and staff. This is reflected in a wide range of recent activities that concern program assessment. These activities have involved a number of formal committees and institution-wide processes.

For instance, in order to assess "institutional resource alignment with the university's mission" for the purpose of informing future budgeting and resource decisions, UAA faculty and staff have been actively engaged in a process of program prioritization wherein programs and support functions are reviewed against a set of established criteria and ranked for prioritization within five categories. The criteria explicitly reference the University mission and values but not the Core Themes. A task force of faculty categorized the academic programs whereas a team of faculty, staff and administrators categorized programs within support functions such as student affairs. The evaluators find that the clarity with which faculty were assigned responsibility for the prioritization process within academic programs illustrates the institution's robust joint-governance processes and the shaping role of assessment, and faculty responsibility for that assessment, within UAA's strategic planning and resource decisions.

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Report on Standard 2.B Human Resources.

UAA has approved new collective bargaining agreements for adjunct faculty, crafts and trades staff, and for faculty members of United Academics, one of two tenure-track faculty unions. New faculty evaluation guidelines, based on these agreements, have been implemented and training regarding the standards has been provided for both faculty and evaluators. The evaluation guidelines begin with the institution's mission and core values. The evaluators were pleased to see that the guidelines and standards for demonstrating and advancing teaching excellence specifically cite participation and leadership in "shaping and improving assessment methods," and use of instructional and classroom inquiry, and professional development.

In addition, UAA undertook a new faculty and staff survey to assess satisfaction, climate, and other issues. Data from the survey, which was the first such survey since 2003, informed changes to campus awards and recognitions, demonstrating the use of assessment data in human resource improvement efforts.

Report on Standard 2.C. Education Resources

UAA's update on its education resources documents a wide range of activities that demonstrate continued development of its structures and processes for assessing student learning. These activities have involved a number of formal committees and institution-wide processes, including the General Education Requirements Assessment Task Force (GERA).

Separately, the Faculty Senate Academic Assessment Committee (AAC) has held workshops and seminars to disseminate best practice approaches to assessment and to enhance and sustain a culture of assessment among faculty. The AAC has successfully worked to make program assessment meaningful, and to increase the visibility of student learning outcomes. AAC members, for instance, helped lead the effort to have program learning outcomes incorporated into the UAA catalog. This committee, comprised of widely-respected faculty from a broad range of disciplines, mentors and supports faculty in carrying out assessment activities. The AAC formally reviews departmental and program assessment plans, providing detailed feedback to chairs and others involved in program assessment, and maintains a useful online assessment handbook.

The evaluators found the AAC to be a remarkably rich and effective educational resource. The central functions and responsibilities of the AAC within UAA's program assessment plan ensures that the assessment

of student learning outcomes is principally planned, carried out and administrated by faculty. The effectiveness of the AAC is demonstrated in the quality of departmental assessment plans and assessment procedures, the thoroughness with which they are carried out, and the consistency with which departments document the use of their annual assessment findings in concrete program improvements. Importantly, the AAC models assessment practices in its own processes. For instance, improvements to the committee's procedures for responding to departmental assessment plans have been informed by their assessment of those processes. Whereas they once graded departmental plans, they now use a more formative and dialogic approach that has been more favorably received and has resulted in greater improvements.

In addition, UAA plans to initiate an e-portfolio system and to explore participation in Quality-Matters. Faculty will also play a leadership role in the institution's development and use of these educational resources. The role of the AAC, and of faculty leadership in general, in the institution's program assessment processes ensures that the assessment processes and resources evolve in an organic manner and in such a way as to fit UAA's institutional culture and programmatic needs.

Report on Standard 2.D Student Support Services

UAA has engaged in significant changes within Student Affairs. These changes include the creation of the Division of Student Access, Advising, and Transition to better support students entering the University and completing their first year. Similarly, the division is reviewing its Student Code of Conduct, conducting trainings regarding Title IX, and has initiated a mandatory orientation and academic advising pilot for a select cohort of 775 students.

The Division will also be piloting the Student Success Collaborative (SSC), an early warning and data analytics platform provided by the Education Advisory Board. The evaluators expressed some concern about the simultaneous use of MAP-Works and the SSC, since the combined use of both systems will provide duplicative early warning and note-making systems and require that advisors learn to implement two new web platforms. In addition, the IT support required for the data uploads and implementation of such systems can be substantial. Implementation of the SSC can also require extensive involvement by academic department chairs.

The evaluation team applauds UAA for its investment in these platforms. The use of predictive analytics is a recognized best practice that has been associated with remarkable improvements in retention and graduation rates at some institutions that, like UAA, have lower-than-average overall

graduation rates and/or retention rates for students of color. UAA's use of both platforms demonstrates a willingness to aggressively explore all possible tools for improving its services to students. However, the evaluators wonder if the Division has underestimated the challenges of simultaneously implementing both systems. We suggest that UAA seek advice from other institutions that use both systems and otherwise establish an implementation plan to ensure that these systems are used in a complementary fashion that doesn't overwhelm advisors or IT staff.

Report on Standard 2.E Library and Information Resources

Several changes have been made to the library and its services. These include a new electronic interface to the catalog, an expanded Joint Library Catalog, and improvements to the library's QuickSearch service.

Report on Standard 2.F Financial Resources.

UAA faces declining enrollments and a sudden decrease in state general fund support. While short-term measures initiated by the University should enable UAA to weather these deductions through FY 2015, strategic reductions are expected to be necessary in the near future. Responsibility for such reductions rests with the Chancellor's cabinet, which will undertake this work informed by the prioritization recommendations of faculty who comprised the Academic Task Force and the faculty and staff who comprised the Support Task Force.

Standard 2.G Physical and Technological Resources

A new master plan has been approved by the Board of Regents, new construction and renovation has begun, and improvements have been made to Information Technology Services (ITS). Further, ITS has begun a review to determine where changes and improvements are needed.

As in the prioritization process, the self-evaluation did not note whether action on the Master plan, the new construction, or the library improvements were informed by the university mission and Core Themes, though stakeholders expressed certainty that they were in discussion. In these examples the evaluators see additional opportunities that can be taken advantage of in the Year-Seven report for more explicitly highlighting the shaping role of the mission and Core Themes in these strategic actions.

PART II: SECTION I: ASSESSMENT FOR MISSION FULFILLMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

The UAA mid-cycle self-evaluation report describes dissatisfaction with the institution's previous plan of mission fulfillment, employed in the pilot cycle, wherein performance relative to Core Theme indicators rolled up to comprise mission fulfillment. According to the MCE, the institution found that this approach did not encourage the kind of collective, holistic approach to mission fulfillment it seeks. Seeking a process of defining mission fulfillment that might be characterized by these features, the University has sketched Table 8, within the appendix, which provides a simple diagram of the relation of mission and Core Theme fulfillment. However, revised indicators of mission fulfillment did not exist at the time of the report, which noted that " . . . the university is continuing to develop its approach to evaluating mission fulfillment . . ."

The UAA Board of Regents approved the University's five Core Themes in 2012, following approval by the Chancellor's Cabinet. The indicators of Core Theme fulfillment have been continuously refined to improve their alignment with planning and resource decisions but remain in development. For instance, targets have been established for some indicators but not for others.

In addition, the University has engaged in several new initiatives designed to support determinations of mission and Core Theme fulfillment and to align the coordination of data gathered in such efforts to strategic planning and resource and curriculum decisions. For instance, the Office of Institutional Research (IR) has been realigned to better support the University mission, new IR staff have been hired, and a new dashboard has been deployed.

Importantly, the MCE notes that assessment and accreditation efforts were "substantial" during the pilot cycle, including a large steering committee and five ad hoc core committees. Following completion of the pilot cycle, the institution recognized the need to seek a more sustainable assessment and accreditation process. To this end, the Cabinet formed a Subcommittee on Institutional Planning and Assessment (IPA), and tasked it with the responsibility of assessing the previous structure and process and of recommending changes. Since then the Provost assigned accreditation to the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Academic Affairs, and in Spring 2014 the Cabinet approved the creation of an Accreditation Steering Committee, to be co-chaired by the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Academic Affairs and the Senior Vice Provost for Institutional Effectiveness. The standing Accreditation Steering Committee is charged to oversee and guide UAA's approach to

accreditation, and to integrate Core Theme assessment into the core work of the institution, and to create a communication plan.

The evaluators applaud this attempt to seek simpler and more sustainable processes for determining mission and Core Theme fulfillment, and for improving the linkages between mission fulfillment and decisions pertaining to strategic planning and resource allocation. In particular, UAA's dissatisfaction with its previous indicators of mission fulfillment suggests a strong, campus-wide commitment to ensure that accreditation processes are useful and meaningful. Nevertheless, the lack of Core Theme targets and indicators of mission fulfillment is worrisome at such a late point in the accreditation cycle.

Fortunately, the evaluators left their visit convinced that UAA has the institutional capacity and culture to rapidly develop meaningful indicators of mission and core-theme fulfillment. To begin with, the University has for years published a widely-distributed annual update on its institutional performance. This report contains data on some of the indicators of mission and Core Theme fulfillment for which the University has established targets. That is, documentation of mission and core-theme fulfillment with respect to these indicators is ample and longstanding. Once the remaining indicators are established and data is gathered, this publication could serve as a ready-made vehicle for publication and discussion of a more complete set of mission and core-theme indicators of achievement.

In addition, UAA has recently expanded the capacity of its Institutional Research Office and is well served by experienced assessment specialists within its faculty and administration. Finally, the evaluators left their meetings with the Chancellor's Cabinet, the AAC, and the Accreditation Steering Committee impressed by the professional and collegial climate they have achieved in their joint-governance and assessment processes. In the view of the evaluators, these resources provide the institution with the necessary conditions for collectively and rapidly establishing the remaining indicators of achievement.

Separately, the Faculty Senate Academic Assessment Committee (AAC) has held workshops and seminars to disseminate best practice approaches to assessment and to enhance and sustain a culture of assessment among faculty. Student learning outcomes have been incorporated into the UAA catalog. This committee reviews assessment plans, publishes an assessment handbook, and maintains a repository of the institution's academic program assessment plans. The considerable resources of this committee can contribute to the rapid development of indicators of mission and core-theme fulfillment.

SECTION II: REPRESENTATIVE EXAMPLES OF ASSESSMENT

The UAA MCE provides representative examples of institutional and programmatic assessment within two distinct Core Themes. The first example addresses Core Theme 1, "Teaching and Learning," while the second addresses Core Theme 3, "Student Success."

Example A: Supporting Student Achievement through Academic Program Assessment

The evaluators applaud UAA's robust student learning outcomes assessment processes at the departmental and program level, its structural support for those processes, and the high rates of participation of its departments and programs on the UAA's campuses. However, the evaluators found proof of these processes and support resources more evident in their visit than they did in the MCE, which is surprisingly modest with regard to these matters.

The MCE does note that program faculty annually collect data on their PSLOs and use the findings in their continual improvement efforts. And the MCE provides a detailed example of how this is done within the Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) program. This example includes a useful description of how student learning assessment of writing outcomes demonstrated by BBA students informed curricular changes to improve the instruction of writing in the program. Supplemental resources reviewed by the evaluators during their visit, such as samples of departmental assessment plans and the annual survey of program-level assessment results, further documented the use of assessment results in program improvement, suggesting a well-developed system of student learning assessment for which participation rates and visibility are both very high across the university.

Example B: Supporting Student Achievement through Assessment of Student Success.

UAA has engaged in significant changes within Student Affairs. These changes include the creation of the Division of Student Access, Advising, and Transition to better support students entering the University and completing their first year. Similarly, the division is reviewing its Student Code of Conduct, conducting trainings regarding Title IX, and has initiated a mandatory orientation and academic advising pilot for a select cohort of 775 students.

While the assessment findings which informed these changes were not always spelled out in the MCE, the evaluators' discussion on campus provided evidence that these changes were informed by best practice

research, the University mission, in-house surveys of students, and the University's retention and enrollment data. For instance, the new Division of Student Access, Advising and Transition is responding to the institution's low graduation and retention rates by implementing a new data-analytics platform within MAP-Works to predict student difficulties, to provide early notification of student difficulties, and to permit faculty to easily refer students to the division. In this way the division seeks to connect students to resources and support before course failures have occurred and to use advisors to proactively reach out to students, rather than simply waiting for the students to come to them. Enrollment Services in Student Affairs is supporting the Office of Undergraduate Academic Affairs to use the new electronic catalog to publish accessible and recommended pathways through majors.

SECTION III: PREPARING FOR THE YEAR SEVEN EVALUATION

The NWCCU Mid-Cycle Evaluation (MCE) serves to assist institutions in determining if they have achieved the institutional conditions necessary for a successful Year Seven self-evaluation and peer evaluation. These institutional conditions include a mission statement defined in terms sufficiently pragmatic to guide institutional processes, student learning outcome indicators and assessment processes that feed back assessment results to be used for continuous improvement, and evidence and processes sufficient to demonstrate how institutional assessment is used to meet the requirements of Standard Five, concerning mission fulfillment.

Our discussions on campus confirmed the many demonstrations in the self-study that UAA has achieved the necessary institutional conditions required for continued preparation for Year Seven regarding its mission, and its student learning outcome assessment and improvement processes.

Our discussions also confirmed that the necessary conditions for achievement of Standard Five have not yet been achieved. Specifically, the institution cannot publish and act upon evidence-based evaluations regarding the extent to which it is fulfilling its mission because it currently lacks a complete and articulated definition of mission fulfillment, and because its indicators of Core Theme achievement remain incomplete. Fortunately, and as described in earlier sections of this report, our discussions have convinced us that UAA has both the expertise and the joint-governance processes needed to achieve this final "necessary condition."

We strongly suggest that UAA immediately move toward the establishment of meaningful and measurable indicators of mission and core-theme fulfillment, and that concrete internal deadlines be established for this purpose. While the MCE recommends "continued" development, discussion and implementation of such indicators, no firm deadlines pertaining to its Year Seven preparations are mentioned. However, if UAA is to be able to demonstrate broad discussion of mission fulfillment in their Year Seven Self-Examination in 2017, the actual sharing of these results would need to occur in 2016, with data collection occurring in the second half of 2015. Such a time-line is only possible if the institution rapidly establishes its indicators of mission and Core Theme fulfillment and we urge it to do so.

In addition to the suggestion above, pertaining to demonstrations of the necessary conditions for the Year Seven Self-Study and evaluation, we offer the following collegial suggestions to aid the University in its assessment and accreditation planning. None of these suggestions are intended to suggest deficiencies or instances of non-compliance. Instead, they are offered in the spirit of advice to assist a strong university in better showcasing its strengths and successes.

Move Ahead Quickly with GER Assessment

As noted in the MCE, UAA's General Education Requirements Assessment Task Force (GERA) was recently established to move UAA toward "an institutional approach to assessing general education outcomes." This task force is to "support the transition to a new assessment process" in AY 2015.

Because standards 2.C9 and 2.C.10 specifically address general education programs and their assessments, the evaluators suggest that the University move quickly to develop a new GER assessment process.

Showcase Your Strengths and Provide Ready Access to Assessment Materials

As noted previously in this report, the evaluators found UAA's student learning assessment processes and products to be exemplary. However, the report is so modest in its account of these resources that their quality is difficult to ascertain. In addition, evidence—such as actual copies of the assessment products—was frequently not available.

For instance, the evaluators were extremely impressed by the work and impact of the AAC and suggest that UAA more deliberately showcase the role, activities and impact of this committee in their Year Seven self-study. The AAC demonstrates exemplary assessment and joint-

governance processes the evaluators found to be highly developed, sustained and useful for the institution. The quality of the program-level assessment plans and processes clearly reflect the success of the AAC in providing guiding feedback, training and support to departments. More explicit documentation of this annual guidance, and the assessment improvements it has led to, would help the institution to better showcase the strengths of this resource.

Similarly, neither the MCE, nor the materials made available during the visit, provided evidence of the quality of the program level assessment plans. Only after requesting examples of departmental assessment plans and findings were the evaluators given concrete demonstrations of the assertions of quality made in the report. In fact, when assessed against the MCE rubric for evaluating assessment plans, the departmental plans and processes the evaluators considered were found to be "Developed" to "Highly Developed" by the evaluators. The evaluators suggest that UAA work harder to showcase the high quality and demonstrable strengths of these plans and its student learning assessment practices. Specifically, we recommend that UAA make this exemplary work more visible by providing the Year Seven evaluators with ready access to each college's repository of plans, annual assessment findings, and their documented use of the findings to inform program improvements.

Follow Assertions With Evidence and Examples

The evaluation team also recommends that the University more deliberately follow statements with documented evidence, proof or examples. Consider the following statements:

Page 17: "It (The Annual Academic Assessment Survey) also shows that, despite this high number, faculty are looking deeper into the results and making improvements both to their programs and to their assessment processes."

Page 18 (first paragraph): "Major curriculum revisions, as well as other types of program improvement suggestions, have emerged from the work and discussions resulting from these neutral review panels."

These statements, like others in the report, would be substantially strengthened by concrete examples. Indeed, one might argue that virtually every accreditation assertion warrants evidence of some kind. Example one, for instance, should be followed by examples of results that were reexamined and improvements to programs and assessment processes that were informed by this reexamination. The absence of evidence is yet more striking in the second example because one would

expect "major" changes to be of great significance and therefore worthy of mention.

The unsubstantiated nature of these and other assertions struck the evaluators as particularly curious because UAA stakeholders had no trouble providing examples and evidence for these statements when asked to during our visit.

Specify References to the Core Themes

In multiple meetings, the evaluators were told that the prioritization process was grounded in the institution's mission and Core Themes. While the evaluators did find the institution's mission to be firmly evident in the prioritization standards and rubrics, they did not see the framework of Core Themes explicitly cited in the process. In discussions of this matter, campus representatives explained that because the Core Themes rise directly out of the mission and strategic plan, "mission," "strategic plan" and "Core Themes" are used somewhat interchangeably among stakeholders.

The evaluators found the close linkage UAA has established between the strategic plan and the Core Themes to be a strength of its accreditation processes. Moreover, the evaluators found ample evidence that the campus community is aware of the Core Themes. This awareness rises out of two sources: the wide involvement of the UAA community in its pilot cycle of the new standards, and the institution's exemplary assessment newsletter and accreditation web sites, which provide timely updates on accreditation processes and activities. This close linkage and broad awareness renders the Core Themes implicit in activities where they are not explicitly mentioned and likely explains the fact that the evaluators did not see the framing use of the Core Themes in the prioritization process to the extent that campus participants in the process did.

Fortunately, this situation can be easily remedied by adding mention of UAA's Core Themes to discussions of published references to the University's mission and strategic plan. Use of phrasing such as, "the university's mission and Core Themes," is explicit and clear to external evaluators. This is especially important for discussions of the prioritization process. As UAA representatives explained, if state support continues to contract, program eliminations and other resource decisions will be informed by the prioritization process. Hence, the role of this process as a concrete demonstration of joint governance processes, and of the use of assessment in resource decisions, may increase in importance and impact over the next two years, making it central to the Year Seven report. If this occurs, we suggest that the relationship

between prioritization and the Core Themes be highlighted and fleshed-out more than currently exists in the MCE. For instance, if the minutes of the prioritization meetings include reference to the Core Themes, those minutes could be provided as evidence.

Provide Rationales and Contextual Explanations

Separately, we recommend that UAA provide a rationale for each of the indicators of mission and Core Theme fulfillment it establishes. For instance, the evaluators expressed some concern regarding the strength and usefulness of the institutional indicator of "total student credit hours" for the Core Theme objective of "UAA Academic Programs Meet State Needs." While the explanations given during our visit about this indicator were helpful, we nevertheless left with the sense that stakeholders find a meaning in this indicator that we, as outsiders, don't fully grasp. Rationales, written with an eye to an external evaluator's perspective, would go far toward remedying this disparity.

The evaluators also recommend taking extra pains to describe the unique features of UAA's mission, and the unusual context of providing higher education services within Alaska. The evaluators found the quality of human and educational resources of the UAA to be in sharp contrast to its performance relative to standard measures of institutional effectiveness, such as retention and graduation rates, for instance. "How can such a well-run institution have graduation rates so far beneath the national average?" we asked. A quick look at the rates of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, and other institutions, showed us that the low graduation rates are a feature of the larger state context, rather than UAA itself. A Year Seven report with more contextual data and explanations would help the evaluators in this regard.

Provide An Assessment Plan Summary and Flowchart

The NWCCU guidelines for evaluation of the MCE refer in at least two instances to an institutional "assessment plan." In contrast, the standards do not refer to an "assessment plan," but rather to a "comprehensive system of assessment of student achievement" (4.a.3).

The evaluators certainly found clear evidence that UAA maintains a robust system of assessment. However, they did have questions that might easily have been answered had UAA provided a formal assessment plan, or an overview of their assessment system. For instance, the evaluators struggled to see the relationship of the new Accreditation Steering Committee to the Faculty Senate Academic Assessment Committee (AAC) and the various offices engaged in accreditation and assessment efforts, such as the Office of Undergraduate Academic

Affairs, the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, and the Office of Institutional Research. A formal assessment plan or overview, with clear responsibility mapping or, alternatively, a flow-chart of committees/entities involved in the process, would have assisted the evaluators in understanding the role of each contributor within UAA's assessment system. A formal plan of this nature would also document the role and function of UAA's many community and professional advisory boards within their system of assessment and, in this way, further showcase the institution's strengths.