

Mid-Cycle Evaluation

University of Alaska, Anchorage

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Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities

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Introduction

University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) is the University of Alaska System's largest urban institution, and its only urban institution. University of Alaska Anchorage students attend class in Anchorage or one of five community campus locations that are geographically dispersed, and are uniquely tied to the communities that they serve: Kodiak, the Kenai Peninsula, Prince William Sound, and the Matanuska-Susitna Valley. The institution is the designated health campus for the University of Alaska System, and its health programs collectively generate more degrees than any other area except for the general Associate of Arts degree.

UAA is in transition as they have significant leadership changes, 2025 strategic planning, major budget cuts, a 7.1 magnitude earthquake, and a global pandemic which continues to impact UAA members in ways that reflect both the significance of the traumatic transitions and the admirable flexibility and resilience of UAA faculty, staff, and students.

The evaluation team conducted a virtual evaluation and team members utilized written documentation, electronic and paper exhibits, web resources, personal observations, and in-depth interviews to complete this report. The submitted UAA mid-cycle report was well-written and organized. The evaluation team appreciated the effective use of hyperlinks to describe and provide evidence of how UAA is achieving mission fulfillment, student achievement, and programmatic assessment.

UAA has no outstanding recommendations to address as part of their Fall 2021 Mid-Cycle Evaluation.

Part I: Mission Fulfillment

Mission

With the beginning of the new accreditation cycle, UAA wrapped up its three-year strategic plan, UAA 2020, and started work on a plan for the next five years. UAA 2025 has five aspirations, and these aspirations provide the framework by which the institution delivers transformational experiences and by which it measures institutional effectiveness. These aspirations are intentionally integrative, and progress on one aspiration can also affect progress on the others. The five aspirations are:

1. We put students first.
 - a. UAA becomes a student-centered institution.
 - b. Equity gaps in student learning and achievement are narrowed.
 - c. Students are retained, persist, and graduate at increasing rates.
 - d. Students develop and achieve UAA's Core Learning Competencies.
2. We create a culture of equity and inclusion by embracing our diversity.
3. We embrace our role as a trusted and respected community partner.

4. We positively impact communities and the world through innovation.
5. We accelerate excellence through continuous improvement.

In addition to strategic planning, UAA revised their mission in February of 2021 to explicitly recognize its commitment to students and honor the ancestral lands on which the institution resides. For the purposes of accreditation, UAA defines mission fulfillment as the UAA 2025 aspiration, “We put students first.” The mission, aspiration, and strategic plans at UAA clearly define its educational purposes and its commitment to student learning and achievement.

In conversations with UAA staff and faculty, evaluators observed lived commitments to students as described in their day-to-day behavior. Staff and faculty were specifically called out by students as essential to their academic success. Students described UAA faculty and staff as being adaptable, flexible, and genuinely concerned about student health and wellness (i.e., food insecurity, community resources, and psychological well-being).

Compliments

1. *Clear definition of educational purposes and commitment to student learning and achievement. The institution clearly articulates the connection between its mission, aspirations, and the UAA 2025 Strategic Plan (1.A.1).*

Improving Institutional Effectiveness

UAA is engaged in ongoing, systematic and regular processes of assessing institutional effectiveness and supporting mission fulfillment. The institution’s systems and processes to achieve mission fulfillment including academic program review (seven-year cycle), annual program student learning outcomes assessment, and student affairs assessment. In addition to the previous processes, UAA is launching two pilot projects to assess core competency assessment and metrics for student success programs and services.

UAA has a strong vision and desire to use data to inform their planning and identify opportunities to align future work under the mission. UAA’s student success initiatives are opportunities to see the integrated cycles of improvement occur at an institutional level. The institution clearly describes in conversation the prioritization of equitable placement, persistence, and retention of learners. Through intentionally appointed, charged, administratively sponsored working-groups, the institution demonstrated an emerging institutional effectiveness process. These student focused initiatives used data to plan and execute strategies to marginalize student success inequities in first-year advising, math and writing in the first semester, major switching, and to develop a comprehensive list of student support programs.

Staff described institutional effectiveness as the backbone of UAA and numerous kudos were given to a “phenomenal” institutional research team (in academic and student affairs) who support extensive dashboard systems with the aim of serving the UAA community by keeping

the “data alive”. The UAA community described engaging with data and asking critical questions while remaining doggedly focused on an intention to use the data in ways that is student centered.

In addition to UAA's institutional effectiveness efforts, the institution is in the initial phase of formalizing planning processes that guide resource prioritization and allocation. UAA is piloting the use of institutional effectiveness data to inform their governance, policy, and decision making. This is most evidence in the UAA evolving committee structure. There are numerous committees who are committed to maximizing the involvement of a broad constituency. While the evaluation team struggled to understand the functional charge, scope, and accountability of several institutional committees (i.e., accreditation advisory committee, campus planning advisory board, faculty senate academic assessment committee), it was clear that UAA members appreciate the increased alignment of efforts and ability to utilize bottom-up approaches to “empower those who are closest to the work”. Reflections of faculty and staff highlighted the intentional linkage of accreditation and assessment data which bridges the academic and student affairs worlds in ways that are meaningful and collaborative (i.e., residence life and writing placement projects as symbiotic initiatives).

While engaged in innovative approaches to continuous improvement, UAA has the potential to be an institutional effectiveness exemplar and with time may be able to demonstrate ongoing, systematic, evidence-informed evaluation and planning that are used to inform and refine systems, practices, strategies, and assign resources.

Compliments

- 1. Commitment to meaningful participation and contributions of a broad constituent base (1.B.3).*
- 2. Transparent use of institutional effectiveness indicators by collecting and analyzing real-time data and distributing templates, guides, and resources aligned with mission fulfillment on their public facing web pages (1.B.2 and 1.D.3).*

Considerations for Institutional Reflection

- 1. Greater systemization of assessing institutional effectiveness (1.B.1).*
- 2. Greater integration of institutional planning process that is clearly understood both internally and externally (1.B.1).*
- 3. Expanded use of institutional effectiveness reports and findings in planning and resource allocation (1.B.4).*

Part II: Student Achievement

Building on their previous record of collecting meaningful, assessable, and verifiable data, UAA adopted student achievement metrics (e.g., persistence, retention, graduation rates, semesters to degree) that are in the process of being embedded in planning, resource allocation, and

decision making. These student achievement metrics are assessed using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Core Competencies: A qualitative approach

In the 2019-2020 academic year, UAA began a campus wide process to develop the institutional-level learning core competencies. An informational kickoff event with a national speaker contextualized the work and was supported with focus groups, town hall meetings, and presentations through a year-long and inclusive process. At the end of the 2019-2020 academic year, the UAA governance groups: Faculty Senate, Staff Council, Union of Students, and the Chancellor's Cabinet endorsed the final set of core competencies and achievement metrics.

The core competencies include:

- Effective Communication
- Creative and Critical Thinking
- Intercultural Fluency
- Personal, Professional, and Community Responsibility (PPCR)

Proposed assessment of the core competencies will utilize a qualitative approach of student focus groups and a graduate exit survey to see where throughout the students' academic and co-curricular experience they engaged opportunities to develop the core competencies. In an effort to assess the core competencies, UAA started a qualitative pilot project seeking to explore student learning opportunities that promote the development of the core competency, Personal, Professional, and Community Responsibility. In conversations with students, they described widely available opportunities for transformation through the core competencies achievement inside and outside of UAA but that it often depended on self-direction. This pilot approach is promising and provides an opportunity for UAA to develop a nuanced understanding of where students best learn and how they deepen their learning around the core competencies.

Meaningful Metrics and Disaggregation

In addition to competency development, UAA is committed to the meaningful use of student achievement metrics. Student achievement results are broadly shared, easily understood, and readily displayed internally and externally on the Institutional Accreditation website.

Disaggregated indicators are benchmarked against intentionally selected regional and national peers. One example of UAA's ability to utilize disaggregated data to inform outcomes improvement is their strategic student success efforts to improve graduation rate, course completion, and first-term student enrollment. UAA experienced a six-percentage point increase in the First-Time Full-Time 6-year graduation rate for the Fall 2012 cohort (from 25.4% to 31.4%) in response to strategic student support initiatives. Importantly, the number of Alaska Native students and students enrolled in developmental math and/or writing have seen substantial increases in their 6-year graduation rates. Other key increases include:

- 4.2% increase in average course completion rate
- 8% increase in first-term students enrolling in math

- 32% increase in first-term students enrolling in writing

The evaluation team encourages UAA to continue to explore disaggregated data and determine if there are significant trends over time.

UAA is establishing new approaches to responding to disaggregated institutional data in meaningful ways. UAA is working to better understand its student profile to better understand obstacles to student success. This is to be commended and should inform strategic planning around existing and future student success initiatives.

Data to Inform Decision Making and Support Student Success

UAA has impressively dug into the work of supporting student success through the creation of programs that focus on closing the equity gap, creating a sense of belonging, and removing barriers to success. These emerging programs include the development of a comprehensive First-Year Experience program, employing Peer Learning Assistants in high-enrolled high-DFW courses, advising and participating in the NWCCU Retention, Persistence, and Student Success Academy.

These emerging programs are both ambitious and promising. The First Year Experience program is in the development phase but the FYE Committee identified three overarching goals, the goal of creating a required common first year experience course and learning communities. As UAA continues expanding this program, tracking longitudinal data about course pass rates and disaggregating the data will help define a path forward in the effort to close equity gaps.

In the same way, the peer mentoring program for first year students is equally promising and in the pilot year will provide important insights into what type of mentoring is most powerful and with whom. This mentoring strategy shows promise as it moves toward closing the equity gap and should be carefully assessed and monitored for effectiveness over time.

UAA's overarching structure for advising systems (i.e., Academic Pathway programs, Seawolf Academic Advising Platform, and the creation of the Academic Advising Steering committee) demonstrates implementation of best practices to sustain and build on past successes and create new professional development opportunities (i.e., standardized manuals, training, coordination). These changes show great potential to lead to better advising outcomes including course selection, increased number of students taking math and writing in their first semester, and student course pass rates. The evaluation team encourages UAA to continue to track the impact of these programs on students' success over time.

These pilot results demonstrate the effectiveness of student success initiatives and are indeed noteworthy and show promise as effective approaches for UAA. The evaluation team recognizes these initiatives were made possible because of intentional and often difficult decisions to reallocate resources to support UAA student success.

Compliments

1. *Deliberate selection of institutional effectiveness indicators that include those which NWCCU requires but also disaggregation of data that are meaningful to the institution (i.e., course pass rates, GER completion rates) (1.D.2).*
2. *Investment in student success initiatives and evaluation of those initiatives to measure whether the intended outcomes of retention, graduation, and persistence are achieved (1.D.1 and 1.D.4).*

Part III: Programmatic Assessment

There are two basic components of Programmatic Assessment: the Seven-Year Academic Program Review (mandated by the Board of Regents) and annual program student learning outcomes assessment required by the institution. Program Student Learning Outcomes are assessed differently and appropriately by the different disciplines but reported annually in methods established by the Faculty Senate Academic Assessment Committee. In AY22, the reporting shifted from two methods (a Qualtrics survey and an annual report) and two deadlines (June 15 and October 15), to an assessment report generated by a single, standard fillable form due on October 15. Rather than posting the annual reports on a log-in protected SharePoint site, the institution plans to post all reports on the public website in the future. Faculty and staff expressed enthusiasm for the new template, posting of reports on a public webpage and the potential for information sharing across the institution.

The mid-cycle report provided two examples of programmatic assessment in the Anthropology and Writing program. Both exhibit discipline specific assessment and the effort to understand through formative and summative surveys where students begin and what they have learned through the major. Anthropology also uses an ePortfolio for summative assessment of each of the program student learning outcomes. In the case of Writing, the adjustment placement and moving to a multi-method approach reflects both an understanding of the unique issues their student body faces and a high level of flexibility in the service of students. Both departments should be commended for the level of collaboration and thoughtfulness and the creativity in terms of doing much with limited resources.

Finally, assessment of student work at UAA is the role of faculty. The Faculty Senate Academic Assessment Committee works with the Office of Academic Affairs to create a very strong culture of assessment across campus and to create standards and advocate for certain processes. The Assessment Committee described their role not as assessors of assessment, but as promoters, advocates and developers of organic assessment that “grows naturally out of what we do, simple, sustainable, valid, and useful”.

Compliments:

1. *The faculty and staff demonstrate a commitment to a healthy culture and understanding of assessment. Evaluators heard language of collegiality, continuous improvement, that was not limited to accreditation, but an intention to engage in meaningful change.*

Considerations for Institutional Reflection

1. *Clarify how the institution engages in an effective system of academic program assessment across academic departments and programs (1.C.5).*

PART IV: Moving Forward

As UAA continues to prepare for the seven-year review, they are continuing to develop new processes to support student learning, student achievement, and mission fulfillment. The vision and goals of the institution demonstrate a strong commitment and desire to put students first.

The institution provided significant evidence of its inclusive planning process and is determining how to use regular and systematic evaluation to inform not only student learning and achievement, but also assign resources and achieve mission fulfillment.

The evaluation team would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the significant challenges (i.e., major snowfalls, pandemics, budget cuts, earthquakes, leadership transitions) and the impact of these challenges on learners' experiences, moral, strategic planning, and resource planning. Despite these challenges narratives of resilience and strength were described throughout our meetings with UAA members. Many at the institution described these challenges as opportunities to refine their persistence focus on student success and that as the institution recovers there is a willingness to presume positive intent and sustain confidence in the future.

Compliments and Concerns

COMPLIMENTS

The Evaluation Team commends UAA for its:

1. *Clear definition of educational purposes and commitment to student learning and achievement. The institution clearly articulates the connection between its mission, aspirations, and the UAA 2025 Strategic Plan (1.A.1).*
2. *Commitment to meaningful participation and contributions of a broad constituent base (1.B.3).*
3. *Transparent use of institutional effectiveness indicators by collecting and analyzing real-time data and distributing templates, guides, and resources aligned with mission fulfillment on their public facing web pages (1.B.2 and 1.D.3).*
4. *Sustained commitment to a comprehensive system of student affairs assessment that utilizes meaningful data to review and revise its student programs and services (1.C.7).*
5. *Deliberate selection of institutional effectiveness indicators that include those which NWCCU requires but also disaggregation of data that are meaningful to the institution (i.e., course pass rates, GER completion rates) (1.D.2).*
6. *Investment in student success initiatives and evaluation of those initiatives to measure whether the intended outcomes of retention, graduation, and persistence are achieved (1.D.1 and 1.D.4).*

CONSIDERATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL REFLECTION

The Evaluation Team suggests that UAA's consider:

1. *Greater systemization of assessing institutional effectiveness (1.B.1).*
2. *Greater integration of institutional planning process that is clearly understood both internally and externally (1.B.1).*
3. *Expanded use of institutional effectiveness reports and findings in planning and resource allocation (1.B.4).*
4. *Clarify how the institution engages in an effective system of academic program assessment across academic departments and programs (1.C.5).*