UAA Core Competencies: A Journey of Collaboration and Engagement

Final Project

NWCCU Mission Fulfillment Fellowship Year Two

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University of Alaska Anchorage Mission: *The University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) transforms lives through teaching, research, community engagement and creative expression in a diverse and inclusive environment. Serving students, the state, and the communities of Southcentral Alaska, UAA is a comprehensive, open access, public university established on the ancestral lands of the Dena'ina, Ahtna Dene, Alutiiq/Sugpiaq, Chugachmiut, and Eyak peoples.*

Abstract

The goal of this NWCCU Mission Fulfillment Fellowship Final Project was the identification of institution-wide student learning core competencies at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA). The 2020 NWCCU guidelines created an opportunity to move towards a learning systems paradigm by identifying those student core competencies that the institution, in all its dimensions, should be promoting. It is now widely recognized that student learning takes place across the entire campus and includes curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular learning experiences. The adoption of an institution-wide core competency framework was needed to create a dialogue in which these differing spheres of student learning could be productively brought together. This paper describes the epistemology and methodology for engaging UAA internal and external stakeholders in a collaborative core competency development process (year one) and the pilot project for the implementation of one core competency (year two).

I.   Introduction

The goal of this NWCCU Mission Fulfillment Fellowship Final Project was the identification of institution-wide student learning core competencies at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA). These core competencies would be used: (1) to clarify the key elements of a university education at UAA; (2) to help create a more seamless and unified educational experience (learning system) for UAA students; and (3) to bring together the academic and student service sides of the institution to promote sustained and intentional learning across the campus.

The fellows embarked on a multi-year process using a reconstructive methodology to engage the university community and external stakeholders and identify four core competencies: Effective Communication; Creative and Critical Thinking; Intercultural Fluency; and Personal, Professional, and Community Responsibility (PPCR). This was followed up with a pilot project to refine and implement one of the competencies (PPCR).

1.   Context

The University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) is an open access university educating over 13,000 students each year in southcentral Alaska and beyond. UAA offers a broad range of in-person and remote programming from its five campuses and extended sites and serves traditional and nontraditional age students; first-time; returning and transfer students; and working professionals. UAA has been accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) since 1974. This single accreditation status applies to all UAA campuses, including Anchorage, Kenai Peninsula College, Kodiak College, Matanuska-Susitna College, and Prince William Sound College and their extended sites.

2. The Problem

Over the past two decades there has been increasing recognition that student learning is not well served by a "cafeteria" style educational culture in which students are left to their own devices to discern the connections among their different learning experiences across the arc of their university careers. This is not only an issue of institutional effectiveness, but one of equity as well because disadvantaged students tend to suffer disproportionately from the disorientation and alienation created by unaligned and "hidden" curricula.

To address these issues, Jankowski and Marshall (2017) have proposed a "learning systems paradigm" in which learning opportunities across the university are (1) learner centered and (2) aligned by learning outcomes that are (3) based on a consensus of key stakeholders and (4) clearly communicated across the institution—especially to learners.

In the meantime, the NWCCU in 2020 revised its accreditation guidelines to focus more intently on student success and the closing of equity gaps. In particular, the NWCCU required:

> Consistent with its mission, the institution establishes and assesses, across all associate and bachelor level programs or within a General Education curriculum, institutional learning outcomes and/or core competencies (NWCCU, 2020).

UAA already possessed a robust system of academic program and general education assessment, as commended by NWCCU in 2019, but had not identified institution-wide student learning outcomes or core competencies. The new NWCCU guidelines created an opportunity to move towards a learning systems paradigm by identifying those student core competencies that the institution, in all its dimensions, should be promoting. If done well, institution-wide student core competencies could provide a framework to intentionally, consistently, and transparently align student learning experiences into a coherent system of student development and achievement.

We define a core competency as: the student learning that we aspire to promote in every UAA student through curricular, co-curricular (e.g. student activities, service areas) and extracurricular activities. Core competencies should reflect and guide the culture at UAA, while promoting alignment of learning experiences across campus, academic confidence, and a sense of belonging for students. In short, a core competency is an essential piece of "know how" that students must master in order to flourish in their academic and post-graduate roles. Core competencies are cross-cutting (multi and interdisciplinary), meaningful to learners, educators, and the broader community (especially employers); and are assessable, and, when possible, comparable to peers.

Student learning takes place across the entire campus and includes curricular (e.g. classes), co-curricular (e.g. internships, student research, conferences), and extra-curricular (e.g. student employment, clubs, athletics, government, student support services) learning experiences.   The adoption of an institution-wide core competency framework was needed to create a dialogue in which these differing spheres of student

learning could be productively brought together. Moreover, the knowledge-how orientation of core competencies highlights the often neglected "soft skills" that students develop in their extra-curricular learning experiences—skills that are often highly prized by employers (e.g. effective teamwork) and important to personal development.   By setting out to identify a handful (3-5) of core competencies we hoped to create deliberations that tended to avoid disciplinary silos and instead focused holistically on student learning across the institution.

3.   Epistemology and Methodology

Jankowski and Marshall (2017) rightly argue that the alignment of a learning system needs to be consensus based. Anything less will promote insufficient uptake on the part of institutional actors to create a robust and institutionalized learning system. Therefore, for epistemic and practical reasons, we adopted a "rational reconstructive" approach. Like the broader family of social constructionist approaches, rational reconstruction works immanently within the situated, communal, and pragmatic dimensions of practitioner "know how" and idealizes that knowledge-how into regulative ideals that in turn guide practice (Dewey 1920; Habermas, 1990, Charmez 2006, Tucker, Moreno, Masooma 2021).   In this case, members of the university community would be engaged in order to articulate educational goals (i.e. the core competencies) that both descriptively reflect grounded practice while prescriptively guiding future practice.

Because reconstructed norms are developed from the perspective of participant know-how, interpreters enjoy no unique or hierarchical status over practice participants (Habermas, 1990). Consequently, rational reconstruction is a "grounded theory" (Charmez, 2006) and proceeds best with symmetrical and deliberative approaches in which interpreters work as co-participants in an intersubjective reflection on community practices. This is especially important as the reconstruction moves from the know-how of participants to the "know-that" of idealized norms of practice.   Here the interpreter/theorist will inevitably assume a privileged position when moving from the intuitions of practitioners to explicated norms. Because of the danger of the theorist importing their own understanding into norm construction, articulated norms must be understood as provisional and revisable and subjected to a double-iterative process by which they are brought back to practice participants for deliberation and potential revision.   Ideally, a "reflective equilibrium" between proposed norms and participant know-how is achieved (Rawls 2001; Daniels 1979). This is achieved by revising the norms and/or by recognizing that certain elements of communal practice need to be revised or abandoned.   Reconstructed norms then gain acceptance from practice participants because they see their own know-how reflected in them.   However, reconstructed norms are not merely conventions, but should also be able to gain the

rational assent of stakeholders based on the warrant for their reasonability. In other words, when done well, reconstructed norms both reflect "who we are" and "who we should aspire to be," or as J. Rawls (2001) puts it, articulate "a realistic utopia."

In collecting and analyzing input from stakeholders, we used the Delphi technique. The Delphi technique has been used for decades in industries such as business, public health, and education as a means of building consensus, through the collective expertise of a group, rather than individuals. Key features of the Delphi technique include iteration, which permits the group members to view the collective effect of their individual contributions and revise their input if desired; distribution of summaries of the group's selections; and quantitative presentation of the group's decision process. Traditionally the Delphi technique uses the group's expertise to prepare a questionnaire in a focus area of interest, feedback is solicited from the designated experts, revisions are made, and feedback is solicited again to confirm consensus of the revised questionnaire (Giannarou & Zervas, 2014). The UAA CC development process utilized a modified version of the Delphi technique to widely engage the stakeholders of the UAA community in proposing and finalizing the UAA CC, as described below.

II.   Reconstructing Student Learning Core Competencies

Rational reconstruction using the Delphi technique was attractive to our project because as Peter Drucker famously quipped, "culture eats strategy for breakfast." If the core competencies are to serve as norms, they need to meet the university "lifeworld" halfway (Habermas, 1990). Competencies that are hierarchically imposed or developed from an exclusively theoretical or disciplinary perspective would lack the practical credibility necessary for them to serve as effective institutional norms. By reconstructing the core competencies immanently from existing community know-how, we could deploy the institution's communal intelligence; create a process that would build trust and bring disparate stakeholders together; and explicate norms which would have practical credibility and gain acceptance from institutional stakeholders. With such imprimatur, the core competencies could serve as the consensus based framework to align student learning opportunities into a learning system.

1.   Stakeholders

In deploying this methodology, we first identified key stakeholders who could provide the community "know-how" to be reconstructed into the core competencies.   Perhaps the two most obvious stakeholders are students and faculty members.   As learners, students have a unique perspective on institutional practices and their effectiveness.

Students also provide insight into their aspirations and the value they see, and would ideally prefer to see, in their educational experience. We believed that alumni could also provide a valuable student perspective in light of post-graduate experience in the market and civil society. In universities, the primary mode of learning occurs via the academic curriculum. As such, the perspective of faculty members on what we do, and should aspire to be doing, in developing student knowledge and skillsets would be essential to any reconstruction of the core competencies. Moreover, faculty endorsement would be necessary in any operationalization of the core competencies.

However, there are a variety of learning opportunities across the campus that fall outside the traditional academic curriculum. Students acquire important skills and knowledge in student employment, athletics, student government, and clubs, etc. as well as in more traditional learning settings.   As such it quickly became clear that staff, and university service areas leaders would also be important sources of insight on the core competencies. University leadership would also provide important insights into the purpose of a UAA education and would be an essential group using the core competencies to develop and implement institutional policies and practices.   Finally, as a public university committed to promoting the state economy, employers were an important stakeholder to include in the reconstructive process as they best understand the competencies needed in the marketplace and where they see the university succeeding, or falling short, in developing those competencies.

We also created a "Core Competency Working Group" that consisted of staff, faculty, and administrators to help process the information collected from stakeholders. The two faculty who served as the year one NWCCU Mission Fulfillment Year One fellows were members of the working group and shared information throughout the Core Competency development process about their interviews with key employers in the local and state economy.

2. Engaging Stakeholders

We adopted a three pronged approach to engaging stakeholders using university-wide open forums; targeted visits to organized stakeholder groups; and surveys. Local employers were primarily engaged through the NWCCU year-one fellows project of Jennifer Brock and Rachel Graham that involved interviews on the skills that employers believe that UAA graduates need in the marketplace.

Figure #1: Engaging Stakeholders: Key Events

October 4, 2019   Annual Academic Assessment Seminar and Accreditation Kick Off
Broad engagement with the new cycle began with a kick off on October 4, 2019. Over 100 faculty, staff and students joined Dr. Natasha Jankowski, Director of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) to explore what moving from Core Themes to Core Competencies means for an institution.
106 participants. Kick-Off Program. Kick-Off Welcome PowerPoint. Kick-Off Keynote PowerPoint. Follow-up survey distributed to forum participants, 64 responses. Taking a Pulse on Where We Are Now Survey Results (Kick-Off Participants).

November 15, 2019   Open Forum: Honoring Your Work and Building Forward
55 participants. November 15, 2019 Program. November 15, 2019 PowerPoint. Follow-up survey distributed to forum participants, 25 responses. Taking a Pulse on Where We Are Now Survey Results (November Forum Participants).

February 7, 2020   Open Forum: Dialing In the Core Competencies
62 participants. February 7, 2020 Program. February 7, 2020 PowerPoint.

March 2020   Core Competency Naming Survey
226 responses, distributed to stakeholder groups and core competency forum participants. Core Competencies Naming Survey Results.

April 2020   Core Competency Final Naming Survey
184 responses, distributed to the UAA Community. Core Competency Final Naming Survey Results.

April 3, 2020   Open Forum: Naming Our Core Competencies
52 participants. April 3, 2020 Handout. April 3, 2020 Forum PowerPoint with Feedback Summary.

May 7, 2020   Annual Academic Assessment Retreat
83 participants. May 7, 2020 Program. May 7, 2020 Summary.

3. Forums

University-wide forums were of two types: content guided and workshop idea sharing. Content guided forums were aimed at situating the process and sparking deliberation on the core competencies in light of our goal of promoting a learning systems paradigm aimed at alignment and equity. To that end our October *2019 Annual Academic Assessment Seminar and Accreditation Kick-Off Meeting*, the UAA community, including faculty, staff and students worked with Dr. Natasha Jankowski, who, at the time, was Director of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA). We explored what moving from core themes to core competencies means for an institution. During the meeting, attendees were electronically polled on their top

considerations for UAA CC from the initial list of "candidates": UAA general education student learning outcomes, the American Association of Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) Essential Learning Outcomes and the AAC&U Employer Survey outcomes.

Following the October 2019 meeting the UAA community members were asked to complete a "Taking the Pulse'' survey and provide their feedback on the list of CC candidates. The results of the surveys informed the next steps in the CC development process, such as discussion activities at the open forums.

In November 2019, a workshop forum was held to share examples of assessment in general education and co-curricular programs. A key focus of this open forum was to bring together members of the UAA community and discuss best practices in assessment while simultaneously exploring learning outcomes, or additional candidates for the UAA CC. The message to participants was communicated clearly that the UAA CC would not be a "one size fits all" mandate, rather each program could envision how they already do, or could plan to, provide student learning opportunities in each CC.

4. Stakeholder Visits

Good deliberative process requires not only inviting stakeholders, but proactively seeking them out and meeting them in their own settings. We identified a variety of organized student, faculty, staff, and administrator stakeholder groups (see Appendix *) to canvas their ideas about the key skills and knowledge-base students need to be successful in their academic and post-graduation careers.

Stakeholders requested that the CC development process be mindful of the following:
- Honoring current work
- Honoring the place
- Honoring the person
- Honoring the capacities that we have at the institution to do this (i.e., connections with members of the local community and alumni)
- Understanding who our students are (i.e., applied learning opportunities in the classroom, adult learners)
- How we can make UAA easier to navigate

After meeting with each stakeholder group, follow-up electronic surveys were sent to the group asking them to rank their initial top considerations for UAA CCs. As UAA community stakeholder visits were completed, key themes from these discussions became additional CC candidates and were added to the list. Our initial list of CC's totaled 31 (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Initial Combined List of Candidates for Core Competencies (December 2019)

UAA UNIVERSITY *of* ALASKA ANCHORAGE

Compiled List of Core Competencies Resulting from Fall Conversations 12/2/19

1. Communicate effectively in a variety of contexts and formats
2. Critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills
3. The ability to locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources
4. The ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings
5. The ability to work with numbers and statistics
6. The ability to analyze and solve problems with people from different backgrounds and cultures
7. Intercultural knowledge and competence
8. Ethical judgment and decision-making
9. The ability to work effectively with others in teams
10. Adopt critical perspectives for understanding the forces of globalization and diversity
11. The ability to analyze and solve complex problems
12. Self-motivation and the ability to take initiative and be proactive in offering ideas and solutions
13. Civic knowledge and engagement, both local and global
14. Relate knowledge to the historical context in which it developed and the human problems it addresses
15. The ability to innovate and be creative
16. The ability to work independently in setting priorities, managing time, and meeting deadlines
17. Foundations and skills for lifelong learning/Ability to learn or lifelong learning
18. Identify ways in which science has advanced the understanding of important natural processes
19. Interpret different systems of aesthetic representation and understand their historical and cultural contexts
20. Proficiency in a language other than English
21. Staying current on changing technologies and their applications to the workplace
22. Problem-solving
23. Resilience
24. Self-assessment/self-awareness/self-knowledge
25. Advocacy (self-advocacy, professional advocacy)
26. Community engagement
27. Diversity
28. Leadership
29. Preparing for the professional world/Development as a professional or professional development
30. Self-reliance
31. Student to alumni transition

5. Refining the Results

Our forums and stakeholder meetings generated 31 competencies that stakeholders identified as essential to student development. This list was then edited for redundancy and to keep them sufficiently broad to have institution-wide applicability. Here, the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics (AAC&U, 2009) were often used as a template to help thematize the competences. The list of core competency candidates, which was analogous to the development of a questionnaire in the Delphi technique, was shared with the UAA community stakeholders (the experts) at open forums and voting was conducted (quantitative presentation) to cull the core competency candidates to a list of nine:

- Effective Communication: skills and dispositions to utilize oral and written communication in a clear, creative, and convincing manner.
- Formal Reasoning: logical, quantitative, and hermeneutical analysis of arguments and problems. Lateral thinking and creativity in framing and resolving problems.
- Substantive Reasoning: Scientific (natural and social), hermeneutic, ethical (moral and political), and aesthetic reasoning. (truth, beauty, goodness)
- Inter-cultural Fluency: knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for empathetic understanding of social diversity and ability to work respectfully and productively with others from diverse backgrounds.
- World Understanding and Mapping: knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for understanding and interpreting the social and natural worlds both in terms of "facts" and contextual relationships.
- Self-Management: knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for executive functioning, work ethic, and self-discipline to apply oneself in an effective manner.
- Professionalization: knowledge, skills, and disposition necessary to gain entry and flourish in one's career. Job skills and presentation of the professional self.
- Social Responsibility: knowledge, skills, and dispositions need to be a good member of one's community (global to local). Ethical judgment and motivationally efficacious sense of justice and community engagement.

In February 2020, an open forum was held to engage the UAA community in refining an intermediate list of nine core competency candidates. The attendees were split into work groups of approximately 7 people and given the task of reviewing the intermediate list and confirming or revising the list. The attendees completed a follow-up survey and a list of four core competency contenders emerged from the UAA community input.

In the meantime the Core Competency Working Group was also deliberating potential thematization of the competencies. Several members of the group solicited feedback from students in their classes on the validity of the nine CC's and their possible consolidation to four.

While there appeared to be consistency between the feedback from the open forum attendees about what the UAA core competency top four contenders should be, there was concern about adequately reflecting the attributes of the original 31 core competency candidates. Thus the Core Competency Working Group used the four core competency contenders as categories and organized the 31 initial candidates as features of the four categories. This categorization led to the development of a working definition for each of the four core competency categories and a naming survey was conducted in March 2020 with a strong response from the UAA community. In early April 2020 an open forum was held to continue to refine the naming process and provide an additional opportunity for feedback. The accreditation tri-chairs visited with stakeholders to solicit additional feedback on the naming of the UAA CC. In mid-April a final naming survey was distributed and received another strong showing of engagement from the UAA community. In defining the CC's, language from the AAC&U VALUE rubrics was used wherever reasonable.   The final four CC's were:

- **Effective Communication**: The knowledge and skills necessary to engage in effective communication in diverse contexts and formats.

- **Creative and Critical Thinking**: The knowledge and skills necessary for critical exploration of issues, artifacts, and events in order to creatively design, evaluate, and implement a strategy to answer complex questions or achieve a desired goal.

- **Intercultural Fluency**: The knowledge and skills necessary to promote effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts, particularly in terms of the diverse populations of Alaska.

- **Personal, Professional, and Community Responsibility**: The knowledge and skills necessary to promote flourishing, professional excellence, and community engagement.

III. Pilot Project: Personal, Professional, and Community Responsibility

At the annual Academic Assessment Retreat in May 2020, the final list of UAA core competencies was presented to the UAA community. At the end of the retreat a vote was conducted to determine which core competency would be piloted in the 2020-2021 academic year for implementation at UAA and *Personal, Professional and Community Responsibility (PPCR)* was the winning CC. This decision was supported by the Accreditation Advisory Council and the Core Competency Working Group.

In summer 2020, the Core Competency Working Group focused on the goals of increasing awareness of how the many parts of UAA touch the Personal, Professional and Community Responsibility core competency and visualizing how student learning opportunities in PPCR/all of the core competencies are integrated across UAA in both curricular and co-curricular settings. The Working Group explored examples of PPCR learning opportunities across the UAA community, such as community engaged learning, to develop key tenants of the core competency implementation process: (1) CCs are not hierarchically imposed, rather they are organically developed within specific programs and service areas; (2) CCs are intentionally broad to enable programs and services to self-identify their current or planned contributions to student learning; (3) all segments of the UAA community should be represented in the learning systems paradigm; (4) the CCs should acknowledge and intentionally build on what we are already doing; and (5) the totality of the UAA student experience should be oriented towards the CCs.

Ultimately, the Core Competency Working Group decided that to improve student learning, it came down to a question of "culture" and helping each member of the UAA community to see what they contribute to student learning. This concept became the framework of the PPCR pilot project for AY22 and successful implementation of the core competency at UAA was described as follows:

> *"Success would be that not only do our students know what the core competencies are, but they can identify 'where in my time at UAA I learned about them.' Success will also be a clear integration of the core competency into all sectors of UAA. We want to be able to demonstrate that core competencies are so integrated that students can't help but be touched by them. Core competencies become part of who we are and students graduate with a certain level of competence in UAA's Core Competencies."*

1. **Pivot to Qualitative Methods for the Institutional Assessment of Core Competencies**

Over the course of many in-depth discussions during the summer and into AY21, the decision was made to focus on qualitative methods for both the implementation and assessment of the UAA CC. Among faculty, administrators and staff, there is a familiarity with what can be learned from the quantitative analysis of assessment data, and the question remained about what parts of the student learning story could be better understood by using qualitative methods. Ewell (2009) describes two paradigms of assessment: the assessment for accountability paradigm, relying on quantitative data to make summative judgements, and the assessment for accountability paradigm, which relies on a blend of quantitative and qualitative data to make formative assessments for the purpose of improvement. The focus on mission fulfillment and institutional effectiveness, or quality improvement, was the foundation of the UAA core competency development process and necessitated a blend of quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

However, after attempting to develop an institution-wide assessment rubric on the core competencies, it became clear that a centralized approach to assessment of the core competencies would be unwieldy.   While there was good consensus on the core competencies, that consensus was very much "freestanding" in that different institutional actors had different understandings of the core competencies and different reasons for endorsing them. This was not entirely surprising as many concepts lack an essential semantic core and are instead a constellation of meanings linked by "family resemblances" (Wittgenstein, 1953). As such, we decided to adopt a decentralized approach to assessment of the core competencies by encouraging programs and service areas to reflect on how they promote, or could promote, the core competencies and how they could go about demonstrating student learning and development in those areas.

At the institutional level, we focused our energies on using qualitative approaches both to demonstrate **where** and **how** the UAA community provided student learning opportunities in *PPCR* and how we defined, or might come to define, this core competency. The goal here was to "map" various student learning opportunities in PPCR, but also to encourage institutional actors to see how their work connected, or could connect, to the core competencies. This was especially true for a core competency such as Personal, Professional, and Community Responsibility, which, compared to effective communication and critical and creative thinking, was a relatively novel learning outcome. The two main qualitative approaches utilized were PhotoVoice and student focus groups.

In AY21, the PPCR pilot implementation project focused on how to demonstrate that student learning opportunities are being, or could be, provided, particularly with the use of an equity lens on student learning and assessment. Through a series of open forums, hosted by the Office of Academic Affairs, in the fall 2020 semester we explored **where** and **how** the UAA community provides student learning opportunities in the many dimensions of Personal, Professional and Community Responsibility. The variety of activities provided through the open forums and the ongoing stakeholder visits were conducted to perpetuate consciousness raising about how to incorporate PPCR throughout the UAA community.

Figure #3: Personal, Professional, and Community Responsibility: Key Events

September 18, 2020   Annual Academic Assessment Seminar/Core Competency Kick Off: *"Equity Through Transparency in Learning*
                        and Teaching (TILT)"
Keynote Speaker: Suzanne Tapp, co-editor, "Transparent Design in Higher Education Teaching and Leadership: A Guide to Implementing the Transparency Framework Institution-wide to Improve Learning and Retention" (**Access Dr. Tapp's book through UAA's Consortium Library**)
111 participants. September 18, 2020 Forum Program. Keynote Post-Seminar FAQ. TILT Checklist for Transparent Assignments. Transparent Assignment Template.

October 16, 2020   Open Forum on Core Competencies: *"Personal, Professional, and Community Responsibility: What is it? Where do we*
                        promote it? How do we help students develop it?"
82 Participants. October 16, 2020 Program. | Personal, Professional, and Community Responsibility Photo Submission Form for November Forum.

November 13, 2020   Open Forum on Core Competencies: *"Personal, Professional, and Community Responsibility: Let's collaborate to*
                        tell our story."
39 Participants. | November 13, 2020 Forum Program. | Feedback Survey Link.

March 5, 2021   Open Forum on Core Competencies: *"Personal, Professional, and Community Responsibility: How does your program or*
                        service help students meet this core competency? How will you know when students have achieved it?"
70 Participants. *March 5, 2021 Forum Program. | Forum Exercise Guidance Handout. | Forum PowerPoint: "Where We Have Been and Where We Are: AY21 Open Forums"*

 May 6, 2021   Annual Assessment Retreat
97 Participants. May 6, 2021 Program. | May 6, 2021 Summary. | PowerPoint: "Shift to Core Competencies from Core Themes - Looking in the Rearview Mirror" | PowerPoint: "Engaging the Student Perspective - a Qualitative Approach to Assessing Learning in the Core Competencies"

2. **Using an Equity Lens on the Core Competencies**

In September 2020 the Annual Academic Assessment Seminar and Core Competency Kick-Off provided training focused on "Equity through Transparency in Teaching and Learning (TILT)." The goal for this open forum was to energize the UAA community and improve on what we are already doing in our curricular and co-curricular student learning opportunities related to PPCR. Through TILT, as led by Dr. Suzanne Tapp, the Executive Director of the Teaching, Learning and Professional Development Center at Texas Tech University, UAA community members received instruction on how to increase the transparency in assignment design, showing students how the assignment connects to student learning outcomes, as a means of increasing equity in student learning. An applied learning activity and discussion were facilitated and additional training was provided at the January 2021 Winter Teaching Academy.

The October 2020 open forum explored what and where *PPCR* student learning opportunities occurred in curricular and co-curricular settings across UAA. In order to facilitate buy-in from the UAA community for implementing the new core competencies, it was critical that all stakeholders collaborated to broadly define what each core competency looks like at UAA. All internal stakeholders (faculty, staff, administrators, students) were recruited to attend the open forum in order to articulate institution-wide student learning. In the spirit of role modeling the 'professional excellence' aspect of PPCR, the chancellor and provost each framed the goals for the open forum and provided examples of PPCR in their own work. For example, the chancellor reflected on her role in public service, ensuring compliance with regulations and her commitment to transparency. The provost described her focus on building professional relationships and the teamwork that is necessary in higher education. Additionally, to demonstrate the diversity of student learning opportunities throughout the UAA community and to inspire brainstorming at the open forum, a student, a faculty and a staff member each provided examples of PPCR in their part of UAA. A dietetics student reported on her experience with community engaged learning at a food distribution center; the research laboratory manager for the UAA College of Arts and Sciences presented on the importance of responsible conduct and role modeling in ensuring safe laboratory operations; and a faculty member described his assignment in a course focused on professional ethics.

The activities at the October 2020 open forum were designed to collect examples of student learning opportunities that reflect *Personal, Professional and Community Responsibility*, from administrators, students, staff, and faculty within the UAA community, for use in broadly and collaboratively defining this new core competency. For example, participants completed an individual mind mapping process centered around the project question: "Where are student learning opportunities taking place

within the UAA community, whether in the curriculum, co-curriculum or through students' daily interactions with UAA processes, that reflect *Personal, Professional and Community Responsibility*?" This assignment, and the group debriefing using Jamboard (Figure 4), laid the foundation for the November 2020 open forum which used an innovative qualitative approach, PhotoVoice, to explore how UAA broadly defined *PPCR*.

Figure 4. Where Do Learning Experiences in Personal, Professional and Community Responsibility Occur at UAA (October 2020)

LEARING EXPERIENCES?
Service-learning experiences
Alaska Native Themed GER
Pedagogy (Flipped Classroom/Project based learning/TILT)
UNIV 150 Course
Capstone Courses
ePortfolio reflection on PPCR
Courses that address ethical and social issues
Library Science Courses
Practicums/Internships/Externships
Research (grad and undergrad) (content/part./org.)

Tom Case Leadership Fellows Program
Student Clubs Participation/Leadership
Counselling/Advising
CBPP Business Plan Comp.
Email Etiquette
Campus Events/Discussions

USUAA Participation
Student Coaching/Peer Mentoring
Student Employment
Student Volunteer Activities
Student Orientation
Career Readiness Workshops
Athletics

Safety Training
Hospital Days for MD Students
Title IX Training
Art Studio Monitor
Radio Station Participation
COVID Training/Requirements
Care Team

WHERE DOES LEARNING TAKE PLACE?
 Classroom
Library
Middle College
Student Clubs
Advising
Professional Organizations
Greek Life
Learning Commons
Dean's Student Advisory Board
Alumni Association
Residence Life
Labs
Residence Halls
Hospitals
Advisory Boards
"Safe Spaces"
Radio Station
Multicultural Center
Email/Blackboard/Zoom

3. PhotoVoice

PhotoVoice (PV) is a participatory action research method, a qualitative approach, that uses photography and group discussion to facilitate a deeper understanding of an issue of significance to a community, and is traditionally used within marginalized groups (Rutgers International Department, 2016). The PV method was selected in an attempt to equalize the importance of the contribution of each UAA community member, regardless of their role, in broadly defining PPCR at UAA. Psychology and Health Sciences faculty members with previous PV experience guided the modification of the PV method for use in the cross-institutional implementation process. The aim of the PV process was:

> To generate awareness of current, and potential future, student learning opportunities in the UAA community, whether in the curriculum, co-curriculum or through students' daily interactions with UAA processes, that reflect Personal, Professional and Community Responsibility.

Open forum registrants were asked to submit photos, in advance, that captured a student learning opportunity in *PPCR* in their program or area at UAA. At the November 2020 open forum, the following steps were followed:
  - o   Introduction: Describe the process for linking images and finding a common theme
  - o   Step one: Breakout groups (random sorting of participants) Brief sharing of each photo and narrative
  - o   Step two: Remain in breakout groups: Categorize photos/narrative into themes using a modified SHOWED method (Rutgers International Department, 2016; Table 1)
  - o   Step three: Discussion with all participants: Group consensus process on overall themes and finalize the narrative (Figure 5)
  - o   Step four: Select photos that are exemplars of the themes (Figure 6)
 - o   Full group debrief

Table 1. Adjustment to the PhotoVoice SHOWED questions for the PPCR process evaluation

Original PhotoVoice SHOWED questions	PhotoVoice SHOWED questions as used in the UAA PPCR process evaluation
1. What do you See here?	1. What do you See here?
2. What is really Happening here?	2. What is really Happening here?
3. How does this relate to Our lives?	3. Why was this learning opportunity created?
4. Why does this Exist?	4. How does it relate to the lives of students?
5. What can we Do about it?	5. What can we do to sustain or improve it?

Figure 5. Attributes of Personal, Professional and Community Responsibility that Emerged from the PhotoVoice Process (November 2020)

- Role modeling
- Ethics
- Place-based learning
- Applied learning
- Civic engagement
- Community-based learning
- Leadership
- Safety
- Whole person
- Project-based learning
- Professional development
- Integration of culture
- Building relationships
- Team work
- Connection with others
- Passion for your work
- Sense of purpose
- Importance of practicing
- Student engagement
- Resilience

Figure 6. Summary of the Themes That Emerged During the PhotoVoice Process (November 2020)
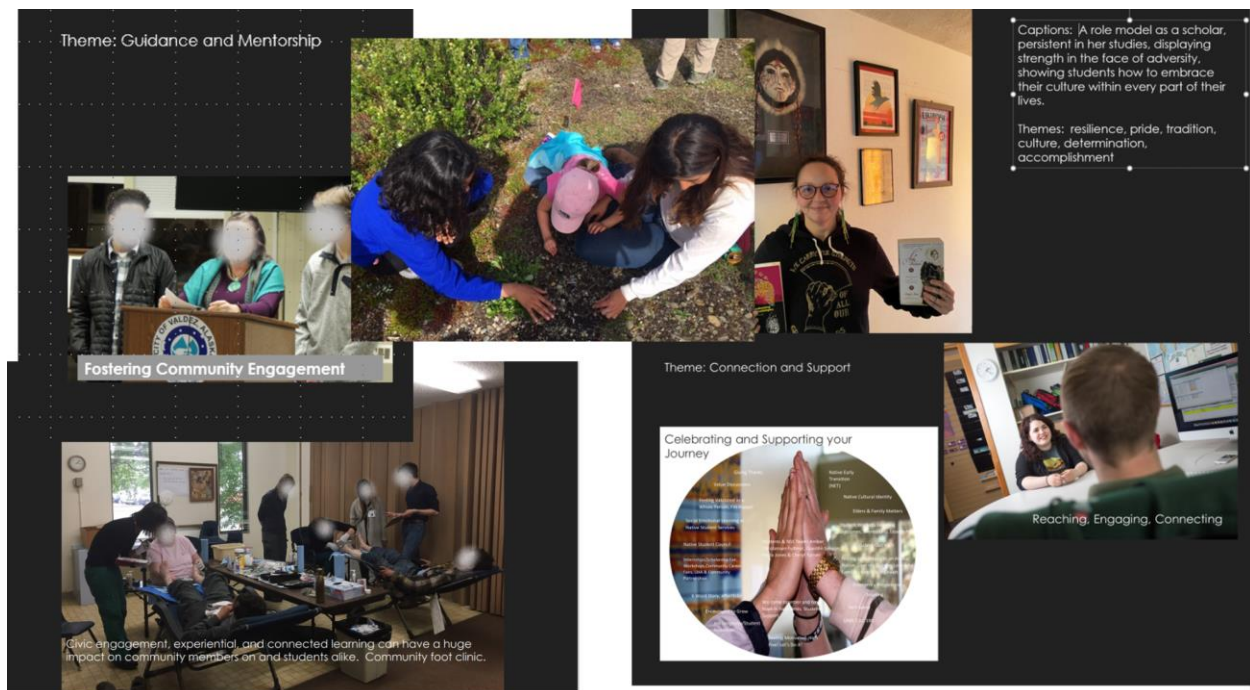
The consistency of the attributes of PPCR that were reported through the PV process as being present in student learning opportunities at UAA (Figures 5 and 6) and what external stakeholders are seeking is an important means of triangulation. The results of the interviews with the employers of UAA alumni, conducted by the NWCCU Mission Fulfillment year one fellows in spring and summer 2020, confirmed that the PPCR core competency was on the correct path with developing knowledge and skills that external stakeholders, in this case employers, are looking for in UAA graduates: teamwork, applied learning, place-based learning, ethical decision making, professional development and leadership.

The modified PV process was well received by the open forum participants. A manuscript has been submitted for publication that describes the novel approach of using PV in accreditation processes in more detail.

In March 2021, an open forum was held to ask academic programs to explore how they already help students meet the *PPCR* core competency, or how they plan to in the future, and how they would know when students have achieved this. Rather than creating a separate core competency program-level assessment process, programs were encouraged to reflect on and align their student learning opportunities in *PPCR* within their curriculum. This was an important step in alignment with the original

consideration of not contributing to a sense of being overwhelmed or additionally burdened, that was stated at the beginning of the core competency implementation process.

4. Student Focus Groups

In an effort to solicit additional student feedback during the PPCR implementation process, a pilot student focus group was conducted in April 2021, with plans for additional focus groups in AY22. The goal of the student focus group was to document where and how students develop the core competencies at UAA, for the purpose of the assessment of student learning. The focus group facilitator asked questions about three aspects of PPCR:

- Opportunities available to students related to developing attributes of PPCR both at UAA and in their lives outside of the university.
- Specific experiences they have had related to achieving PPCR at UAA, including where and when these experiences occurred and developed.
- Opportunities or experiences not available to them that they believe could have enhanced the development of PPCR or challenges they experienced in meeting PPCR.

The results of the focus group triangulated with the open forum feedback in the types of learning experiences in PPCR available at UAA (e.g., academic coursework, teamwork), where the learning experiences take place (e.g. classroom, community-based environments, student clubs, tutoring) and the attributes of PPCR that are clear to students (e.g., professional development, ethics, leadership, resilience). The disruption caused by COVID-19 in all learning experiences and providing more community-based learning were noted as an area for improvement. One student summarized their learning experiences in PPCR as having been indirectly obtained by *"just the experience of going through the process of being a college student."* Students may have multiple core competency related learning experiences during their time at UAA, but which opportunity really resonates with them may vary.

At the May 2021 Annual Assessment Retreat the plans for streamlining the program assessment reporting process were presented, including the plans for the institutional assessment of core competencies, how programs will reflect on and align the core competencies within their curriculum, starting with PPCR, and how extracurricular and co-curricular programs and service areas can do this, also. The director of residence life described examples of how this could be accomplished. The results of the first student focus groups were presented and input was solicited for the future focus groups and the plans for a graduate exit survey. At the conclusion of the retreat, a vote was

conducted on which core competency to focus on in AY22. While there was support for each of the remaining core competencies, Effective Communication was the winner.

IV. Evaluating the Outcomes of the UAA Core Competency Development and Implementation Process

The timing of the UAA core competency development and implementation process aligned with several significant events in Alaska and globally: financial uncertainty, a 7.0 earthquake, and COVID-19. Throughout the development and implementation process, the UAA community engagement and collaboration was remarkable. While the timing was notably full of external stressors, the UAA community came together and contributed to what amounted to a simultaneous community-building and self-reflective exercise, developing the full set of core competencies and then implementing *PPCR* in AY21. The Core Competency Working Group challenged the accreditation tri-chairs to be inclusive and specifically define opportunities for involvement for all UAA community members. There was careful attention to recruitment messages and exemplars provided at the open forums to deliberately showcase curricular and co-curricular opportunities. The feedback on this process was consistently positive and demonstrated that faculty, staff, administrators and students felt heard and valued for their contributions.

1. Need for Further Work

UAA will proceed with the implementation of the remaining three core competencies: Effective Communication, Creative and Critical Thinking and Intercultural Fluency. It is anticipated that a "layered approach" will be utilized in which the new focus (e.g., Effective Communication in the 2021-2022 academic year) and the previously implemented core competency (e.g., PPCR) will be the focus in a collaborative manner. Possible examples of the layered approach include guided discussions on the identification or incorporation of learning experiences that are jointly developed between more than one core competency.

One part of the plan for the institutional assessment of the core competencies is the development of a graduate exit survey. This process still needs to be developed and implemented. Ongoing collaboration among the internal and external UAA community stakeholders will be essential to this process.

As is essential with the assessment process, we need to identify how we will "close the loop," using the assessment results to refine and improve curricular, co-curricular and

extra curricular programs at UAA. The results of student focus groups and the graduate exit survey will be the feedback that is used in this process, as well as program and general education assessment results, when applicable. Possible formats include open forums with discussion among all stakeholders and presentations at all college meetings.

2. Lessons Learned

In the course of this project we achieved a variety of insights that could be helpful for other institutions.

- As anticipated, the process of articulating institution-wide student learning core competencies pitched our deliberations at a sufficiently abstract level to encourage stakeholders to adopt an institution-wide perspective that did not privilege particular disciplines or educational locations on campus. This created a discursive space in which various institutional actors from a variety of disciplinary perspectives were able to fruitfully deliberate without the disciplinary silos or turf battles that can accompany deliberations on more specific SLO's, such as in General Education.

- The core competency development and initial implementation processes were lengthy and it was essential for all internal stakeholders to feel like they were collaborators in the process. The end result belongs to the UAA community. It was important for staff, faculty, students and administrators to feel like their voices were valued and their input was incorporated. Staff members were initially hesitant to participate in the core competency development process. Students are also hesitant to attend fora that appear to be faculty-centric.   Great effort was made to engage all internal stakeholders in the process, often by meeting them in their own settings. While time-consuming, targeted visits to organized stakeholder groups (e.g. student and faculty government, staff council, the alumni association) made our deliberations more inclusive and representative of the campus community. Ultimately, the deliberative process itself became a source of trust-building and mutual recognition of the various community stakeholders who embraced thinking within the learning system paradigm.

- A key part of the core competency development process that evolved was the necessary willingness to pivot with the methodology during the process. If a method is introduced and has great significance (i.e., TILT training to focus on transparency in assignment design), it's vital to include this new method. Also, be willing to incorporate non-traditional methodologies in the process, such as

PhotoVoice. There are community-building opportunities that can come from using new methodologies.

- In exploring methods for engaging the UAA community with the core competency implementation process, we decided to utilize qualitative approaches and capture the "stories" of student learning through PhotoVoice, student focus groups and ultimately a graduate exit survey as a means of the institutional assessment in core competency achievement. Due to the success of the PhotoVoice and initial student focus group, these methods will be utilized again.

- Lastly, the process of explicating CC's gained significant credibility because it was not perceived as an administrative project being imposed on the campus community. In an era fraught with faculty-administration distrust, the collaborative structure of our process helped fill in some of the trust deficit that can undermine such initiatives.   At UAA, the accreditation tri-chair structure, comprised of the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs and Institutional Effectiveness and the two faculty authors of this paper, plus additional staff, faculty, and administrators who were recruited throughout the process as exemplars at key stages in the process, added to the success of the core competency process. Faculty and staff could identify with the leaders and their roles at UAA.

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