

NWCCU Demonstration Project: Peer Evaluation Report

University of Puget Sound

Tacoma, Washington

April 18-19, 2017

*A confidential report of findings prepared for the
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities*

Introduction

Jane Atkinson, vice president and provost of Lewis & Clark College, and Stephen Germic, provost and academic vice president of Rocky Mountain College, visited the University of Puget Sound on April 18-19, 2017 to conduct a peer evaluation of the university's report for the NWCCU Demonstration Project. In advance of our visit we had an opportunity to study the university's informative and well-written report, an accompanying volume of supporting materials, and a comprehensive electronic version of the Standard Two documentation.

Our schedule for the day and a half long visit was well designed to give us insight into the university's ongoing efforts to assess and improve the educational experience of students at Puget Sound. In addition to a meeting with President Crawford, lunch with three members of the Board of Trustees, student and faculty forums, a campus symposium, and the exit interview, we also participated in discussion sessions regarding three key initiatives relevant to general education at Puget Sound. These sessions concerned Diversity and Inclusion, Experiential Learning, and Education Goals. Because these are all "works in progress," they were particularly useful for giving us an understanding of how the university engages in educational change and development.

Has the institution defined mission fulfillment with a focus on general education, implementing methodologies for collecting data, analyzing the data, and utilizing the outcomes for continuous improvement?

For the Year Three accreditation, the university built a framework centered on its three core themes. The framework had three layers: "the environment we design and deliver," "the experiences of students within that environment," and "the outcomes that result from those experiences" (page 9). NSSE data was the primary data source—a choice based on the premise that "measuring extent of High-Impact Practices can serve as a proxy for outcomes." The university also took a separate approach to assessing achievement of core theme objectives involving "indicators and objectives." Their peer reviewers were concerned that the process of carrying out this process of assessment could prove "overwhelming."

In light of feedback received in the Mid-Cycle review, the university significantly modified its approach to defining and evaluating mission fulfillment for the current review.

For the Demonstration Project Report the university revised the framework with a focus on student achievement. And at the same time "the Puget Sound environment and student experience within it" have been separately assessed in order to answer the question "How do we get better at fulfilling our mission?" (page 10).

To evaluate extent of mission fulfillment, they examine the following three questions:

1. “Are our students persisting to graduation at an acceptable rate?”
2. “Are our students achieving along essential learning dimensions at an acceptable rate?”
3. “Are our students progressing toward lifelong holistic goals in an acceptable way?”

Based on these questions, here are the elements they examine to assess mission fulfillment.

1. “Student persistence to graduation”
2. “Student achievement along essential learning dimensions based in general education:
 Apt expression
 Critical analysis
 Rich knowledge of self and others”
3. “Student progress toward a lifetime of engaged citizenship”

The university sees the first element as “a necessary condition” for the other two. As a residential liberal arts college, the University of Puget Sound determined that its graduation rate should be “relatively high within the full range of higher education institution types.”

The second element –students’ performance in core areas of general education—is viewed as “the heart of the matter.” It is central to the mission statement, the faculty’s educational goals and the goals of the Division of Student Affairs. The competencies identified here are recognized the foundation “upon which progress toward holistic lifelong goals are built.”

The third element, engaged citizenship, serves to describe a lifelong goal the university has for its students. This is measured in terms of students’ survey responses concerning their “preparation for and progress toward engaged citizenship” at the time they graduate. By adopting instruments to study alumni outcomes, Puget Sound may be able to extend its window for assessing lifelong learning beyond graduation.

It should also be noted that the concept of High-Impact Educational Practices pioneered by George Kuh and AAC&U LEAP project has been important to the university’s work in both curricular and co-curricular areas. High-Impact Practices are viewed as the “delivery mechanism” for the “essential learning dimensions” cited in element #2 above. They figure prominently in assessment and planning efforts examined in this report.

For the Methodologies section, has the institution explored each of the following areas (these are not all required, but should be considered):

General Education assessments: Table 4 (page 16) presents the Curriculum Committee’s seven year cycle for review of the general education curriculum or, what some faculty and administrators prefer to call the “Shared Curriculum.”

Direct assessments: Table 2 of the evaluation report presents both the direct and indirect methodologies used for assessment of both curricular and cocurricular dimensions of students’ educational experience. The principal direct assessment tool pertaining to general education is

the longitudinal Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) study, which has been ongoing since 1998.

Another, the Research Practices Survey (RPS), pertains to information literacy and asks students to respond to questions regarding sources of information.

The Division of Student Affairs also collects direct evidence of student growth. DSA studies students' persistence and academic progress in the optional residential seminars. Academic progress in Greek life is also tracked.

Indirect assessments: Again, see Table 2, page 16. These are primarily surveys and focus groups, and they too are used to assess both the curricular and cocurricular dimensions of the educational experience. As will become evident in this discussion, the university uses focus groups in creative ways to augment and illuminate aspects of information gleaned by direct assessment methodologies; to generate ideas for addressing issues identified through various research methods; and for building consensus regarding how to proceed.

Curricular assessments (programmatic, major, electives): Departments and programs are reviewed on a seven year cycle by the Curriculum Committee.

The university has also created a Student Learning Outcomes Team (SLO) that is working to strengthen the “culture of assessment on campus.” Part of the work involves working to “align” departmental assessment with assessment of institutional goals. The idea is to help departments insure that their “stated outcomes” are “clearly stated, measurable, and linked to the department goals, Puget Sound mission, and educational goals.”

Co-curricular assessments: The report presents the mission statement of the Division of Student Affairs along with its student learning goals that support the institutional mission as well as the academic goals the faculty have set. The aforementioned table on page 14, “Institutional Assessment Instruments and Processes,” lists direct and indirect means of assessment for both curricular and cocurricular aspects of the educational experience.

Analysis and Use of Assessment Evidence

Chapter 4 presents a detailed examination of assessment results and how they are being put to use. The discussion is built around case studies, each considered in light of the following three questions: “What did we see?” “What did we do?” “How will we understand the impacts?” As reviewers we concur that this section supports the proposition that “robust process for continuous improvement” are “hallmarks of Puget Sound’s culture and history” (p. 21).

Educational Goals

The first of these case studies is one we were able to explore in some depth during a special session with faculty involved in work on this project.

In the course of preparing for this review, the faculty has revisited a set of educational goals first approved in 1976, then revised in 1991. A 2015 survey undertaken by the Curriculum Committee revealed that the faculty had inconsistent awareness of these goals. At the same time, in recent years, the Division of Student Affairs has embraced the educational goals and integrated them into that division's values and planning. Revisiting the goals will be important for campus discussion about the core curriculum. In consultation with the Faculty Senate, the associate deans' office and the Office of Institutional Research developed a research protocol for conducting small group discussion sessions with faculty. The format called on faculty to identify the educational goals they wanted their graduates to achieve, to compare those goals to the existing goals, and to rate the importance of each goal. In this way the researchers were able to see which of the existing goals were confirmed, which needed updated wording, and which needed to be significantly rethought or eliminated. And they could also identify support for new goals. This process also underlined faculty's responsibility for helping students to achieve shared educational goals—and, importantly, identified areas in which faculty felt unprepared to do so. An Ad Hoc Committee on Educational Goals was then charged by the Faculty Senate with reviewing the results of this study and proposing next steps. In February 2017, the Ad Hoc Committee proposed a revised set of educational goals, which the Faculty Senate has now approved.

The faculty forum we attended demonstrated deep interest in questions of educational goals and what defines a Puget Sound education. General education or the “core” was recognized as a way to express what is distinctive about a Puget Sound education. “The mission should be expressed in the core,” said one faculty member. The University of Puget Sound has a well-established general education program that has been developing over the decades in response to the evolution and growing complexity of our world. There has been drift, or as one person put it, “core creep.” The current core is layered stratigraphically with older and newer elements. Some elements of the current general education program do not speak as powerfully to current students and faculty as others do. There are concerns about the labor required to sustain a core program that has continued to grow. There is also awareness that discussion and, eventually, changes will need to be made in order to ensure that the program is sustainable.

In our interviews with faculty, it became clear that the process of reviving and renewing the institution's educational goals has the potential to strengthen the effective use of student learning outcomes by the faculty. By mapping the educational goals onto departmental and program curricula, it may be possible to achieve more consistent language about learning objectives and greater clarity about assessing learning outcomes across the university.

Writing Across the Curriculum

In this section, the university analyses the results of its latest evaluation of student writing portfolios, a direct form of assessment that Puget Sound conducts every five years. Essentially this involves faculty teams scoring portfolios of student papers from their first and their senior

years. The portfolio scores are then compared to see if the scores on individual student's writing has improved, remained the same, or declined between year one and year four. The results indicate improvement in students' writing proficiency. The latest WAC assessment was followed up with focus groups and questionnaires to find out more about students' experience with writing at Puget Sound. This process yielded rich information about what was working and what might be needed to sustain and improve the Writing Across the Curriculum program. These results are summarized on pages 32-33 of the report.

First Year Seminars

The first year seminar program is assessed regularly in a number of ways—including campus survey instruments, national surveys BCSSE and NSSE, Curriculum Committee reviews, the university's Research Practices Survey, the Writing Across the Curriculum assessment described above, and annual conversations with seminar faculty led by the Center for Writing, Learning, and Teaching.

In 2011 a faculty-led process resulted in a significant redesign of the first year seminar format that was implemented in the 2013-14 academic year. The format was changed from two non-sequenced seminars to a “sequenced, theme-based design.” Student writing liaisons from the writing center as well as peer advisors are engaged with all seminars.

In 2014, the preliminary results from the first year of the new format were assessed, using an adaptation of the Writing Across the Curriculum assessment protocol. This regular review is ongoing. A significant outcome of this work is the development of a writing handbook specifically designed for the campus and prepared by a faculty member with a team of three students.

The Committee to Support the Shared Curriculum is monitoring faculty and student feedback on the program in order to support its ongoing improvement.

“Connections:” The General Education Interdisciplinary Capstone Course

Again, a combination of survey and focus group data identified both strengths and weaknesses in this element of the general education program. The assessment process identified concerns with lack of depth, excessively large classes, and inadequate follow-through on recommendations for improvement. In response to the findings, a Teagle mini-grant is being used to improve the inter/multi-disciplinary dimensions of the offerings in this area. And the process for both assessing and responding to core course recommendations is also being bolstered.

Diversity and Inclusion

The Diversity and Inclusion initiative coalesced and gained momentum with the appointment of a Dean of Diversity and Inclusion/Chief Diversity Officer in 2013. The dean, along with the Diversity Advisory Council, drew on the results from two Campus Climate Surveys, along with

information gleaned from NSSE, university surveys, student data, and focus groups to make the case that many minoritized members of the campus community were experiencing a sense of marginalization and changes were needed. In response to these findings, the institution has taken a number of steps to transform the campus—among them, a new general education course requirement focusing on knowledge, identity and power (KNOW), now in its second year. Students played a significant role in the establishment of this requirement and an important dimension of the KNOW courses is that students engage students in grappling with challenging dimensions of difference.

The Diversity and Inclusion initiative has prompted a host of other changes, including the establishment of an African American Studies Major, a Latina/o Studies program, a diversity training day for student leaders, a sexual and gender violence prevention programming, and Green Dot, Anti-Bias/Hate Education campaign on the part of student government. The university has become the first POSSE Foundation partner in the Northwest, and the university has developed a program to recruit, enroll, and support students from Tacoma Public Schools with financial aid and academic support. The institution is aiming to have its student demographics proportional to those of the nation at large and for students of all backgrounds to feel equally welcome and at home on campus. Impressively, over the last three years, over half the tenure-line hires have been faculty of color. And the Race and Pedagogy Institute is a partnership between the university and the South Sound community to engage educators in critical examination of race and ways to overcome racism.

These accomplishments illustrate well how the university is making use of institutional research and campus dialogue to improve and transform the educational experience at Puget Sound. Discussion with faculty, staff, and students revealed awareness of the need for intentional cultivation and institutional resources to help this initiative grow and thrive.

Experiential Learning

This initiative developed in response to institutional assessment that indicated that University of Puget Sound students participate in experiential learning at lower rates than their counterparts at peer institutions. Working from the premise that purposeful connection of one's education to something outside the classroom promotes critical self-reflection and builds the capacity for lifelong learning, the university applied for and received a three year grant from the Mellon Foundation. Still in the early stages, the supporters of this initiative are exploring ways to interest their colleagues in creating opportunities for experiential learning. At this point it is not clear what shape a fully realized experiential learning program will take: might it someday be a required element of the Puget Sound general education program, or perhaps a distinctive option for students existing at the border of the curriculum and the cocurriculum? Experiential Learning is at a much earlier stage of development than the Diversity and Inclusion initiative. Here there are challenges to solve, including how to keep this project in definitional bounds, how to promote self-reflection on the part of students, to assess students' metacognitive work and

identify the difference it may be making in their educational growth. Corraling the concept of experiential learning is a major task. As someone put it, “if it is everything, it is nothing.” Proponents for this initiative recognize that they will only be able to take it so far without significant investment of resources. And to that end, they recognize the importance of effective means of assessment for determining the educational value of this undertaking.

What are the Committee’s thoughts about your strategies/conclusions regarding mission fulfillment (Section VI)?

Here again is the framework the university uses to assess mission fulfillment, along with its assessment approach and results:

1. *Student persistence to graduation*

As part of its strategic planning efforts, the university has set targets for five measures: number of new matriculating first-time first year, full-time students; retention of students from first to second year; the four-year and five-year graduation rates; and the overall satisfaction rating on the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium Survey (HEDS) senior survey. With the exception of what they conclude to have been an anomalous dip in the four-year graduation rate for one cohort, they have met their targets. We, like they, consider these to be useful and appropriate indicators for evaluating what they term a “necessary condition” for mission fulfillment.

2. *Student achievement along essential learning dimensions based in general education:*

Apt expression

Critical analysis

Rich knowledge of self and others

“Apt expression”—defined as written communication and oral communication—is assessed based on data from the Spring Survey, the HEDS Survey, and NSSE, plus the institution’s own Writing Across the Curriculum assessment for the “written communication” component. The data support the conclusion that the university is meeting its targets for written communication. The survey data indicates, however, that students have less confidence about their abilities in the area of oral communication. Given that the Puget Sound curriculum places considerable emphasis on writing skills and far less on speaking skills, one could argue that the survey data—reflecting students’ own judgements of their skills in an area not highlighted in the curriculum—demonstrate the shortcomings of an indirect assessment methodology rather than a direct measure of students’ actual competence. Whether that is, in fact, the case or not is something that Puget Sound will likely be investigating in its future assessment efforts.

“Critical Analysis” is likewise measured by survey results for first year and senior cohorts. Again, the measures are indirect and reflect students’ own assessment of their

skills in this area. Results exceed targets for The Spring Survey and HEDs, and are close to target for NSSE.

“Rich knowledge of self and others” was an area where the survey results were particularly concerning and became one impetus for the Diversity and Inclusion initiative discussed above. These indicators will be important to watch in the future for assessing the new general education Knowledge, Identity, and Power or KNOW requirement, as well as other steps the institution is taking to develop intercultural knowledge and sensibilities.

3. Student progress toward a lifetime of engaged citizenship

Two items on the HEDS senior survey and one NSSE item are used to assess student levels of civic engagement. Two of the three indicators yielded a result in the acceptable range and a third was judged “borderline.” Here again, the university is taking steps through its Experiential Learning initiative to bolster civic engagement through High Impact Practices that encourage students to draw connections between their formal learning and out-of-classroom experiences.

We imagine the university will in the future want to extend its assessment of engaged citizenship through the administration of alumni surveys. Puget Sound has an impressive and growing alumni population (that includes a significant number of current Trustees) who embody the university’s “educational outcomes.” Tracking their responses to questions about their post-graduation lives and careers can augment the ongoing research on current students in valuable ways.

Puget Sound concludes from this evidence that the institution is currently fulfilling its mission in acceptable fashion—and, what is more, the institution knows its areas of strength and where it needs to grow. We concur. And we also see strong evidence in the report that the university is systematically reviewing its performance, identifying areas for improvement, and taking formal steps to address them through effective mechanisms for planning and budgeting.

Has the institution successfully demonstrated compliance with all regulatory Standards? (Section VII of the report)

We have reviewed the Standard II documentation provided to us electronically in advance of the visit and cross-checked certain items with materials provided in the work room. On a conventional NWCCU site visit, evaluators would typically follow up to see how certain policies and procedures were being implemented in practice. That was beyond the scope of this review. Based on the documentation we examined online and onsite, the University of Puget Sound has demonstrated compliance with all the regulatory Standards.

What are the Committee’s thoughts about the institution’s clarity and contributions towards lessons learned and best practices as a resource to member institutions?

The approach taken in the NWCCU Demonstration Project is well suited for the University of Puget Sound, a stable and well-run institution with a strong campus culture. At this largely undergraduate liberal arts college, general education is an important dimension of students' educational experience and a useful lens for examining mission fulfillment. It will be interesting to learn if this approach works equally well in other kinds of institutional settings.

The university states that it did not have enough time as part of this project to “define the measures, measure, make changes, then measure again to ‘close the loop.’” Therefore, in their report they looked principally at the ways they “are using data to discover and attend to continuous improvement.” (p. 77). As evaluators we found this to be a very successful and informative approach, one that provided us with a “front-row seat” to observe the process of continuous improvement in action at Puget Sound.

We were also impressed with the institution's highly effective use of discussion formats in the course of conducting assessments, evaluating results, and determining appropriate courses of action in curricular and co-curricular arenas. For example, they have augmented the Writing Across the Curriculum assessment with student focus groups in order to learn not only about students' development as writers, but also to obtain information about “the culture of writing at Puget Sound” (p. 30) and feedback on how faculty can “help” or “hinder” students' development as writers. The results of these focus groups have led to steps the university is taking to improve the teaching and culture of writing at Puget Sound. Faculty work on revising and renewing the Educational Goals is another outstanding example of how discussion groups were used to develop consensus on an important institutional issue. We came away from this visit with an appreciation for the collegial and constructive way the Puget Sound community approaches and works through difficult and challenging issues.

The university offered a number of thoughtful observations and suggestions in its report:

Among them was a critique of the “core themes” as an “artificial” device, “a distraction” that complicated the effort to assess mission fulfillment. They felt it was a waste of time to have to build core themes into the model as they sought to examine mission fulfillment. In their view, it made more sense to look at “essential learning outcomes,” tied to “educational goals” and “High-Impact Educational Practices.” They suggest that the NWCCU give institutions more flexibility in how they go about demonstrating mission fulfillment. An alternative would be for the university to revisit and revise its core themes in light of the work it has done to revise its educational goals.

They ask that schools be allowed to use the self-study to “be candid about shortcomings and plans for improvement” rather than setting low-bar mission fulfillment thresholds.” We fully agree with this suggestion and believe it is in keeping with the Commission's approach to evaluation.

They think of the educational environment as “a necessary condition” for mission fulfillment. They suggest that “separate attention” to the college’s environment and students’ experience within it” helps to answer the question, “How do we get better at fulfilling our mission?”

They note that indicators such as retention and graduation rates are not the same as mission fulfillment, but they are “necessary conditions” for it. They think that the NWCCU should “consider allowing institutions to discuss or describe the necessary conditions for mission fulfillment at their institutions.” In fact, many institutions include these indicators in their approach to demonstrating mission fulfillment, something that could be more widely shared among member institutions.

Regarding Standard II, they opine that the “Resources and Capacity” section should be limited to “substantive changes with pointers to policies” and institutions should submit “a separate table with links and/or descriptions of compliance with each substandard.” Doing so would free up space in the report for examining mission fulfillment. This opinion is widely shared among member institutions. If the Commission does decide to streamline the process for Standard 2 evaluation, we hope that site visits will continue to provide an opportunity for evaluators to assess how policies and procedures are being enacted in institutional practice. While compliance with many of the substandards can be confirmed merely by the presence or absence of specific documentation, others do require confirmation that institutional practice conforms to stated policies or procedures.

They asked if an accreditation report could be “a relatively brief narrative that serves as a guide to existing documents that tell the story of continuous improvement and mission fulfillment.” If by “relatively brief,” the university is characterizing its own Demonstration Project report, we are pleased to endorse this approach. We found the narrative of this report to be informative, illuminating, and immensely helpful for conducting our site visit.

They do point out that their suggestion of a brief narrative would only work if institutional work is well documented. That happens to be the case for University of Puget Sound, which is distinctive for the way it has deliberately built its mission, planning, and programs over the years in a continuous fashion with careful attention to what has come before and what it aspires to accomplish in the future. With change has come continuity and awareness of institutional trajectory. Not every institution is as mindful of its past or as intentional in setting its future direction as this one.

It was remarked during our site visit the Demonstration Project report feels more accessible to the community than a conventional self-study does. We heartily concur and thank our colleagues at Puget Sound for engaging us in a highly informative and thought-provoking response to the NWCCU Demonstration Project.