

Mid-Cycle Evaluation

University of Alaska Southeast (UAS)

Juneau, Alaska

April 14-15, 2022

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

Table of Contents

Evaluators	3
Introduction	4
Part I: Mission Fulfillment	4
Part II: Student Achievement.....	6
Part III: Programmatic Assessment.....	7
Part IV: Moving Forward.....	8
Part V: Addendums	9

Evaluators

Shannon Beets, University of Nevada, Reno

Dr. Mark Stewart, Willamette University

Dr. Mac Powell, Senior Vice President, Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)

Introduction

The Evaluation Team would like to thank the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS) for producing an excellent Mid-Cycle Report. The report was concise and well supported with data that reinforced the narrative. The Evaluation Team appreciated the time, effort, and openness of the various UAS faculty and staff members across all campuses that took the time to attend meetings, answer evaluator questions, and share their work in support of the UAS mission.

In general, the Evaluation Team would like to compliment UAS for the sense of collaboration that was apparent across the institution. The Evaluation Team observed many examples of common programming, shared resources, cross-campus problem solving, and frequent communication among locations that truly demonstrated the spirit of “three campuses - one university.”

Additionally, the Evaluation Team would like to compliment the entire UAS campus on a data-driven, values-centric commitment to the success of Alaska Native students at UAS. This commitment to the success of Native Alaskan students is tied to both the system-wide Alaska Native Success Initiative (ANSI) and to UAS’s own status as a Native American/Alaska Native Serving Non-Tribal Institution. On the institutional level, this commitment to the success of Native Alaskan students was expressed in the newly-revised mission statement recently crafted and approved by the UAS community. Further commitment was demonstrated by the work of two high-level Chancellor’s committees dedicated to attracting and retaining both Native Alaskan students and employees. UAS has also dedicated resources to areas where improvement in equitable outcomes for Alaskan Native students is sought. As an example, based on their disaggregated data, UAS has recently hired a person to focus on Native Alaskan student retention. Additionally, UAS has hired faculty members to support curricula focused on Alaska Native Languages and Alaska Native studies. This commitment to Alaska Native student success was demonstrated through examples throughout the institution from targeted retention efforts to rural financial aid outreach to faculty teaching and learning techniques. It is an excellent example of mission, values, and data coming together to increase institutional commitment and effectiveness.

Part I: Mission Fulfillment

In 2021, UAS undertook an extensive revision of the mission statement. This effort was launched because there were concerns that not everyone saw their programs reflected in the existing mission statement. After an extensive process engaging constituents across the

institution and multiple iterations, a mission statement that focused on the student-centered nature of the university and the values of diversity and equity was approved by the BOR:

The University of Alaska Southeast is a student-centered university that provides instruction in liberal arts, professional, and technical fields. On the homelands of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples, we serve the coastal environments, cultures, economies, and communities of Alaska, through interdisciplinary education, workforce development, and scholarship, research, and creative activity.

The adoption of the mission statement was only the first step in the process which continued to include the modification of the UAS values and the confirmation of the UAS vision statement. This process was clearly documented on the UAS website and involved appropriate opportunities for broad-based participation. With the foundation in place, the UAS community was able to develop five core objectives with measurable and meaningful indicators of success. The indicators of success on the core objectives were appropriately benchmarked where possible, whether that was against the newly revised peer-group data compiled by UAS or against system-wide goals/expectations for enrollment.

In conversations with UAS leadership, the plan is to revisit progress on the Core Objectives and indicators on an annual basis with an eye towards making appropriate revisions to indicators and goals. In terms of continuing to improve with an eye towards a successful year seven visit, this annual revisiting of the core objectives and indicators is important for several reasons. First, there are core objectives where indicators must still be developed, and appropriate goals established (Core Objective 4: Be a Great Place to Work for All Employees – Employee Demographics and Core Objective 5: Maintain Relevance through Productive Relationships within Southeast Alaska – Experiential Learning). UAS leadership is aware that this work still needs to be completed. Second, while there was broad familiarity and commitment to the UAS mission, values and vision across the campus, the awareness of some of the Core Objectives and associated indicators was more limited and various constituency groups seemed less aware of their own roles and responsibilities in achieving the institutional goals related to mission fulfillment. The planned annual conversations about the core objectives, indicators, and progress towards achieving goals should help increase campus awareness, engagement, and participation in mission fulfillment activities before the next NWCCU visit. Additionally, where data is being collected related to employee satisfaction as part of a Core Objective (Great Colleges to Work For survey, Core Objective #4), it will be important to share survey results going forward, especially since staff expressed some concerns that the first round of results had not been shared. The UAS leadership was clear that sharing this survey data as part of tracking success on Core Objective #4 would be a priority this year and moving into the future.

UAS has demonstrated a strong commitment to the collection and use of data in evaluating mission fulfillment. As an example, retention data is being collected and disaggregated by gender, age, Alaska native status/other minority/white, rural, first generation and Pell status for both retention and 200% completion rates as part of Core Objective #3: Increase Student

Success. This disaggregation reflects the institutional commitment to ensuring equitable outcomes for all students in accordance with their mission and values. UAS is also making programmatic changes and investing necessary resources for continuous improvement when they do not meet their student success goals for certain populations of students. In preparation for the next NWCCU visit, the institutional research director will need to continue to grapple with how best to represent the race/ethnicity demographics that are currently combined into a single “Other Minority” category on her reports. The director is fully aware of the challenge created by the fact that some student populations have an N that is lower than 5, which could jeopardize the individual identity of students, and she is exploring creative solutions like combining multiple years and cohorts to overcome this issue.

In general, UAS has created a strong foundation for defining, tracking, and assessing progress towards mission fulfillment. If they continue their efforts and work to broaden the conversation about core objectives, indicators, and goals they are well positioned for future success.

Part II: Student Achievement

On the heels of its comprehensive review in 2019, the UAS took demonstrable steps to strengthen its approach to tracking student achievement across each of its three campuses. Mid-Cycle self-report observations were confirmed through site visit interviews held with administration, faculty and staff, indicating a concerted effort is underway to gain greater, evidence-based insight into the dual “challenge areas” of declining enrollment and student retention. Two efforts are praiseworthy: UAS’ “Retention through Intervention” program, a university-wide initiative informed through direct participation in the NWCCU’s Retention Academy; and a 2020 initiative on better understanding student success as a function of both retention and completion rates.

The institution’s innovative “Retention through Intervention” program grew out of a desire to know more about DFW rates among underserved students enrolled in gateway and entry-level course offerings. Interviewees cited a serendipitous moment whereby a member of the faculty experienced an “a-ha” moment upon learning their own record of DFW rates from the Director of Institutional Effectiveness. This moment prompted much-improved communication between UAS faculty and academic advisors on the need to engage struggling students as early (academic alerts) and often (midterm grades) as possible with regard to course performance, relative standing, and available resources. This was an excellent example of the power of data to drive continuous improvement at UAS. It was also a credit to the Provost’s Office that they were able to change the UAS culture around midterm grades and early intervention simply by appealing to faculty’s commitment to student success without the need for top-down policy revision. The peer evaluation team applauded this initiative and encouraged continued build-

out beyond gateway and entry-level courses to include courses offered at the upper-division level.

Beyond discussion of improved student success efforts to track retention, conversations with faculty and administration revealed a dedicated, authentic desire to know more about successful recruitment of prospective students as a measure of student success. By way of example, dual-enrollment high school students across the state and throughout the PacNW are being monitored more closely by UAS admissions staff (working with IE and supported by data from Hanover Research) to better target student interests and anticipate financial need. This has led to a growing sense between UAS administration and (increasingly) frontline faculty members that challenging enrollment headwinds will only be successfully navigated through an improved focus on recruitment *and* retention, with the former beginning as early as senior year of high school. Embracing a data-driven approach to decision-making on student recruitment and retention bodes well for an institution as heavily dependent upon in-state student enrollment as UAS, in particular students from underserved, primarily rural communities. These cross-campus efforts are central to UAS efforts to increase enrollment and achieve Core Objective 1: Provide Access to Higher Education to All Students

Part III: Programmatic Assessment

UAS cornerstone program assessment components include an annual reports process and a 5-year cycle of program review. All data become centralized on the Provost's webpage, providing easy, widespread access both internally and externally. Program reviews are required by the University of Alaska Board of Regents (BOR) and provide a dashboard-level synopsis of program criticality, quality, and demand. In this way, program reviews offer a consistent opportunity for championing successful programs while identifying ways to build upon their successes. Recently, in light of existing enrollment and budget constraints, these reviews have provided an opportunity for suggesting changes, reallocating resources internally, or to propose eliminating a program altogether. Presently, there is a revision process underway to align program review criteria with Board of Regents policies, as well as NWCCU 2020 standards. Annual program reports offer yet another resource for improved, data-driven decision-making. Learning outcomes are established for each academic program, followed by implementation and reporting, and finally closing the loop by converting insights gained from the process into program improvements.

The Provost's Assessment Committee (PAC) for General Education Learning Outcomes (GELOs) includes faculty members from Juneau, Ketchikan, and Sitka. The group itself was established in 2016 and meets regularly. Site visit interviews conducted with members suggest a continuity spanning a minimum of 3 years' service, with several members serving from inception. The group's primary focus is to establish, track, and routinely report out on institutional general education program outcomes, which consist of five key areas of knowledge and skills required

of all UAS graduates. A series of rubrics was recently completed and made available to the campus community for broader implementation. Our conversation with group members revealed spreading enthusiasm for campus-wide exchange over General Education curricular objectives, one group member suggesting that next year's fall convocation could prove an ideal venue for focus group-like discussion among faculty as to current best practices for teaching General Education courses. Momentum within the group is strong and there is good support from the Provost's Office for continuing its work, but efforts will be for naught if the good groundwork completed to date is not expanded more broadly among faculty who regularly offer General Education curricula.

In terms of assessment of student support programs, the administrative units are using the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) standards for evaluation. As part of this process, each unit evaluates its performance in comparison to twelve standards, which include assessment, diversity/equity/inclusion, resources, technology, and others. Each program will have the opportunity to go through the assessment process twice before the next NWCCU visit. In interviews, program directors clarified that this evaluation process had been a longstanding expectation that was temporarily paused and has been restarted. Directors reported a variety of improvements made within their departments as a result of CAS evaluation, including changes to dining services, resident assistant (RA) job duties/programming, and more. Evidence that this is a data-driven evaluation process leading to improvement in student services was clearly provided. Executing on the plan, completing the anticipated evaluation cycles, and sharing evidence of improvements made as a result of the outcomes will support UAS success during the next NWCCU visit.

PART IV: Moving Forward

After reading the Mid-Cycle Evaluation report provided by UAS, considering the supporting data, and conducting extensive interviews with key stakeholders during the virtual visit, the Evaluation Team believes that the university is well-positioned to provide evidence of mission fulfillment and meaningful assessment during the Year 7 visit. Assessment data at UAS is designed to demonstrate equitable student achievement and is being used to drive continuous improvement in alignment with the institutional mission. Assuming UAS maintains its commitment to continue and to enhance the current efforts related to data collection, analysis, distribution, and use in decision-making, a successful comprehensive visit is anticipated by the Evaluation Team. Although the UAS leadership team acknowledges there are still improvements to be made in the assessment and mission fulfillment process, UAS has a clear strategic vision and is already using existing data to make decisions in support of the strategic priorities.

UAS has emerged from a very difficult period that included budget cuts, COVID-19, and serious concerns about consolidation with another University of Alaska institution. Despite these considerable challenges, there is a strong leadership team in place with a clear vision and a sense of optimism about the future. Enrollment remains a significant concern for the

institution, but they are pursuing a dual-pronged approach focused on recruiting and retention that seeks to address this issue. With focus on the strategic vision, campus-wide discussion of the indicators of success, and full engagement of all constituents in the achievement of key objectives, the Evaluation Team believes that UAS has every opportunity to fulfill its mission as a student-centered, culturally relevant institution in southeastern Alaska.

PART V: Addendums

Recommendation 1: Spring 2019 Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability Evaluation;

Stabilize its administrative team and structure, as well as employ a sufficient number of qualified personnel, in order to fulfill its mission and achieve its strategic priorities (Standards 2.A.9; 2.B.1).

The Evaluation Team observed a highly-qualified, committed, and stable administrative leadership team functioning under the strong leadership of Chancellor Carey. Although filling key vacancies created through a combination of budget cuts and COVID-19 remains a concern, UAS seems to be moving in a positive direction in terms of sufficiency of staffing. Recently, approval was received to hire a Director of Admissions and a search was undertaken for the next Director of Education for the School of Education (SOE). Unfortunately, the search for the SOE director that was conducted in the academic year 2021/2022 was unsuccessful and closed. UAS plans to relaunch the search in August 2022. Hiring appropriately qualified personnel to fill these key vacancies will reduce the number of jobs currently resting on the shoulders of members of the leadership team. This is an important step towards employing a sufficient number of qualified personnel to fulfill the UAS mission. On the faculty side, peer comparison data shows that the student to faculty ratio of 10:1 is comparable if not slightly lower than schools in the peer comparison group. Faculty qualifications are also comparable to those at peer institutions.

Although not directly related to sufficiency of staffing, achieving Core Objective #4: Be a Great Place to Work for all Employees, will continue to require a focus on staff morale, including the ability to provide COLA increases, and the sharing of existing employee satisfaction data with staff. The Evaluation Team was pleased to hear there is tentative approval for a COLA increase for UAS staff included in the system budget for next fiscal year. Based on staff feedback in the open meeting, some attention should be focused on frequency and consistency of the employee evaluation process at UAS in preparation for the next NWCCU visit.

It is fair to observe that despite the fact that staffing levels have not returned to pre-budget cut or pre-COVID-19 levels, declining enrollments at UAS have introduced questions about what staffing is currently needed to serve the existing student population. Similarly, given the newly developed Core objectives, UAS is facing a dilemma common to many institutions about whether to refill previously vacated positions or create new positions that might be needed to

support the strategic direction of the college. Continuing to discuss these issues and make the best decisions for the institution overall will be an important part of the work by the leadership team in their ongoing efforts to obtain sufficient staffing to achieve their strategic priorities.

Recommendation 2: Spring 2019 Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability Evaluation;

Expand on the strong progress made in the analysis and use of disaggregated demographic and learning outcomes data in order to support the evaluation of mission fulfillment (Standards 4.A.1; 4.A.6; 5.A.1).

In the three years since its Year 7 review, the institution has made meaningful strides in expanding its use of data, taking care to disaggregate the information to better guide their pursuit of mission fulfillment. As evidence, retention and completion data are now regularly reviewed and an integral component of conversation between senior cabinet members and the director for institutional effectiveness (Core Objective #3), and there is growing support to incorporate data on recruitment efforts to help further clarify enrollment headwinds (Core Objective #1). Importantly, throughout each of its site visit interviews, the Mid-Cycle review team informed the ALO and others that it was important to prioritize complete disaggregation of race/ethnicity demographic data to achieve alignment with NWCCU standards in time for the next comprehensive review (i.e., 2026).

Recommendation 3: Spring 2019 Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability Evaluation;

Revise and refine its objectives and indicators to better inform its future planning and decision-making (Standards 5.B.1; 5.B.2).

The institution has brought its objectives and indicators into better alignment with its mission statement, both through its continued partnership with external entities (e.g., Hanover Research Group), and also through expanded use of comparative data obtained via ModernThink (e.g., Topline surveys). UAS' Director of Institutional Effectiveness collaborated with the Provost's Office to help identify a group of rigorous, more closely aligned peer comparison institutions facing similar recruitment, enrollment and completion challenges and opportunities. These data sources have been effectively used to identify meaningful indicators and appropriate goals that are used to determine whether Core objectives have been achieved and whether mission fulfillment has been attained. In general, UAS should continue with plans to annually review Core objective data with an eye towards further refinement of the indicators and goals. That said, the existing data is already being used to drive resource allocation, planning and decision-making.