Mid-Cycle Peer-Evaluation Report
University of Oregon
Eugene, OR
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A confidential report of findings prepared for the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities

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Introduction

The University of Oregon was founded in 1876 and, as of 2014, is governed by a Board of Trustees. The University's mission statement is founded upon the core themes of teaching and education, discovery, and service and reflects the University's institutional learning outcomes for its students to "question critically, think logically, reason effectively, communicate clearly, act creatively, and live ethically."

The University is designated as a Carnegie "Doctoral/Very High Research Activity" institution and is a member of the Association of American Universities (AAU).

In fall 2019, the University enrolled 22,615 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students, a number driven by its largest-ever freshmen classes in 2018 and 2019, as well as increasing enrollment among its graduate students in the last five years. Just over 30% of the total student body in fall 2019 were students of color, the highest percentage in the University's history.

Site Visit Overview

On behalf of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), the evaluation team reviewed the University's Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report and conducted a virtual site visit on April 20-21, 2020. Travel restrictions put into place as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic prevented a physical site visit. The purpose of the mid-cycle review was to evaluate the University's assessment of mission fulfillment, especially with regards to student learning, and its progress towards meeting the requirements and standards of the comprehensive Evaluation of Institutional Effectiveness (formerly Year Seven Self-Evaluation Report).

The University arranged all meetings for the visit via Zoom and took responsibility for any technical issues that may have occurred. The evaluators had no challenges in holding meetings via this format, and the University managed the unprecedented nature of this visit exceedingly well. Prior to the virtual visit, the University provided the evaluators with the Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report, and during the visit, additional materials were provided to the evaluators upon request.

Upon submission and acceptance of its Year One Self-Evaluation Report with no further action required, the University satisfied three recommendations from their previous year-seven review. This allowed the evaluators to focus on and inquire about key elements of the Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report while considering the University's level of preparedness for the new standards and expectations articulated by NWCCU for the Evaluation of Institutional Effectiveness.

The evaluators' prepared questions addressed the following topics:

1. programs and initiatives – both curricular and co-curricular – that have been especially impactful in fostering undergraduate and graduate student learning and student success
2. programs and initiatives supporting the University experience for underrepresented students
3. motivations for and early takeaways from the reform of Core Education and the revision of the course evaluation process (the two examples of assessment featured in the Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report)
4. expectations for degree program assessment of student learning and program review; ongoing challenges to assessment of student learning
5. how the Teaching Engagement Program has informed an emerging culture of pedagogy and pedagogical training
6. ongoing planning processes to ensure that the University's institutional goals are met; how University- and college-level strategic planning goals align
7. dissemination and use of disaggregated student data and capacity to address potential equity gaps among student populations.

The evaluators met with representatives from Undergraduate Education, Student Life, and the Graduate School; from Core Education; from the Teaching Engagement Program, online education, and the process of teaching evaluation; with faculty and staff responsible for accreditation and core theme planning; with faculty from three of colleges; with the Institutional Data Experts and Analysts (IDEA) group; and with the Provost and President. The conversations with University leadership, faculty, and staff were engaging, constructive, and candid, and the evaluators are especially appreciative of the time and attention given by meeting participants while working remotely from their individual homes. The evaluators also wish to thank the University's Accreditation Liaison Officer for managing all online meetings and providing all requested materials in a timely and efficient manner.

The Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report and Supplementary Materials

The University's Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report was thorough and well-prepared and featured in its appendices a wealth of commentary, exhibits, and forms relevant to the University's Core Theme 1 ("Exceptional Teaching and Education"). Additional materials were provided upon request to the evaluators in a timely fashion; these materials were uploaded to a document-sharing folder managed by NWCCU.

Part I: Overview of Institutional Assessment

As discussed in the report, the University's Board of Trustees assumed governance of the University in 2014, completing a transfer of governance from the Oregon University System under the aegis of the Oregon State Board of Higher Education. In fall 2014, the Board of Trustees issued the current form of the University's mission statement that is reflected in the University's three core themes and

the institutional learning outcomes referenced throughout this report. In 2015, upon assuming the office of the presidency, President Schill issued "Excellence," the University's strategic planning document, focusing upon four institutional goals. The evaluators exclusively discussed the first of these goals: the promotion and enhancement of student access, retention, and success.

Mission fulfillment is assessed via the University's core themes, to each of which "theme teams" are assigned. The evaluators met with representatives from the team charged with assessing "Exceptional Teaching and Education" (Core Theme 1) and with representatives from an Accreditation Committee charged with preparing the Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report. In preparation for this report and visit, the Core Theme committees reviewed the metrics within their respective themes to determine their relevance to mission fulfillment. Although these committees have access to performance data for these metrics, they do not assess performance by meeting or failing to meet a pre-determined threshold.

An appendix of the Mid-Cycle Report featured an exhaustive summary of assessments and commentaries on core theme metrics.

The evaluators were unable to determine the extent of scaffolded strategic planning between the University and its colleges and schools, but the aforementioned representatives did explain that the University's program review process was revised partly to account for this at times undefined alignment of institutional and college-level planning.

Compliment

Not only has the University met goals relevant to student success, as set forth in its strategic planning document ("Excellence"), but it has done so ahead of the President's anticipated schedule. For example, the intent to improve the four-year graduation rate by 10 percentage points from 2010 to 2020 was realized in 2019.

Concern

Outside of the core theme "theme teams," institutional planning is executed via partnerships across various offices and University Senate groups that convene as needed, rather than in a concerted, systematic, and ongoing fashion.

Part II: Representative Examples of Assessment Activities

In its Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report, the University provided two examples of assessment, both reflective of the institution's first core theme ("Exceptional Teaching and Education"): Core

Education reform and the revised process of course evaluations. During the virtual visit meetings, additional information was provided for both examples.

Both examples recall a lesson that University faculty and staff have taken from participation in the NWCCU Demonstration Project (2014-2017), namely that "one of the most significant drivers of student learning, success, and experience is what happens in the classroom."

Example 1: Core Education Reform

The University Senate has overseen an ongoing process of reforming the University's Core Education in two stages:

(1) the modification of the current distribution model, the "Areas of Inquiry", in which students are required to complete 15 credits in Arts and Letters, Social Science, and Natural Science, by adding shared outcomes to each course in an Area of Inquiry . The four "methods of inquiry" reflect the University's mission statement and serve as institutional learning outcomes: critical thinking, creative thinking, written communication, and ethical reasoning. Each course that meets an Area of Inquiry requirement must also address at least two of these "methods of inquiry."

(2) the replacement of a "Multicultural" requirement with that of "Cultural Literacy" (effective as of fall 2019).

In planning these changes, University representatives considered both national best practices (e.g., the AAC&U essential learning outcomes and the movement towards more innovative and socially relevant cultural classes), as well as their own institutional mission. The proposal and revision of courses (and approval of said courses) to supply the new Core Education is ongoing; the original deadline for the first generation of courses to be approved for the Core by spring 2021 has been extended to 2022, owing to the COVID-19 crisis.

Compliment

Alongside its other initiatives aimed at improving student success and providing pedagogical training for instruction faculty, embarking upon a reform of Core curriculum that reflects the University's mission statement and serves as the vehicle of institutional learning outcomes attests to the University's dedication to fostering an impactful student experience.

Concern

A model of assessing students' development and ultimately mastery of the "methods of inquiry" encountered in Core Education has not yet been established.

Example 2: Revision of Course Evaluations

Responding to historical and ongoing concerns about student evaluations of teaching (e.g., gender and ethnicity bias), the University Senate and Office of the Provost have, over a three-year period, developed a new, holistic teaching evaluation system. Based upon the institution's definition of teaching excellence – teaching that is inclusive, engaged, and research-informed – the Senate Continuous Improvement and Evaluation of Teaching committee redesigned the teaching evaluation tool with the goal of ensuring evaluations were fair and transparent. After a yearlong pilot of the instrument that included revising and validating the survey, the instrument was formally launched as the Student Experience Survey in fall 2019.

The Student Experience Survey is one of three components of the revised evaluation process. The University also introduced the instructor reflection, which provides instructors of record an opportunity to reflect on what they are doing in their courses to align their instruction more closely with the University's definition of teaching excellence. Along with a traditional peer-review process, the University has developed a rich, holistic teaching evaluation process.

Compliment

The University's commitment to the principle that 'what happens in the classroom drives student learning, success, and experience' is evident in their cutting-edge work to revise the teaching evaluation system. Faculty buy-in, as evidenced by the signed MOU between the Provost and the Faculty Union, indicates a broad consensus around what constitutes effective teaching. The faculty appear confident that data from the revised system will be more useful for improving teaching than data previously gathered.

Concern

It is not yet clear how the evaluation of teaching, albeit an important aspect of the institution, addresses programmatic assessment. While the evaluation of teaching does align with and support a continuous process of improvement, that improvement is focused on teaching, not student learning directly.

Part III: Planning for the Evaluation of Institutional Effectiveness

Core Education Assessment

As noted above, the University has embarked upon an ambitious reform of Core Education that will deliver institutional learning outcomes ("methods of inquiry") to students via courses completed in three "areas of inquiry": Arts and Letters, Social Science, and Natural Science. In addition to these three areas, the University implemented in fall 2019 an additional requirement in Cultural Literacy.

At present, the ongoing implementation is focused on (1) review of courses proposed to satisfy the new Core standards, as set forth by the Core Education Council and (2) coordinating with representatives of the Teaching Engagement Program to assist faculty in both proposing and teaching courses appropriate for the new "methods of inquiry."

To date, the review process has achieved two important objectives. It has ensured consistency in how iterations of individual courses approved for Core designation and taught in various sections and/or modalities consistently address the "methods of inquiry" within their own learning outcomes. It has also inspired ongoing conversations on the presence of quantitative literacy in the curricula of, e.g., STEM versus non-STEM degree programs; on the possibility of incorporating an oral communication competency alongside that for written communication; and on the relative ease with which faculty have proposed and revised courses supporting "methods of inquiry" that recall skills present in the former general education curriculum (e.g., critical thinking), as opposed to ethical reasoning, new to the revised Core Education. It remains to be determined how and if the Core "methods of inquiry" (and the Core courses themselves) will be integrated into the learning outcomes and curricula of major degree programs. Individual departments may determine whether – and, if so, to what degree – they wish to incorporate Core "methods of inquiry" within their disciplinary learning outcomes and courses required for the major. Representatives of the Core Education Council expressed their hope that the presence of career-readiness skills in Core and major courses may offer one means of integration. It also remains to be determined how the "Cultural Literacy" requirement will be aligned with the three "areas of inquiry," but the Core Education Council is addressing this issue, with the goal of establishing a Core curriculum that is both cohesive and easily navigable for students.

A five-year cycle of assessment of Core "methods of inquiry" is planned but has not yet been implemented and how this plan will be operationalized is unclear to the evaluators. The University is considering at least two options for assessment of student learning within the Core: an institutional-wide approach in which competency in a "method of inquiry" is measured at some summative point in the undergraduate career and one in which departments offering Core courses will assess student learning in a manner that is efficient and meaningful for their faculty. Although the learning outcomes ("methods of inquiry") have evolved as the University has implemented its revised Core Education, participation in two recent, general education assessment projects, NWCCU's Demonstration Project and the Multi-State Collaborative, may offer a methodology and strategies applicable to the new Core.

An institution-wide model of Core assessment need not undermine the autonomy of degree-granting departments to assess student learning in their own preferred manners, but university guidelines would foster momentum for departments struggling to manage such assessment and would provide the University with a means of reflecting on the impact of the new Core on student learning.

Compliment

The dedication of faculty and staff to Core Education reform and the coordination of key groups (e.g., the Core Education Council and those involved in the Teaching Engagement Program) have ensured a well-managed 'preparatory' phase, in which faculty have been provided with clear guidelines, resources, and training for designing and teaching courses appropriate for the new Core.

Concern

A model for assessing competency in the "methods of inquiry" has not yet been negotiated and implemented with Core and academic unit stakeholders (per Eligibility Requirement 1 and Standard 1.C.6). The alignment of the Cultural Literacy requirement with the "areas of impact" has not yet been achieved and articulated. Both of these phases of Core implementation would assist curricular planning and revision in a time when very large cohorts of students will presumably be the main consumers of the new Core.

Undergraduate Assessment of Student Learning (non-Core Education)

Direct assessment of student learning was not discussed in the University's Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report, which examined assessment through the indirect means of course evaluations; rather, assessment of student performance in courses, curricula, and other learning experiences was discussed in the virtual visit meetings. Other than those faculty and staff involved with the reform of Core Education (see above), the evaluators raised the topic of student learning assessment with University leadership in Academic Affairs, Student Life, and Equity and Inclusion; representatives of the Teaching Engagement Program; and faculty from three of the University's colleges, including those accredited within their respective disciplines.

Building a culture of assessment that might complement the University's emerging culture of pedagogy is very much a work in progress. The University mandates that degree-granting departments annually submit plans for assessing student learning and reports on assessment findings, but there is no mandate concerning methods and strategies that departments might employ. A review of the University's "curriculum assessment" site, to which assessment plans and reports are posted, showed substantial but uneven progress towards planned, programmatic assessment. There appears to be heavy reliance on indirect assessment - primarily through surveys of students close to graduation. This evidence is helpful, but incomplete without relevant direct evidence. As the University noted in its final report for the Demonstration Project (presented to NWCCU in lieu of a traditional Year Seven Self-Evaluation Report), "assessment [of student learning outcomes] efforts must clearly derive from our mission and values, benefit our primary constituents, and represent responsible stewardship of resources" (11). Lingering concerns over assessment of student learning done for external reasons (i.e., accrediting bodies) and the use of assessment findings to achieve the proverbial 'closing of the loop' were evident to the evaluators.

The University has recently created and filled a position, housed within the Teaching Engagement Program, to support assessment efforts across campus, and the Program itself offers faculty training in assessment practices.

The articulation and development of career-readiness skills was a frequent topic of conversation regarding student learning. Meeting participants noted that the University intends to establish a model of career-readiness skills, as they are encountered both outside and inside the classroom and as early as possible in a student's career. What role assessment might play in this model is not yet determined. However, this conversation, as well as the ongoing implementation of institutional learning outcomes that reflect the University's mission statement, offer potential solutions to the concerns expressed by the University in the Demonstration Project; namely, in which specific courses and/or learning opportunities to focus assessment efforts and thereby manage time and resources while still yielding data beneficial to various stakeholders. Given the size and diversity of the University's last two classes of first-year students, this would be a timely conversation.

There are a number of possible issues to address in such a conversation, including, but not limited to, the larger aims of an undergraduate learning experience founded upon institutional learning outcomes that reflect the University's mission; the potential development of these outcomes throughout the Core and major curricula; a balanced use of indirect methods of assessment already in place (e.g., evaluations, surveys) and direct methods focused on evaluating student work; the role of learning via the many high-impact opportunities offered by the University (e.g., first-year experiences, the alignment of academic and career advising in Tykeson Hall, peer mentoring); the potential development of career-readiness skills in multiple arenas, both curricular and co-curricular; and the use of assessment results for planning and continuous improvement of curricular and co-curricular programs that support student learning.

Compliment

Since its participation in the NWCCU Demonstration Project, the University has addressed assessment, curricular design, and pedagogy in an academic fashion, based upon research into best practices and scholarly literature and reflection on strategies that would be most effective within the local contexts of the University.

Concern

The University has not yet initiated a focused, sustained conversation on student learning assessment (per Standards 1.C.5, 1.C.6, and 1.C.7) that might complement the enthusiasm for the Teaching Engagement Program and the new system of course evaluations, both of which foster innovative, self-reflective pedagogy among the faculty and reward evidence of such pedagogy in promotion and tenure review.

Teaching Engagement Program and Course Evaluations

Changes in the evaluation of teaching at the University came about over a three-year period, beginning with concerns related to student teaching evaluations raised in 2017. Rather than a replacement evaluation instrument, a more holistic approach was adopted that includes surveying students about their experience, peer review, and faculty reflection about what they are doing in the classroom to advance the University's ideals of inclusive and research-informed teaching. This holistic approach to evaluating teaching closely aligns with the definition of teaching excellence put forth by the Provost and the Teaching Engagement Program. Based upon interviews with faculty and staff during the virtual site-visit, it is clear to the evaluators that the Teaching Engagement Program has become a well-received and well-respected component of the institution. Its reach is broad and includes support for faculty and Graduate Teaching Assistants at all points in their career.

Compliment

The thoughtful, deliberate process of defining, developing, evaluating, and ultimately rewarding teaching excellence is an impressive example of collaboration that provides a framework for student success at the University.

Concern

While it is apparent that the groundwork for assessing student learning has been established through the recent creation of an assessment leadership position, housed within the Teaching Engagement Program, the effort required to design, refine, and/or implement assessment activities – and make use of assessment - in the University's many degree-granting units and in Core Education (per Standard 1.C.7) will require coordination and collaboration with faculty and staff across the University.

Graduate School

Graduate education was not discussed in the report; at the request of the evaluators, representatives from the Graduate School were included in the virtual visit meetings, and other faculty members were also invited to discuss graduate education during their respective meetings. It was noted in the report that graduate enrollment, particularly within doctoral programs, has increased in recent years. The Graduate School offers a number of professional development opportunities for its students, and, although much of this programming is currently on hold, owing to the COVID-19 crisis, professional development primarily accounts for the formalized learning experience offered to all students outside of their program curricula.

Notable professional development programming includes the opportunity for Graduate Teaching Assistants to participate in pedagogical training offered by the Teaching Engagement Program; pedagogical training on specific strategies (e.g., preparing syllabi, responding to micro-aggressions in the classroom) offered by the Graduate School; and specialized programming in support of diversity and inclusion and underrepresented students. Graduate students may also participate in a research forum and are eligible for an excellence in teaching award.

Student learning is overseen by the individual graduate degree-granting units alone, without any centralized guidelines. As a result, direct assessment learning is also managed at the department level, and assessment activity seems minimal. Indirect assessment of the graduate experience is done by participation in the gradSERU survey.

The Graduate School makes use of student achievement data, particularly in its use of data provided by the University's Institutional Research office in addressed equity gaps among the school's underrepresented populations. Faculty also spoke of the efficacy of mentoring programs for graduate students, both peer-to-peer and faculty-led mentoring.

Compliment

The wealth of professional development programming attests to the holistic view of education within the Graduate School. The value that faculty and staff place on insights into student success and fostering a sense of community within the graduate ranks have the School well positioned to accommodate increasing graduate enrollment.

Concern

There is little evidence of direct assessment of student learning at the graduate level, and such assessment may be especially valuable to Master's programs that are more heavily reliant on classroom learning within their curricula. The Graduate School, like the University's undergraduate degree-granting units, would benefit from robust, disaggregated student performance data that might assist in regular, deliberate planning within the University's existing expectations for self-study (e.g., program review).

Institutional Planning

Systematic and ongoing institutional planning is a fundamental tenet of NWCCU. It should be designed to inform institutional effectiveness, assign resources, and improve student learning and achievement (Standard 1.B.1). The University has utilized a more reactive form of planning that has served it well, particularly in response to changes in external governance and turnover of higher-level administration. The evaluators heard about the five-year strategic framework ("Excellence") that

President Schill established shortly into his tenure that has successfully guided the institution since 2016.

Compliment

The University's alignment between mission, institutional learning outcomes, teaching excellence, and teaching evaluation illustrates a carefully planned integration and process that is quite remarkable. The evaluators often detected the excitement and pride of the individuals involved in these efforts, particularly as they spoke about the potential for improving student success and student learning at the fundamental level of the classroom. Encouraging similar systematic planning at the broader institutional level will aid the University in demonstrating institutional effectiveness for the Evaluation of Institutional Effectiveness (Standards 1.B.1, 1.B.3). The institution has incredible momentum; a more formalized planning process can leverage that momentum into the future.

Concern

The evaluators heard and read about a preference for reactive planning, but it is unclear whether a reactive framework will continue to support the institution going forward. The University admitted its largest and most diverse class of students in fall 2019. Given this growth of the student body, coupled with the issues introduced with the current health and economic crisis, the impact of which will likely be far-reaching, the University may benefit from regular, systematic institutional planning (Standard 1.B.4). For example, Institutional Data Analysts and Experts are well-positioned to provide both student demographic and performance data that can provide the University with insight for ongoing planning and evaluation of students' academic experience.

Data Infrastructure

The Institutional Data Analysts and Experts (IDEA) staff, other area analysts, and Business Intelligence staff have made significant strides to provide University constituents with relevant, timely data. Common metrics around enrollment, retention, and graduation can be drilled down by populations of focus that allow the University to understand who their students are and how those students are faring in terms of retention and graduation (Standards 1.D.2, 1.D.3). This solid groundwork should support progress towards using these disaggregated data to compare University students to the students at other peer-institutions (Standards 1.D.2, 1.D.3).

Colleges and departments are given access to demographic information about their students in a departmental profile. These data are informative, but not necessarily actionable. Disaggregated student-performance data, however, would help faculty and administrators devise action plans, both immediate and systemic, to address performance concerns early in a student's career (Standard 1.C.7). Not only could such data benefit the department, but rolled up to an aggregate could inform

programming and focus of, for example, the Teaching Engagement Program and Student Life initiatives. As the institution, under the tutelage of the data experts, dives more fully into the use of predictive analytics, performance data will allow them to develop richer, more meaningful models.

Compliment

The evaluators acknowledge the high quality of the work done by the university's Institutional Data Experts and Analysts. The amount and diversity of data provided to the campus community will help to inform decision-making and planning. The University has made important gains at addressing equity gaps in enrollment; using data to identify equity gaps in learning and ultimately success seems a natural next step.

Conclusion

The evaluators were very impressed with the Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report and the deep commitment to student success that is evident at the University. Faculty, staff, and administrators with whom the evaluators met clearly demonstrated not only their passion and commitment, but also the excitement with which they approach their work and the challenges they encounter while steering a large, public institution into the future. It is refreshing to see the focus on undergraduate teaching and learning while also successfully navigating the demands and expectations of a research institution. The evaluators also acknowledge the meaningful and ongoing dialogue between faculty, staff, and administrators and the University's students in the examples of teaching and learning initiatives discussed during the visit.

There is no doubt that the University has accomplished much in recent years within the teaching and learning enterprise at the university: this is especially driven by student success initiatives, the emphasis on pedagogy, and the reform of Core Education. The evaluators encourage the University now to use the momentum earned from these efforts to drive a conversation focused on student learning and the assessment thereof and to consider the larger aims of the undergraduate learning experience across academic and co-curricular units and programs. That is, alongside its impressive reflection on teaching, can the University equally reflect on learning in a holistic manner that accounts for all of its efforts and initiatives to date? In keeping with the spirit of mission-centric, institutional learning outcomes and the University's clear commitment to the value of a liberal arts education, assessment built upon existing momentum might address how and where, within the broader university curriculum, students are made critical thinkers, effective communicators, and ethically engaged members of our communities. This may be an especially timely question, given the size of the last two classes of first-year students and the increasing diversity of these first-year students.