Mid-Cycle Evaluation Peer Evaluation Report

Southern Oregon University

Ashland, Oregon

October 10-11, 2019

College/University
Mid-Cycle Evaluation Committee Report

Evaluators

The on-site evaluation committee for the Mid-Cycle Evaluation of Southern Oregon University consisted of Maureen Andrade and Nicole Cundiff.

Overview of the Mid-Cycle Evaluation Visit to College/University

This report represents the primary questions and areas noted in NWCCU's Mid-Cycle guidelines. Such areas were addressed by Southern Oregon University's formal report and guided the informative conversations of the on-site visit. Consistent with the outline presented during the exit meeting and the on-site visit, this report reflects observations, strengths, and suggestions associated with the institutional assessment plan, representative examples of mission and core theme operationalization, preparatory efforts toward the Year Seven review, and progress on the recommendations from the institution's most recent Year Seven evaluation.

Part I: Institutional Assessment Plan

The institution has developed a new strategic plan and updated its core themes since its Year Seven Evaluation. The strategic planning process was inclusive, involving institutional constituents in determining a set of values upon which to base the plan; faculty, staff, and students in the institution's Professional Learning Communities researched current issues impacting higher education to inform the direction of the plan. The plan is flexible and can be adjusted as objectives are operationalized and measured.

The Mid-Cycle Report includes an alignment cycle illustration showing that the core themes are connected to the mission and have their own objectives and indicators while the strategic plan, related to the vision, mission, and values of the university, has separate objectives and indicators (p. 4). Assessments of the core theme and strategic plan objectives are intended to inform programmatic improvements and revisions to the strategic plan.

The cycle of data collection, analysis, programmatic change, and subsequent strategic plan revision depicted in the alignment cycle illustration has yet to be implemented for the most part. The institution's recent focus has been on establishing the strategic plan, revising the core themes, refining objectives and indicators, and establishing baselines.

Campus conversations indicated that stakeholders feel there is a close alignment between the strategic plan and the core themes and that the revised core themes are more inclusive than they were formerly, particularly for academic support units. Academic programs and support programs have aligned their unit-level outcomes with strategic plan and the core theme objectives. This is unifying campus constituents toward the achievement of common goals.

SOU has created assessment reporting processes and relevant templates, rubrics, and evaluation forms. Assessment efforts are documented in Improve to enable tracking, synthesis, and report generation. Further, multiple entities are involved in assessment efforts. The University Assessment Committee and Support Programs Assessment Review Committee, in particular, are helping the institution develop a culture of assessment through their extensive efforts with review, feedback, and support.

The activities noted in this section illustrate continuing efforts to ensure that SOU's planning is current and focused on mission fulfillment. A strong infrastructure has been established for collecting data with the potential to inform planning and resource allocation. However, further data will need to be gathered and analyzed to demonstrate that the meaningfulness of the strategic plan and core theme indicators and that they are providing sufficient evidence of mission fulfilment. SOU will want to ensure that indicators provide information about possible gaps in desired outcomes and that benchmarks are aspirational, so as to lead to continuous improvement.

Part II: Representative Student Learning Outcomes Examples

The institution provided multiple examples of student learning outcomes assessment. The reviewers examined the information in the report and made observations from their visit with the intent of examining the extent to which planning and assessment processes inform mission fulfillment.

Example 1:

SOU's Mid-Cycle report cites several examples from its Business Administration program related to the assessment of student learning. One of these focuses on the business plans that students develop in their senior capstone. The associated rubric provides students with formative feedback. The report indicates that scores on the plans have improved from year to year. However, the report does not identify findings from the assessments that were acted on in order for improvements to occur. The report also indicates that the business plans are assessed for desired writing outcomes and that business students outperform students from other areas in the university. Again, the report does not indicate how this assessment has helped to identify areas needing improvement or informed pedagogical or curricular changes. The same is true of the Major Field Test (ETS). What information have these results provided that have led to needed improvements, how have improvements been implemented, and what were the outcomes of these improvements? Data collected on internships in the business administration program identified several specific areas for improvement that led to a business communication course. However, results of the implementation of this course were not reported. A range of learning activities are in place and with positive outcomes, but the examples provided do not consistently demonstrate assessment loop closings. The focus needs to be on actionable findings from assessment activities and how the findings lead to improvements rather than emphasizing that targets have been met.

The institution also provides examples of assessment from its chemistry program. The program has clear goals related to student achievement on national standardized exams. Specific examples are provided of curricular and pedagogical adjustments that have been made in the program; however, it is not clear from the report how these are linked to test score results, have positively impacted test scores, or how individual faculty members have adapted or altered their courses so that their students are performing to expectations. The same is true of assessment activities in the Chemical Research Communication and Senior Project Course, the capstone project, and the peer-led team learning program. While the examples provided indicate the establishment of student learning outcomes, activities designed to achieve the outcomes, and measurements of the desired outcomes, the report does not provide specificity as to how data has been acted on in order to improve student learning outcomes or the results of actions taken.

Both the Business Administration and Chemistry programs have aligned their assessments with the institution's core themes and are collecting data to inform those themes; however, the preponderance of information shared focuses on meeting performance targets rather than on how the assessments were used to identify strengths and weaknesses, make improvements, and measure the outcomes of those improvements; in other words, closing the loop.

Example 2

The second example provided focuses on improvements in assessment reporting for academic support programs. Efforts include training and an assessment review process which has resulted in a greater number of programs completing assessment reports, mapping outcomes to core theme objectives, and external reviews. This example is also intended to illustrate that feedback from these units has helped inform the new strategic plan and core themes to make them more meaningful to academic support units and encourage their participation. Conversations on campus supported that this has occurred.

The specific example of the Digital Media Center demonstrates the identification of desired outcomes, worded as mission-related goals. The measures of these goals are predominantly counts of entities participating in the services of the Center. The report does not provide a specific example of how the data collected has resulted in actions for improvement. Loop closings need to consider if aspirational targets are being set and if indicators are being identified that reveal possible gaps in goal achievement.

Additional Examples

In addition to the business administration, chemistry, and Digital Media Center examples, the university is participating in the Multi-State Collaborative to compare and benchmark student learning outcomes as measured by VALUE rubrics and is also tracking student self-reported learning gains using NSSE data. While positive comparative results are reported for the former, no actions appear to be planned based on the data. Plans for NSSE data include establishing baseline percentages. Both of these sources of student learning outcomes information have potential, but their effectiveness depends on the institution's ability to identify actionable data to inform enhancements in teaching and learning. Additionally, the matched pairs writing sample data is a commendable effort and demonstrates value-added. The University Assessment Committee regularly collects student work samples, which it evaluates with a rubric. Results are provided to departments for discussion and action. Committee members indicated that departments appreciate this outside evaluation and support. The institution should continue to consider how this collected data can inform changes in practice.

Summary

While the examples provided of student learning assessment illustrate a number of strengths in terms of assessment planning and documentation of outcomes, increased emphasis should be made on loop closings, specifically what was learned, actions taken, and the results of these actions. Achieving targets is commendable but the purpose of assessment is to identify areas for improvement. The tracking of outputs (e.g., percentage of students in engaged learning activities, number of students completing internships, number of visits to career services, number of performance opportunities, number of services provided, etc.) needs to be balanced with assessment that is informative and actionable. The institution must monitor and adjust indicators and targets as needed so as to be aspirational, make continual improvements, and demonstrate mission fulfillment.

Part III: Moving Forward to Year Seven

The comments in this section are focused on NWCCU's 2020 Standards for Accreditation, particularly Standard 1 – Student Success and Institutional Mission and Effectiveness. These standards are referenced in parentheses as applicable.

The following items appear to be in place.

- The institution's mission statement is focused on a commitment to student learning and achievement. (1.A.1)
- A systematic planning system has been established that focuses on institutional effectiveness and specifically on student learning, achievement, and support services. (1.B.1)
- Institutional learning outcomes are being assessed across academic programs and to some extent within support units with various reporting and reviewing mechanisms in place (e.g., report templates, tracking systems, review committees). (1.B.1)
- Goals, objectives, and indicators have been established to measure mission fulfillment and also compare effectiveness with peer institutions (e.g., Multi-State Collaborative, NSSE). (1.B.2)
- Planning appears to be inclusive with constituents across the university participating. (1.B.3)
- Processes for monitoring internal and external environments to identify current and emerging patterns, trends, and expectations are in place with the institution's Professional Learning Communities. SOU has completed two rounds of these reviews and utilized the information for planning. (1.B.4)
- Core competencies such as communication, critical analysis, and problem solving are being assessed (1.C.7)

Areas to consider in preparation for Year Seven follow.

- Objectives and indicators must be meaningful and designed to improve planning, practice, and student learning, and not focus primarily on outputs or meeting targets. In other words, objectives and indicators should focus on assessment that leads to action rather than on outputs (e.g., counts or numbers of participants in an activity). (1.B.2)
- A structure is in place for mapping learning outcomes to core themes and to strategic planning objectives; evidence is needed for how mapping and reporting processes are leading to improvements in planning and to improvements in student learning outcomes. (1.B.1)
- The mapping of outcomes to strategic goals by entities across the university is commendable, but the institution will need to determine how to draw conclusions from the data collected by individual units and on an institutional level to close the assessment loop, determine if the core themes are being achieved, and if mission fulfillment has been achieved. (1.B.1, 1.B.2)
- Documentation and reporting of loop closings must be specific and clear to demonstrate that indicators are meaningful and aimed at identifying actions leading to improvements. Similarly, the results of improvements need to be documented. Reflection on assessment effectiveness and resulting actions must be evident. Indicators may need to be changed or more aspirational targets set.
- The workload of faculty, departments, and chairs and the complexity of assessment reporting requirements must be considered to ensure the effectiveness and meaningfulness of assessment activities.
- Processes need to be established to monitor internal and external environments to identify current and emerging patterns, trends, and expectations. (1.B.4)
- Student achievement data, specifically indicators for persistence, completion, retention, and post-graduation success, needs to be disaggregated by race, ethnicity, age, gender, socioeconomic status, first generation college student, and other institutionally meaningful categories, and must be widely published. (1.D.2)
- Specific regional and national peer institutions need to be selected for comparison purposes of disaggregated student success data. (1.D.3)

- Allocation of resources based on disaggregated student success data needs to be used to mitigate perceived gaps in achievement and equity. (1.D.4)

Response to Student Achievement Data

1. What are the key challenges of the institution related to graduation rates and other data provided?

   Graduation rates for this institution are comparable to those of similar types of institutions (regional comprehensive). Students may stop out or transfer to other institutions. There has also been some economic recession in the area with increases in living costs making it less economically viable for students to attend.

2. What is the institution doing to improve graduation rates?

   SOU is focused on making positive changes to their retention and graduation rates. They have adopted EAB's Student Success Management System, Navigate, which uses predictive analytics to track student behaviors, identify students needing interventions, and determine effective interventions. They are also collaborating with other public higher education institutions in Oregon to streamline student pathways.

3. What initiatives appear to be effective in improving graduation rates?

   SOU is currently implementing Navigate which will help them identify and address barriers to graduation.

4. What might accreditors do to assist institutions to improve graduation rates?

   Provide data and encourage the use of a variety of metrics for measuring graduation rates such as tracking students to determine if they have graduated from other institutions.

Response to Recommendations

Recommendation 3 – a plan is in place to meet library funding needs. Library faculty express that these additional resources have been helpful and meet their current needs.

Recommendation 4 – the core themes are connected to planning in the sense that academic programs and academic support programs are required to map their learning outcomes to both core theme and strategic planning objectives; as a result, the strategic plan and core themes are familiar to and appear to be meaningful to university constituents. The revised core themes have been approved by the Board of Trustees.

Recommendation 5 – further expansion of the use of assessment data to inform planning and resource allocation is needed. The institution has established a structure to guide planning and assessment but many aspects of the *core themes – strategic plan alignment cycle* still need to be implemented and tested; graduate programs have been included in assessment processes.

Conclusion

SOU has established a strong infrastructure to support its efforts to measure mission fulfillment. The institution has made clear strides forward in developing a culture of assessment. This is due to the extensive hard work, expertise, and commitment of those leading assessment efforts at all levels of the university. A continued focus on the results of various assessments related to the strategic plan and core themes and how these are used in planning and resource allocation to achieve mission fulfillment will be important in preparation for the Year Seven Evaluation. Emphasis on meaningful assessment that leads to continuous improvement, indicators that identify gaps in learning, and aspirational targets must be considered as SOU moves forward in setting and refining its indicators and benchmarks.