

# Mid-Cycle Site Visit: Report

University of Alaska, Fairbanks

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## Part 1: Mission, Core Themes, and Assessment

The University of Alaska at Fairbanks (UAF) has clearly identified their mission and Core Themes. The Core Themes are well-aligned with the goals of the institution's strategic plan, and with the University of Alaska system's strategic plan, *Shaping Alaska's Future*.

The evaluators identified no issues with Standard 2, with the exception of one table (Table 2.B.2-1) that appears to indicate that many faculty and administrators do not have current performance evaluations. However, the most recent collective bargaining agreement for the faculty union requires annual performance evaluations. Because of this, it is anticipated that the faculty and administrators will have current evaluations in place long before the Year 7 review.

The UAF is entering a time of significant budget reductions, something that many of the current faculty have never experienced at this institution. Likely the greatest threat to achieving mission fulfillment by Year 7 is losing sight of the strategic goals in the face of very difficult budget decisions. We saw no evidence that this was happening. Instead, comments from administrators indicated that the Core Themes and strategic goals are important for guiding difficult decisions in tough economic times.

### University-Level Assessment

The Strategic Planning document is actively used to guide decisions, and funding requests must indicate how they will influence related Core Themes. Examples were provided such as strategic investments used for improved academic advising with the result of improving student graduation rates, and including impacts on strategic goals of the institution included as part of new grant submissions.

The UAF Core Themes are:

- Educate
- Research
- Prepare
- Connect
- Engage

The "Connect" and "Engage" Core Themes add clarity to the mission statement by indicating the institution's commitment to engage indigenous people, culture, and knowledge. This commitment was apparent throughout our conversations with faculty and administrators.

To assess mission fulfillment UAF has developed a set of 31 indicators of achievement across its five (5) core themes and identified thresholds that capture when mission fulfillment has been surpassed, met or fall below expectations.

The UAF has developed a detailed Mission Fulfillment Rubric, and defined mission fulfillment as

“...achieving an average index value of 3.0 or better for the indicators within each theme, and having not more than one indicator in each theme group rated 1 (below expectations).”

Using this definition with the rubric, the institution will be able to definitively state whether they have or have not fulfilled their mission in Year 7. The weakness of this approach is that it requires that the rubric accurately reflect the entirety of the institution’s mission and goals, which is difficult to accomplish with any concise document. The approach used by UAF to define mission fulfillment is probably better than most, and we have no improvements to offer. We simply encourage the faculty and administrators at the institution to continue to develop the metrics and the rubric, as they indicated they desired to do.

### Program-Level Assessment

The Vice Provost and Accreditation Liaison Officer has leadership and coordination responsibility for supporting and monitoring the metrics associated with the Core Themes, as well as development and implementation of program assessment plans and collection of assessment summaries from departments.

Program assessment plans and annual assessment summaries submitted by departments are collected on the Provost’s Assessment web page. The quality and rigor of both the plans and summaries varies widely. There is evidence of a few programs trying to do as little as possible, and evidence of a lack of knowledge of how to structure an effective assessment plan. In this the UAF is similar to many other institutions. However, there are positive signs as well:

- The UAF Assessment webpage provides excellent templates and examples for both program assessment plans, and annual assessment summaries.
- Assessment plans based on the new template are generally more complete and of higher quality than those that did not use the template.
- Many departments have assigned a faculty member to coordinate assessment as part of their required workload. Including assessment in someone’s assigned duties is a significant step towards plan implementation.
- We heard comments ranging from grudging acceptance of the need to participate in program assessment to an openness to participate in the process. We did not hear comments indicating resistance or outright defiance from faculty regarding program assessment.
- Departments engage in program reviews on a 5-year cycle. These internal reviews include a review of assessment plans and activities, and program faculty use that opportunity to update and refine their assessment plans. This provides a timeframe for updating the UAF program assessment plans.

The UAF still has some work to do to get all programs up to speed with outcomes assessment by the Year 7 report, but we believe that the institution has made significant progress and has the people and

structures in place to have a good likelihood of having strong assessment plans for most programs in place by Year 7.

### Course-Level Assessment

We did not investigate the extent of course-level assessment of learning outcomes, however we did learn that student learning outcomes are required to be included on syllabi as part of the new course approval process for all courses at UAF. While it is clear that all recently approved courses must have course level learning outcomes, interviewed faculty were not certain that the syllabi of courses that have were approved many years ago have been updated to include learning outcomes.

### General Education Assessment

Vice Provost Alexandra Fitts is also the Dean of the Division of General Studies, and is responsible for oversight of the general education program. Students are required to take a core set of courses in writing, math, science, take a number of credits in a required cluster of core courses on perspectives of the human condition. A very significant portion of the UAF undergraduates participate in a research experience. The UAF Faculty Senate is expected to approve a new requirement for a capstone course experience for all majors. These capstone experiences will provide significant value to students, and will also be very useful for assessment purposes.

Although it appears that significant efforts are expended to review the courses which make up the general education program at UAF, updating the assessment program for general education would be of benefit by streamlining the assessment process and bringing consistency to the various general education areas. We learned that UAF had made progress towards updating their general education program in a way that would have included a strong outcomes assessment program, but that the campus' efforts have been suspended pending a system-level initiative to update general education. Since all campuses in the UA system have the same requirement to have outcomes-based assessment programs in place for their general education program, it is hoped that such an assessment plan can be developed as part of the system-level initiative.

UAF has faculty learning communities, and we heard of one in particular focused on writing. Faculty in this learning community have worked collaboratively with colleagues across other institutions in the state to develop course learning outcomes for core writing courses. Such learning communities can be very effective in advancing assessment at an institution.

### Part 2: Operationalized Mission and Core Themes

The assessment program for ENLG 111X is a good example of a strong outcomes-based assessment process for general education. The process used to get the faculty together, develop common learning outcomes and assessment strategies, find data storage and access solutions, build common rubrics, calibrate assessment, and use assessment results to drive improvement should be a model for other areas of general education.

The UAF has taken a number of steps in response to low six-year graduation rates including raising the baccalaureate admission standard, supplemental instruction, DegreeWorks for more information to students and faculty on advising, and investments in professional advising. While there is a lag between investments to improve graduation rates and observation of results, at this time the graduation rate has risen from 31 to 42 percent in the past four years. The institution is closely monitoring progress on retention and graduation rates.

### Part 3: Overall Assessment

The institution has a well-defined metrics across all Core Themes and a clearly articulated plan for measuring mission fulfillment. The UAF has been able to maintain alignment of its Core Themes with the updated strategic goals of the UA system's strategic plan.

University-level assessment of Core Themes is well established in most areas. At the institution level, assessment data is being gathered and there is some evidence that the data has been used as part of decision-making and adjustment of assessment plans and metrics. Some collection processes for data outside of the institutional dataset (Banner) are still being developed, and the institution will need to have these processes in place well before the Year 7 review.

At the program level, substantial progress has been made on the implementation of assessment plans, but significant work remains to be done to build sustainable assessment into all programs. However, the foundation has been laid and efforts are in progress to follow through to completion.

The UAF is entering a new season of budget cuts of significant magnitude. The ability to stay on track through difficult financial times will be a daunting challenge. University administrators appear ready to use the strategic plan and Core Themes to guide decision-making as they work through the difficult budget times in the near future.