

Mid-Cycle Peer-Evaluation Report

Montana State University Northern
November 4-5, 2019

Report Prepared by

Margaret Johnson
Professor
Idaho State University
Pocatello, ID

Douglas Bullock
Associate Dean
Boise State University
Boise, ID

Introduction

On behalf of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), the evaluation team reviewed Montana State University-Northern's Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report and conducted a site visit November 4-5, 2019. The purpose of the Mid-Cycle Review was to assess the likelihood that Montana State University Northern (MSU-N) will be prepared to meet the requirements and standards of the comprehensive Year Seven reaffirmation of accreditation review and to offer observations about Commission recommendations from previous self-evaluation reports. We received a well-prepared and thorough Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report from MSU-Northern and are grateful to the MSU-Northern community for the time and energy they devoted to our site visit as well as their candor and responsiveness to our questions and observations.

At the conclusion of the Year Seven Self-Evaluation and site visit in Fall 2016, MSU-N was provided with seven recommendations. Recommendation One was reviewed as part of the Year One Evaluation, and the recommendation was continued by the NWCCU. We were asked to review progress on all seven of the recommendations as part of this evaluation. MSU-N provided a separate report titled "Responses to Recommendations from Past Reviews" in which progress on the recommendations was detailed. This report served as the basis for our conversations, although some of the evidence for progress can be found in the MSU-N Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation.

Montana State University-Northern, located in Havre, Montana, is north-central Montana's comprehensive regional university, offering programs and services at the certificate, associate, bachelor, and master levels. Their service area includes four American Indian reservations and a number of agricultural communities. They provide both technical and liberal arts education and are an open-enrollment institution, serving approximately 1,100 students. They are governed by the Montana University System.

Mission:

MSU-Northern provides higher education to students for professional and technical careers through an institution dedicated to teaching and the pursuit of knowledge.

Vision:

MSU-Northern will be known for its supportive, student-centered environment in which a unique mix of academic programs are responsive to local, regional, and state workforce needs, offered in an atmosphere that promotes student success.

Core Themes:

1. Provide liberal arts, professional and technical programs that serve a diverse student population.

2. Promote student centered and culturally enriched environment which fosters student success.
3. Partner with external entities to enhance and expand learning experiences.

What follows is our assessment and response to the key elements of the MSU-N Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report and observations based on additional information gleaned during the site visit and subsequent phone call with the Chancellor.

Site Visit Overview

The site visit was well-structured and provided opportunities to meet with faculty, staff, and administrators, and we had sufficient time for in-depth discussions that addressed our prepared questions and follow-up questions that arose. It should be noted that Chancellor Greg Kegel was unable to participate at the site visit, though he made himself available for a video conference with evaluation committee members on November 13. While on campus, our discussions focused on the following subjects:

- 1) Where MSU-N sees itself now and what they will need to do to demonstrate mission fulfillment in their Year Seven Self-Evaluation Report site visit;
- 2) The primary challenges associated with the fulfillment of their mission, vision, core themes, and strategic plan;
- 3) The extent of campus participation in and commitment to the core themes and strategic planning process;
- 4) Institutional and program-level assessment processes, timelines, and achievements;
- 5) General Education assessment to date and plans for revision;
- 6) Participation of faculty and staff in the planning and assessment processes;
- 7) The two exemplar programs, Nursing and Little River Institute (including their assessment strategies and results to date); and
- 8) The steps taken to address the recommendations from previous reports and site visits.

We greatly appreciate the time campus members made to contribute to the Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report, and to meet with us and answer our questions. We would like to note our particular appreciation for Lindsey Brandt-Bennett, Jay Howland, Christy Ozburn, and Erica McKeon-Hanson for their impressive work. In addition, we would like to acknowledge the following people who helped to make our visit productive:

R. Neil Moisey	David Krueger	Darlene Sellers
Jamie Duke	Chris Wendland	Steven Wise
Alisha Schroeder	Maura Gatch	Margarett Campbell
Marianne Hoppe	Suzanne Hunger	Dan Ulmen
Valerie Guyant	Kasthuri Udayakumar	Gary Succaw
Joey Todd	Mark Seiffert	Steven Don
Spike Magelssen	Lorren Schlotfeldt	Carol Reifschneider
Chris Bond	Rachel Dean	Christian Oberquell

Mid-Cycle Evaluation Part One: Overview of Institutional Assessment Plan

As stated in the Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report, MSU-Northern has made significant progress in revising its annual review and assessment processes in order to include input from a wider range of university faculty and staff. MSU-N has a well-designed process for assessment of program-level outcomes. All academic programs appear to be engaged in the process (although at varying levels of development). Top-level authority and guidance are housed in the Institutional Assessment Committee (IAC), led by the Provost. IAC communicates the importance of program assessment and assessment-informed planning, and sets and monitors institutional goals such as the number of programs functioning at each level of development. IAC operates a rubric-driven measure of each program's level of engagement with the process. Support and training for programs are available as needed. All of this is to say that MSU-N has a good structure in place for program assessment and for monitoring the degree to which programs are engaged in and using assessment.

The bulk of our interactions with IAC and other key players were focused on assessment of academic programs. However, it is clear that the IAC also includes non-academic programs and services in their messaging and in their rubric-based measure of each program's assessment activity. We assume that the process functions similarly well for these services and programs. MSU-N approaches mission fulfillment via Core Themes. Since the Year 7 visit, the institution has done an admirable job of creating objectives for each theme and measurable indicators for each objective. The mid-cycle self-evaluation includes a clear description of all indicators and their alignment with objectives and themes. MSU-N has also established benchmarks and/or targets for each indicator and an overall threshold across all indicators that represents a gauge of mission fulfillment. They have begun data collection on all indicators, and for many they have multiple years of data.

Whether the specific choices of indicators are ideal, or ideally aligned with core themes, is less clear. One notable gap, for example, is that the core theme indicators do not appear to correspond to assessments of learning or program outcomes. There is room for introspection on the choice of indicators, and possibly for revisions and alterations going forward.

The use of assessment to inform planning and decision making is most strongly apparent in the institutional actions around Goal 1 of the strategic plan: Stability. MSU-N has identified total enrollment as the primary indicator of success and established a specific target. Additional indicators include overall retention rates, program-level enrollment and retention numbers, and some measures of student support activities. Leadership has successfully communicated a vision and an action plan; used program metrics to identify high-leverage activities; empowered key units to take undertake those activities; use assessment data to widely communicate the need for and progress towards this goal; and engaged a range of individuals from the executive to unit level staff and faculty in carrying out the plan. Data continues to play a real-time role in decision making as the work moves forward.

While the above example is nearly ideal, in other areas of the mission we find a disconnect between assessment and decision-making. For example, while the IAC is operating a relatively effective system for assessing most program learning outcomes, we do not find evidence that the

information obtained from this assessment process is being used to guide planning or decision making. MSU-N engages in high-level strategic planning, identifies objectives and selects actions to pursue. However, this process—plan, decide, act—is not necessarily informed by or connected to the information delivered by assessment structure or core theme indicators.

Mid-Cycle Evaluation Part Two: Examples of Mission Fulfillment

MSU-N provided two representative examples of mission fulfillment: The Nursing Program and the Little River Institute. Both are intended to demonstrate assessment, reflection, continuous improvement, and to serve as indicators of mission fulfillment.

Information was provided that demonstrates improvements have been made to the programs, and information was provided to show that these actions have helped to serve students. The following sections provide specific details regarding each program and their processes.

Department of Nursing—ASN Program

The ASN Program at MSU-Northern is accredited by Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN). As part of both the ACEN accreditation and Core Theme Indicator 1.1.3a, the department tracks the first-time pass rate of students who sit for professional credentialing exams (NCLEX). In fall 2016, no new students were accepted into the program because a new state curriculum was being put in place and MSU-N was in a teach-out period. They began to accept new students again in 2017. At the time of the writing of the MCE Self-Evaluation Report, just one year of data was available to demonstrate performance under the new curriculum.

As noted in the report, the Department of Nursing has put in place a number of strong improvements to their program to enhance student learning. In particular, they had encouraged students to use the Hurst Review program for NCLEX preparation for 2017 (for those on the older curriculum). The pass rate for students taking the exam after some had used the Hurst Review program was improved. Consequently, the faculty have added Hurst into a 4th semester course for future students. The pass rate for 2019, the next year that students took the exam, was above the benchmark 80%.

In addition, starting in 2018, the program began to provide simulation practice to enhance student learning by providing students with hands-on experience not available in local medical facilities. From all evidence provided, this appears to be a positive decision, better preparing students for their careers. However, the evaluators did not see evidence that indicates this addition of simulation experience was a direct result of formal assessment. In preparing for the Year 7 Evaluation, we encourage MSU-N to focus more on actions that come as a direct result of the formal assessment processes.

Little River Institute

The evaluators are impressed with the significant achievements the Little River Institute (LRI) has made in just four years since being awarded a NASNTI grant. LRI has instituted new practices and opportunities to enrich the experience of Native American students. In the self-study, MSU-N has indicated that these actions are connected to Core Theme Indicators 2.1.1, 2.2.1, and 2.3.2. In particular, LRI has created a gathering space for students to receive tutoring and mentoring and to improve social engagement; they have developed a culturally responsive mentoring and tutoring program; and they have created professional development on cultural diversity to help LRI staff and faculty from around the campus. That said, these improvements are connected more with planning in the early stages of the grant and through informal feedback from constituents rather than the direct result of formal assessment.

Summary

Both programs provided as exemplar are indeed demonstrating strong commitment to student learning and success. What they have so far accomplished is quite promising for the future. What could be better developed, however, is the connection between formal assessment processes carried out by the programs and changes made as a direct result of the assessment. The ASN program does demonstrate some changes as a direct result of assessment, but the connection between assessment and changes is less apparent for LRI. In anticipation of the Year 7 Evaluation, we encourage MSU-Northern to seek out evidence that better demonstrates closing the loop. We recommend focusing on programs that have made changes that are directly related to the formal assessment process.

Mid-Cycle Evaluation Part Three: Moving Forward to Year Seven

With a concerted effort to improve their program assessment processes and to establish assessable Core Theme Indicators, Montana State University-Northern has been working to address the recommendations from the 2016 Year-Seven site visit. The work that has been done so far has been pursued with clear focus and an effort to improve processes at the university. There are new Indicators that are aligned with the Core Themes and Objectives. All elements of the university mission are aligned with core themes, objectives, and indicators. There are, however, some objectives and indicators, particularly related to diversity and cultural enrichment, that are less clearly tied back to the mission, though they are a part of the strategic plan. As noted in the Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report, the institution is scheduled to review its Mission and Core Themes in 2020-2021. This would be a great opportunity to review this alignment.

The evaluators were impressed by the significant work done so far on program assessment. By the time of the Year-7 site visit, we encourage the university to have completed program assessments for all programs and to be able to demonstrate how the assessments have been used to make improvements. Moreover, we believe it will be important for the institution to be able to demonstrate how the specific data collected for their core indicators has led to decisions about resource allocation. Demonstrating more clearly how the institution is using the information

gained from their core themes, objectives, and indicators, as well as from their program assessments, to lead directly to institutional decision-making is central to mission fulfillment.

Work on the General Education Program and the assessment of the program is making valuable progress, but significant work is still ahead. Please refer to our observations about the NWCCU Recommendations below for more detailed information regarding General Education.

During our conversations on campus, we were impressed by the collegiality of those we met with and encouraged to see the dedication of faculty and staff to student success. We also learned that efforts are frequently made by those in leadership positions around campus to gather input from faculty, staff, and students, particularly at the early stages of planning. We encourage the institution to look for additional methods of collaboration among administration, faculty, and staff. We think that additional work can be done to ensure ample opportunities for feedback on policies and planning at all stages, and to ensure that feedback from each constituency is better incorporated in planning and decision making.

Mid-Cycle Evaluation Part Four: Update on NWCCU Recommendations

Below we share our observations about the seven NWCCU Recommendations.

Recommendation One:

While the University has identified core themes, objectives, and indicators of achievement, the evaluation committee finds that levels of mission fulfillment have not been defined in a manner that permits evaluation of mission fulfillment. The committee recommends that the University establish meaningful, assessable and verifiable indicators of achievement, and threshold levels of achievement, that can form the basis for evaluation of mission fulfillment and accomplishment of the objectives of its core themes. Progress toward mission fulfillment should be regularly assessed, reported and documented (Standards 1.A.1, 1.B.2, 4.B.1, and 5.A).

Based on our review of MSU-Northern's Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report and the subsequent mid-cycle visit, it is our observation that MSU-N has made significant and notable progress on this recommendation and has established meaningful, assessable, and verifiable indicators of achievement and thresholds of achievement. As described in the remarks on assessment in Part One above, MSU-N has identified core themes, objectives for each theme, and measurable indicators of success for each objective. Data collection is present for all.

Recommendation Two:

The evaluation committee recommends that MSU-N continue to refine its processes for general education assessment, as stated in Recommendation 2 of the Fall 2013 Peer-Evaluation Report. While MSU-N has made progress in standardization of general education courses and how they are assessed, further work is needed to clearly document the identified course outcomes, the thresholds for achieving these outcomes, and the assessment of achievement of each of the stated outcomes (Standard 2.C.10).

There are three components of this recommendation. Two seem well in hand. Evidence available to the mid-cycle review team, including but not limited to direct statements from the General Education Committee, indicates that course outcomes are now well documented. Committee members also state that thresholds for achieving these outcomes have been established. The remaining element of Recommendation Two – assessment of achievement – is as yet unmet and appears to present more of a challenge. It also appears that MSU-N is still engaged in debate about how to structure general education and what goals or principles should guide their path forward.

One path is laid out in the Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation. In-person descriptions of how that plan might be implemented suggest several intermediate objectives that would have to be attained:

- Creating and adopting rubrics for each outcome
- Identifying appropriate course-level assessments
- Achieving coordinated use of rubrics across all courses that meet a given outcome, ideally with evidence of inter-rater reliability
- Crafting a process and schedule that captures all general education assessment in a reasonable time frame but within the scope of limited faculty time availability
- Establishing a mechanism that “closes the loop,” that is, a structure by which general education assessment as a whole is reflected upon and used to inform subsequent decision-making

In-person meetings with the General Education Committee and others also revealed potential obstacles:

- The very large number of courses and outcomes needing assessment
- Wide variety of choices currently being made at the course and section level
- Cultural barriers to altering decisions at the course/instructor level
- Limited faculty and staff resources to devote to this project
- Potential disconnect between goals set by administration and goals desired by faculty
- Absence of an institutional approach to receiving, reviewing and responding to whatever information might emerge from a general education assessment process

MSU-N is lucky to have, at this juncture, some very energized faculty who are ready to engage in this project. Some immediately available actions have been identified by the General Education Committee, particularly as regards the very large number of outcomes identified across the general education curriculum. These include

- Adopt a standardized assessment (ETS) that maps to a large number of the general education outcomes
- Set up a rotation in which a subset of course/outcomes are examined in each cycle
- Identify a pilot project that can be carried to completion – outcomes, rubrics, assessments, findings, actions and implementations for next cycle

Clear articulation of these actions as part of a plan to establish a robust general education assessment structure should leave MSU-N reasonably well positioned for its next Year 7 visit.

Recommendation Three:

The evaluation committee recommends that the University continue to carefully monitor its financial environment to ensure short term solvency and anticipate long term obligations. Furthermore, it is recommended that the institution establish by institutional policy, budgetary and long term reserve levels that are within industry guidelines (Standard 2.F.1 and 2.F.3).

The evaluators reviewed the Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report and met with the controller to discuss Recommendation Three. From this information, it appears that the financial planning done at the university is thoughtfully and carefully carried out. The university has been able to put aside some funds in the last few years and have recently paid off some loans. Due to state requirements, however, there are limitations placed on what can be placed in reserve at the institution. In addition, at this time the university is searching for a chief financial officer and vice chancellor for administration and finance (a single position). During the time of this vacancy, there has been no meeting of the university's Budget Advisory Committee. The gathering of evidence was limited in part by the brevity of the evaluators' visit and in part by the vacancy in the vice chancellor position. A more thorough review of materials will be possible during the next evaluation.

Recommendation Four:

The evaluation committee recommends that Montana State University-Northern should more visibly and consistently provide expected course, program and degree student learning outcomes to enrolled students in written form (Standard 2.C.2).

Evidence gathered from our review of MSU-Northern's Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report, the mid-cycle visit, and our review of the university website demonstrated that course, program, and degree learning outcomes are visible and consistently provided to students. Program and degree outcomes for the majority of programs are now posted on the university website, allowing students to review them as needed. Some programs are still completing the development of their outcomes, but those that are missing are expected to be completed soon. In addition, course learning outcomes are required to be posted on course syllabi, and the faculty submit these syllabi to the college deans each semester for review to ensure that student learning outcomes are included. The institution has actively worked to ensure that student learning outcomes are clearly and fully presented.

Recommendation Five:

The evaluation committee found evidence of an impressive amount of focused and purposeful activity concerning comprehensive planning. However, the committee recommends that the emerging comprehensive plan be informed by the collection of appropriately defined data and documented so that it can be more systematic, better integrated, and more widely available to appropriate constituencies for input (Standard 3.A).

The university has made significant progress on establishing data-driven and well-documented comprehensive planning, and they have greatly improved their communication of this information to various constituencies. Updates on the progress being made on the strategic plan and other major university updates are communicated to the campus community at major events

throughout the year. In addition, more frequent updates are communicated at a variety of standing meetings to ensure clarity across campus. It is clear that as various processes and decisions are being developed, there is outreach to gather opinions around campus. Based on our conversations with various groups, we think there is more room to increase opportunities for input from faculty and staff (and students, when appropriate) when decisions are at more advanced stages. Also, as noted below, though decisions are frequently driven by useful data, the data being used could more frequently come from the core theme indicators and program assessments to better reflect closing the loop.

Recommendation Six:

As program assessment capacity is systematized and developed, the evaluation committee recommends that the institution incorporate more evidence of student learning outcome assessment, and assessment-informed improvement efforts throughout the educational experience, including services as well as academic degrees, programs and certificates (Standard 4.A and 4.B).

As described above, MSU-N has assessment structures in place in many areas, and also undertakes strategic planning to guide actions. There are, however, places where the assessment leads to data which does not then go on to inform decisions – notably in the area of academic outcomes. There are also decisions made as part of planning processes that, while well thought out, are more self-contained than they are informed by assessment data. While there are some areas in which the two themes – planning and assessment – are working in conjunction (notably Goal 1 of the strategic plan) the disconnect is often present.

Recommendation Seven:

The evaluation committee recommends that planning for core themes, and decisions and resource allocations concerning core theme programs and services, be consistent with the University's comprehensive plan and informed by the evaluation of the accomplishment of core theme objective. As (Standard 3.B, 4.B, and 5.A).

MSU-N uses strategic planning to guide much of their decision-making. Although many decisions and resource allocations are based in part on their strategic plan, they are not consistently informed by the evaluation of core theme objectives. With the exception of Core Theme One, which has informed a number of decisions about resources, the core themes have not otherwise played a significant role in influencing decisions regarding resources.

Conclusion

We believe there is a strong commitment at MSU-Northern to continue to build upon the strong processes the university has developed in recent years. MSU-N has a clear mission, strong core themes, and effective indicators; and the university has significantly improved their program assessment process. The institution has also improved their communication of decisions to their constituencies. As MSU-N prepares for its Year 7 site visit, the main areas for attention are 1) ensuring decision-making and resource allocation result from formal processes, specifically from program assessment and from consideration of data from core theme indicators; and 2) establishment of a general education assessment plan that is significantly developed by faculty.