

Mid-Cycle Evaluation Report

Prepared for

Columbia Basin College
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Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities*

Table of Contents

Evaluators	1
Overview of the Mid-Cycle Evaluation visit to Columbia Basin College	1
Overview of this report	1
Part I: Overview of Institutional Assessment Plan	1
Part II: Examples of Mission and Core Theme Operationalization	2
Part III: Moving Forward to Year Seven	4
Conclusion	6

Columbia Basin College

Mid-Cycle Evaluation Committee Report

Evaluators

The remote evaluation committee for the Mid-Cycle Evaluation of Columbia Basin College consisted of Dr. Beckie Hermansen, Director of Institutional Research at Snow College in Ephraim, Utah and Dr. Jason Pickavance, Associate Provost for Academic Operations at Salt Lake Community College.

Overview of the Mid-Cycle Evaluation visit to Columbia Basin College

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Mid-Cycle Evaluation review visit was conducted April 6-7, 2020 via remote locations in Utah and Washington. Logistics, including the meeting schedule and internet teleconferencing for the visit were coordinated by Ms. Melissa McBurney, Columbia Basin College Dean for Accreditation and Assessment and Dr. Mac Powell, Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities site visit liaison. All arrangements proceeded effortlessly, and the on-line hospitality was exceptional! Prior to the visit, digital and hard copy versions of *Columbia Basin College's Mid-Cycle Report* were received with ample time for study. Also prior to the visit, ad hoc phone conferences were held with Ms. McBurney and Dr. Powell.

The meetings scheduled for the on-site visit were consistent with the three main parts of the Mid-Cycle report and represented administrative, staff, and faculty personnel either mentioned or associated with the report. The evaluation team conducted all meetings together with one member serving as lead and the other fulfilling the role of moderator over additional interactive elements (e.g. chat) and the time constraints of each meeting. All meetings allowed for quality conversation regarding the practices and evidence associated with the assessment of Columbia Basin College's end-states and the institution's efforts toward mission fulfillment.

The interaction between college representatives with the evaluators was responsive to the improvement and success of the institution. Consistent with this directive, the purpose of the visit focused on an appraisal of current institutional progress and the provision of feedback in preparation for a successful, Year Seven comprehensive evaluation.

Overview of this report

This report follows the general outline of the *Columbia Basin College's Mid-Cycle report* and follows the same format presented during the exit meeting. This report reflects strengths and suggestions associated with (1) CBC's institutional assessment plan, (2) the representative examples of mission and core theme operationalization, and (3) the institution's preparatory efforts toward the college's Year Seven review.

Part I: Overview of Institutional Assessment Plan

Columbia Basin College has implemented an institutional and mission fulfillment plan that is informative and relevant. The college's application of end-states, which are supported by objectives and formative key performance indicators, accomplishes (1) explicitly identified student knowledge and skill achievements supported by strategies that allow learners to purposefully work toward their educational goals with consistent monitored progress; and (2) a smooth transition from core themes to NWCCU's new standards

without losing the effectiveness of objectives and measurable indicators. Within the end-states of Academic Transfer, Professional/Technical preparation, and Transitional Studies, there are key performance indicators that are well-researched as steps to community college student outcome success.ⁱ Of note are two significant measure changes. The first responds a change in state skills testing for Transitional Studies students that ultimately allows three distinct measures to be rolled into one “Measurable Skills Gain”. The second relates to a change from course completion and success rates to more intimate measures of “whether a student has not earned a credit in at least one class” and “whether a student has earned below a 2.0 in at least one class.” These recent changes have positioned Columbia Basin College to monitor end-state short-term gains and sustained improvement more effectively over time (determined as a three-year period). Additionally, it allows the college to determine the effectiveness of immediate and long-term student learning interventions.

The scales used to measure progress are consistent, clear, and complete with historical benchmarks and aspirational targets. In fact, the evaluators appreciated the honesty expressed in all meetings that the college currently has “more orange than green markers”. The candor of current end-state measures served as a great example of the effectiveness of Columbia Basin College’s assessment efforts. All personnel are aware of the college’s current position and demonstrated evidence of on-going discussions and initiatives toward improvement. It was clear that end-state achievement (i.e. mission fulfillment) is an integral part of the institution’s culture from which academic programs and non-academic support units derive individual responsibility.

Part II: Examples of Mission and Core Theme Operationalization

Example 1: History Program Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

In its first example, Columbia Basin College provided an account of its History Program Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes. Professors David Arnold and Chris Herbert described how they introduced common document-based assessments to measure critical thinking in History 146, 147, 148.

The project is commended for its effort to do programmatic and not just course and section-level assessment by measuring a program-level outcome. Given the greater emphasis on demonstrating program learning outcomes in the recently revised NWCCU standards, the CBC History faculty should both congratulate themselves for this initial foray into program assessment and consider this project a starting point for continued assessment of student learning outcomes in the History Program.

The project is grounded in valid assessment practices around rubric development and the evaluation of student artifacts. Document-based assessments (DBQs) are well understood and accepted assessment approaches within the History discipline. Deploying a DBQ approach supports the legitimacy of this example of mission fulfillment. An additional point of strength in this project is connected to the nature of document-based assessment itself: DBQs typically ask students more open-ended questions designed to assess interpretive and argumentative reasoning, or in the words of this study “the ability to analyze the documents and use them as evidence in making historical arguments.” The assessment, in other words, goes well beyond a simple standardized knowledge-recall test to evaluate higher-order reasoning skills and capture a clearer picture of how students can do historical thinking.

The project also afforded the History faculty the opportunity to engage in a process of improvement as they moved from one iteration of the rubric which was, in their terms, “too blunt,” to one that is more fine-grained. Acknowledging the shortcomings of current teaching and assessment practices and looking to

improve using student-based evidence is at the core of authentic assessment work and a signature habit of effective self-reflective practitioners.

It might assist the History faculty and readers of their subsequent assessments to include both examples of the document-based assessment and some illustrative examples of student work and how that work was scored by faculty. What does it look like for a student to be “Excellent” (to use the rubric’s term) at “making historical arguments”? How did the History faculty come to norm their understanding of Excellent versus Very Evident, and so forth scores? Making that work, which no doubt happened, more explicit strengthens the deep reflection necessary for effective assessment and provide more robust evidence of mission fulfillment. It makes the process of assessment, in addition to the results, visible to all readers.

Making one’s assessment speak not only to student learning but also address the broader conversations around history education can also serve as an example of good, faculty-organic assessment to other programs. In trying to evaluate how effectively Columbia Basin College students are doing “historical arguments,” History faculty are participating in larger and quite vibrant debates about history education and information literacy. The work of the history and education scholar Sam Wineburg speaks both to this study and additional discoveries (*Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, 2001). Demonstrating that one’s assessment work is informed by broader conversations around assessment and important debates around effective teaching and learning, and assessment within the field supplements the strength of the entire enterprise.

CBC’s history faculty should look for opportunities to make this study speak not only to future rubric development and its implementation within Canvas, but also to what high-impact history instruction looks like at Columbia Basin College. Those are recognized, harder conversations because classroom practice is often treated as the province of academic freedom. By connecting the findings of this study to the work of teaching, the history classroom becomes an important part of faculty “closing the loop” without losing distinct instructional identity. This is particularly true in situations where a student’s historical thinking is found wanting. For example, can the department examine whether specific pedagogical practices in the history classroom predictably lead to more “Excellent” and “Very Evident” scores on students’ DBQ assessments? These program-level conversations do not hinder academic freedom as much as they inform pedagogical excellence.

Although this evaluation offers peer feedback for improvement, it is the opinion of the mid-cycle evaluators that this project serves as a strong example of mission fulfillment and should form the basis of further work within the History department. It also provides a good example of program assessment and improvement to other CBC academic and professional training disciplines.

Example II: Closing-the-Loop Student of Heritage Spanish Language Learning

The second example of mission fulfillment Columbia Basin College provided was a Study of Heritage Spanish Language Learning led by Professor Lorena Barboza and written up by the former Dean for Institutional Effectiveness, Joe Montgomery. This project sought to understand the obstacles to heritage language learner student success in Spanish 205 (Spanish for Native Speakers). This study was motivated by low achievement rates in Spanish 205 among heritage language (HL) students. The fact that this assessment answered a real curricular challenge is to be commended. It also provided a nice example of assessment driven by on-the-ground faculty concerns about student learning and achievement. Given Columbia Basin College’s service region and student population (40% Hispanic), this study seems highly relevant to the work of the college.

The HL study moved to situate its work within a larger scholarly conversation, noting that the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP) “has identified teaching heritage learners as their second greatest area of concern.” The AATSP points out how the Spanish language that many native speakers were exposed to in childhood “may not be sufficient” to succeed in academic environments.

Using survey work and focus groups, this study formed a picture of students’ “perceptions of their academic preparation for Spanish 205 (Spanish for Native Speakers), their motivations for taking the course and achieving proficiency, and their perceptions of course pedagogy.” The study effectively illustrated why CBC HL learners come to Spanish 205, identified the obstacles they faced toward course success, and exposed some of the root causes of those challenges. In addition, the study provided specific proposals to address the challenges found in the assessment.

Much of the study focused solutions on (1) the development of a better diagnostic assessment to evaluate readiness for Spanish 205, (2) the development of a pre-requisite to Spanish 205 to satisfy the needs of those HL learners who are underprepared when it comes to the 205 curriculum, and (3) the development of a Spanish certificate to address the career motivations of HL students who see in bi-lingual proficiency increased workforce opportunities.

The study did not effectively speak to one of its stated goals: “develop strategies for improving the effectiveness of the Spanish language pedagogy.” A focus on the pedagogical strategies within Spanish 205 would strengthen the study and assist faculty in helping student achievement within the boundaries of the course.

This study highlighted the difficulties students face upon entering Spanish 205; it did not tell us how or how well students learn in Spanish 205 or in Spanish courses more generally. While this study addressed the challenges of a specific and important population at Columbia Basin College, it did not fully inform the programmatic outcomes of the Spanish department or foreign languages at CBC. Given the institution’s emphasis on assessment program-level assessment, the evaluators recommend the Spanish department further focus on student learning outcomes and use to address issues of course design, program design, and pedagogy.

Part III: Moving Forward to Year Seven

Columbia Basin College’s *Mid-Cycle Evaluation Report* and evidence gathered from the remote site visit suggest the college is making progress toward mission fulfillment and will be well-positioned to provide measurable student and program-level outcome data. These data are directly tied to the institutions’ end-states of degree completion, employment or transfer success; professional and technical certificate achievement; and earned high school credentials (GED or diploma) that enable transitional studies students to enter the work force or begin their college careers. The evaluators recognized the following strengths supportive of Columbia Basin College’s progress.

- **Cohesion and Collaboration:** It was clear throughout the visit that administration, staff, and faculty have and continue to together on the same end-state goals and objectives. For example, the Student Success Leadership Committee (albeit new) demonstrated how all college personnel

are focused on student success. Comprised of faculty, staff, and administration from vast aspects of the institution, the committee works together to address the curricular and co-curricular challenges to student well-being and achievement. This is supported by consistent measures and comparable scales on course performance, retention, credit attainment, and completion across the main areas of transfer, professional/technical preparation, and transitional studies.

- **Guided Pathways:** Columbia Basin College is making great progress when it comes to Guided Pathways reform. Revising the student intake process so that students select a specific area of study or meta-major, providing students with clear curricular maps, and providing a more holistic/case-management advising model are all best practices supported by CCRC research on guided pathways reforms. Creating Canvas courses where Student Affairs and Academic Affairs collaborate to build a space for students to get further oriented to their area and access resources is a particularly innovative move—one that other colleges should look to as they do guided pathways. (Standard 2.G.6)
- **Accountability:** It was clear that Columbia Basin College has strong board involvement regarding the goals and objectives leading to end-state fulfillment (last reviewed spring 2018). The college president (President Woods) accepts accountability to the Board, to faculty and staff, and ultimately to students. In fact, it was refreshing to hear leadership recognize “there are more orange than green markers” on end-state measures. This communicated the College’s honesty about its position and its strong commitment to initiatives and resources that “move the needle” toward stated student achievement (Standard 1.B.3).
- **Resources:** Columbia Basin College has made sound investments in research and infrastructure that support institutional progress. For example, in 2019 the Dean of Accreditation and Assessment was created. This position works with the Vice President of Instruction, Institutional Research staff, the Teaching & Learning Committee, academic deans, and general faculty to systematize the assessment of student learning and communicate short and long-term strategies to that end. This is further supported well-founded research on indicators of student achievement, participation in NWCCU’s Fellowship on Assessment and Mission Fulfillment, and participation with the Frontier Set—a select group high-performing, high-potential educational organizations committed to increasing student success and erasing achievement equity gaps by transforming institutional operations at scale.
- **Culture of Evidence:** It was abundantly clear that Columbia Basin College is building a culture of evidence and data democratization. The entire visit was complimentary of the “Jedi Trainings” provided by the Office of Institutional Research. These are trainings that allow faculty and other college personnel access to data on student demographics, course completion, course success, retention, and program achievement using fully transparent and accessible Tableau dashboards. In fact, the college has a wealth of data-driven dashboards and expressed a commitment toward a dedicated server.

As Columbia Basin College continues working toward its Year Seven, mission/end-states fulfillment, the evaluators provided the following feedback

- Continue to work with the Frontier Set and develop the role of the institution's Equity Council to effectively measure, mitigate, and report achievement gap progress. There is an opportunity to provide strong trend, point-in-time, and other evidence that are "disaggregated by race, ethnicity, age, gender, socioeconomic status, first generation college student, and any other institutionally meaningful categories" (Standard 1.D.2, 1.D.3, 1.D.4).
- Proceed to support continual program assessment and improvement. It was clear that program assessment is well-received by faculty and increasing numbers of faculty are using data (via "Jedi-trainings") to measure course and program-level student achievement, and said measures are working to promote program improvement. For example, the Theatre department made sweeping curricular changes (i.e. replacing outdated courses with new, high-impact courses) because of program level evaluation. The Health Sciences used program assessment and advisory board input to revise course and program level outcomes to be better aligned with industry and independent accreditation standards. Using program review data, the Life Sciences established goals to alleviate the number pre-requisite course re-takes, and the Art department commenced the development of a visual literacy course intended to help students apply art/visual appreciation to their non-art-related degree. This is in lieu of the traditional art appreciation course and related general education credit (Standard 1.C.5, 1.C.7)
- Coordinate strategic planning with end-states achievement. Columbia Basin College's strategic plan expires in 2020. The institution has started the process of developing a new strategic plan and is well-positioned to use that plan in support of student learning and achievement indicative of the new NWCCU standards. Having end-states, assessment and institutional strategy as one comprehensive plan—a singular institutional focus—is the hallmark of a high-achieving, excellent institution (Standards 1.B.1, 1.B.2).

Conclusion

A mid-cycle evaluation helps determine the degree to which an institution is on course to reach mission fulfillment (Year Seven). Like general process evaluations, the virtual evaluation team provided objective analyses of the Columbia Basin College's progress, highlighting areas of strength and suggesting timely adjustments to keep the institution on track to reach its goals. The Evaluation Team believes that Columbia Basin College is on course in its preparation for the Year Seven Comprehensive evaluation under the new NWCCU 2020 standards. The institution's work toward end-states and well-researched indicators of student achievement are complimented by its association with the Frontier Set and NWCCU's Fellowship program on assessment and mission fulfillment. Guided pathways provide an intrusive advising structure around holistic student achievement. Faculty appreciate the guided pathways framework and have incorporated other high-impact practices (i.e. TILT, curricular re-design, industry standard alignment) in response to regular program reviews and student achievement metrics. This is well-supported by the comprehensive structure and mission of the Student Success Leadership Committee. Unmistakably,

Columbia Basin College is working together to sustain an institutional culture of evidence-based continual improvement and accountability.

The evaluators appreciate the time and dedication of Columbia Basin College’s board, administration, faculty and staff toward student learning and achievement. Praise is given to all personnel who have adapted to meet the needs of students while continuing the work of improvement during this unprecedented time. Informally, it was impressive to note the involvement of so many faculty and staff via distance and technology—Zoom meetings are hard and it was impressive to note the engagement of so many people in support of Columbia Basin College’s mission. Even socially distanced, it was as if they were all working together in the same room! Remote visits do not adequately capture the affect or energy of a place toward institutional purpose, but Columbia Basin College exceptionally communicated that **it is** an “environment that supports the academic excellence of all students . . . , while fostering meaningful employment, engaged citizenship, and a life-long joy of learning” (Columbia Basin College Mission Statement).

ⁱ Moore, C. Offenstien, J. & Shurlock, N. (2009). Steps to success: Analyzing milestone achievement to improve community college student outcomes. California State University, Sacramento, Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy.