

Mid-Cycle Evaluation
Conducted Virtually

Pacific Lutheran University

Tacoma, WA
April 22-23 2021

A confidential report of findings prepared for the
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities

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Introduction

The mid-cycle evaluation committee conducted a day-and-a-half virtual visit of Pacific Lutheran University (PLU) on April 22-23, 2021. To a person, the PLU administration, faculty, staff and students were welcoming and forthcoming. In our first meeting President Belton indicated that we would not hear anyone who had been scripted or prompted and that was indeed our experience. We also wanted to recognize the general COVID exhaustion that is wearing on everyone and made us even more appreciative of the enthusiasm and willingness of all PLU participants.

The self-study was well prepared, clear and useful. Prior to our visit we were aware through the news cycle and a message from the ALO Karen McConnell a week before our visit that PLU was in the midst of a process of reduction in force. During the visit we learned more about this process that had been in works since November of 2020. Through a faculty joint committee and with presidential guidance, it will yield a reduction of 36 faculty positions as well as plans for investment in new programs and staff via reallocation of resources. There is also an academic restructuring plan that has been circulated in draft which will streamline administration by combining small programs into larger, more viable groups. Both of these processes will have board review and finalization in May. These two processes will have a long-term impact on the course of PLU's future direction and sustainably; in the short term they are significant in-progress changes that while now in general terms have not concluded.

The evaluation committee approached the mid-cycle review with the NWCCU 2020 standards that focus on:

- Students and their success, along with closing equity gaps. These are at the center of the new Standards and the accreditation review processes.
- Processes that allow for adaptability and focused attention to support specific institutional needs.

PLU has undertaken an impressive and strategic alignment process to holistically address mission fulfillment by connecting 1) Strategic Planning, 2) Core Themes and 3) the value and processes of Continual Improvement. Within each of these areas there are initiatives, plans, and ongoing work. This is an ambitious approach to mission fulfillment yet one that is consistent with PLU's mission and trajectory.

Part I: Mission Fulfillment

Faculty and administrators alike all know the mission of Pacific Lutheran University, and they view their work as centered on this mission:

PLU seeks to educate students for lives of thoughtful inquiry, service, leadership and care – for other people, for their communities, and for the earth.

Even faculty who are more typically “pigeon-holed” into the *thoughtful inquiry* part of the mission identified more closely with the *care* aspect of the mission – especially care for their students. Students were able to identify how the work of various parts of the university aligned with the mission, once they were made aware of it.

However, the understanding of “mission fulfillment” is more uneven. The high-level administrators – President Belton and the vice presidents, and those who work directly on accreditation – were able to articulate how their work aligns with the model of Strategic Plans, Core Themes, and Continuous Improvement forming the foundation of Student Achievement, Well-being, and Success. They are engaged in activities that contribute directly to the mission, and to assessing mission fulfillment. However, mid-level leaders were not as aware of these pieces and how they fit together to contribute to mission fulfillment. They clearly understand that their own work serves the mission, and in that sense, they see this as contributing generally to “mission fulfillment.” But vital functions are likely to fall through the cracks without a more universal sense of how each individual’s work contributes directly to mission fulfillment. Moving forward, university leaders may succeed in addressing this by using the visual model presented in the self-report to guide the work of those with boots on the ground.

Part II: Student Achievement

The use of regional and national peers to compare university-wide student achievement data is on the right path, but is not yet complete. A discrete set of ten peer institutions was selected through a rigorous, data-driven process. Five years of IPEDS data have been imported so SQL queries can be pulled easily for any question stemming from that data set. Some of the fundamental questions required by Standard 1.D.2 have already been analyzed for the past five years. The data show that PLU has some work to do to close the achievement gap for students from underrepresented backgrounds. What was not seen, either in the report or through the on-site visit, was a plan to address these achievement gaps. While individuals understand the need to focus on their mission, including diversity and inclusion work, providing clarity and leadership regarding which work is most critical for closing the achievement gap will be helpful in supporting the achievement of all PLU students. In addition, according to Standard 1.D.3, by the time of the Year 7 comprehensive review, the data will need to be made publicly available on the university’s website. Currently, only parts of the required datasets are online, and they are hidden behind a login. This does not meet the criterion of “widely available”.

Regarding the use of peer comparators, there is an awareness among the leadership team that the utility of this set is limited. The types of questions this data set can answer must be selected based on the characteristics used to create the set in the first place. For example, since the peer institution set was not selected based on global study focus, it is unlikely that these institutions are the right ones to look to for questions related to the university’s emphasis on global learning. This is appropriate.

Threaded through the self-study are considerations and questions regarding data as it is connected with the planning processes towards mission fulfillment. This includes discussion of institutional capacity for data collection and data dissemination. We observed patterns noted in the self-study. Individuals are working hard within the scope of their responsibilities and there is evidence of the collection and use of data on projects that relate to each sphere of responsibility but are not coordinated in ways to specifically address the larger institutional goals.

We encourage PLU to collectively make considerations of the first order. What questions are you seeking to answer to meet the specific goals identified in the mission fulfillment processes? What data are needed to answer those questions? This approach employs an institutional effectiveness lens and should allow for PLU to consider and build the best data resources. We recognize that this will also require a disciplined approach by all to be successful within PLU's resource environment.

Part III: Programmatic Assessment

In PLU's model of mission fulfillment, program assessment falls squarely within the "Continuous Improvement" column. It can also be considered in the Core Themes column, as academic program assessment is used to ensure the university is meeting the core theme of "A Challenging Academic Experience," which aligns with the "Thoughtful Inquiry" part of the university's mission.

Two programs were offered as examples of program assessment that are done well at PLU: The Biology major and the First Year Experience Program (FYEP).

Biology Program

Faculty in the Biology department, as well as the Department Chair and Division Dean, understand how their work aligns with the mission. Although they understand their curriculum aligns naturally with the "thoughtful inquiry" part of the mission, and with environmental care, the faculty spoke of how their personal sense of their work values caring for students, another aspect of the mission. This was reflected by what students reported of their experiences in the classroom: that faculty take time to talk with students, and that more than any other professors, they urge their students to visit during office hours.

The biology program is continually revised based on results from both formal and informal assessment practices. For example, the department condensed their Student Learning Outcomes in 2018 along with the rest of the university. In doing so, they aligned their outcomes more closely with the AAAS's *Vision and Change* document, producing clarity and focus for the curriculum. Since revising the outcomes and condensing them to only three, the department has developed a plan for assessing these. The first is assessed by giving students a nationally-normed exam at three points in their education; this exam aligns with the *Vision and Change* plan as well, showing good alignment between program design and assessment. Secondly, the

department has worked to develop a rubric and assessment process for understanding how well they are teaching students scientific writing. This has been in development for several years, and the rubric and team-based assessment process seems to be serving students well. Students reported knowing that they were being taught specific things in mid-level courses in order to be prepared well for their writing-intensive capstone course. They appreciated that faculty were trying to help them succeed. Overall, the Department of Biology executes its plan each year, and closes the loop by making changes throughout the curriculum as appropriate. All of the faculty are engaged with the process at some point, so all faculty embrace the changes that result from the assessment process. Truly, the biology faculty constitute an example of a department that values assessment as a continuous improvement process that leads them toward serving their students better each year. They may have wisdom to share with other programs which may struggle more with assessment.

First Year Experience Program

As faculty describe the FYEP, it is two courses “but so much more”. All students take a 101 and a 190 course in their first year that consistently addresses three learning outcomes: literacy, critical inquiry, and community with an overall goal of helping first year students become successful PLU students.

The 101 course is a focused writing course that employs effective pedagogy to address literacy and writing while fostering a strong sense of community. The assessment and ongoing adjustments have spanned many years. A common assignment and rubrics have assured a level of consistency impressive within a program that is taught by a rotating group of instructors. It was gratifying that the FYEP leadership group integrates other academic professionals in the shaping of the program in ways that help represent the student experience broadly. Future plans include the development of a 201 for transfer students.

190 is less consistent in terms of addressing all the FYEP goals as many 190 sections serve as disciplinary intro courses as well. Students report that they keenly appreciated the community building in 101 and while the writing expectations were consistent between 101 and 190, the community learning outcomes are less focused.

In addition to the two required courses there are options for students and these richly expand the learning of the class into a linked residential learning community, extracurricular offerings, and a Plus 100 class focused on “college knowledge.” One critical question to ask is what is the FYEP providing for all PLU students, rather than courses which only some students take.

Conversation with the core curriculum helped to shed light on how the FYEP can be more deliberately connected to the core in light of an ongoing revision of general education. We encourage thinking along these lines. The committee has done the hard work of defining learning outcomes but further progress has been on hold while issues of reduction in force are addressed. We encourage the core curriculum committee to more proactively move forward on the revision.

General Education is a shared institutional commitment to all students and while there are considerations for implementation, the core curriculum has creative ideas about engaging more academic professionals to participate in the curriculum delivery.

PART IV: Moving Forward

Pacific Lutheran University has spent the past four years utilizing the feedback they received from their comprehensive NWCCU evaluation to focus their work. With a President and Provost who each spent two years in an acting position and now both hold permanent positions there is impressive synergy and great energy. The leadership group is engaged and committed, and with continued alignment it will be a powerful force to see the fruits of the structural and significant organizational changes underway.

The pieces for mission fulfillment are defined, peer institutions have been identified for benchmarking, and much work has been done that should position PLU well to continue to identify equity gaps and address them.

Getting back to normal after a summer of rest will be most welcome and hopefully the sense of paralysis that is due to the unknowns of force reduction and academic restructuring as well as just plain COVID fatigue will be in the past. As one faculty member said, “We missed those day-to-day interactions that provide the glue for working together.”

The evaluation committee is impressed with the fine trajectory that PLU has created and look forward to seeing implementation of mission fulfillment towards institutional sustainability.
