



“Our thematic self-study was valuable for the university in a number of ways. We were able to analyze and appreciate the breadth and depth of our efforts to enhance the university’s learning environments. The number of faculty, staff, and students that have participated in these efforts was impressive. We identified specific areas and efforts that need continual attention and have linked them to our ongoing university planning.”

—Rollin Abernethy, Associate
Provost, Academic Affairs

Conclusion and Request for Continued Accreditation

The University of Wyoming formally requests continued accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. The university has fulfilled its obligations of engagement in self-study as required by the HLC. The self-study document and supporting documentation is available at www.uwyo.edu/accreditation and in the resource room. This collection of evidence demonstrates that we have met the five criteria and 21 core components and have fulfilled other HLC requirements for accreditation.

REFLECTIONS ON THE SELF-STUDY PROCESS

(Core Component 4a)

The University of Wyoming decided to engage in a unique, thematic self-study. The theme of the self-study, “Enriching the University of Wyoming Learning Experience,” was derived in part from the university’s leadership position within the state. As the state’s flagship institution and the only graduate degree granting institution in Wyoming, the university is well positioned to cultivate an educated citizenry in terms of breadth and depth of their learning experiences. (4a) In addition, the university saw an opportunity for the self-study process to support its well established university-wide planning processes. The university chose to start its self-study by focusing on access, excellence, and leadership, three organizing principles that were an integral part of developing the university’s strategic planning document for the next five years, *The Creation of the Future: University Plan 3, 2009-2014*.

As described more fully in Chapter 1, the self-study process was led by the HLC Self-study Steering Committee, which charged nine subcommittees with the tasks of conducting most of the research, writing reports, and drawing conclusions based on the three themes. During their deliberations, committee chairs reported that their central challenge was establishing distinct definitions of access, excellence, and leadership. A pivotal point in the process came with production of the first draft of the self-study report, which contained significant overlap of content from the nine subcommittees. After much deliberation, the HLC Self-study Steering Committee decided to rework the structure of the report to ensure a cohesive thematic self-study that reflects how the university has addressed the five criteria and accompanying core components. The final report is a roadmap for the university to make improvements in critical areas tied to widely supported university priorities and planning processes.

The HLC Self-study Steering Committee is pleased with its decision to conduct a thematic self-study. The subcommittee participants engaged in the self-study in the context of both the theme of enriching the learning process, as well as the larger university planning process. In addition, the theme allowed the institution to focus on critical issues in relation to the HLC criteria and core components rather than the criteria and core components driving the self-study. In the end, such an approach proved meaningful to the institution.

INSTITUTIONAL OBSERVATIONS BASED ON THE SELF-STUDY

(Core Components 1c, 1d, 2d, 5b, 5c)

Throughout the self-study, the HLC Self-study Steering Committee identified a set of key findings at the end of each chapter. These findings identify both strengths and weaknesses in the context of undergraduate, graduate, and professional and lifelong learning. In many cases, the key findings also identify specific steps for improvement, and most of the findings support action items identified in UP 3. (2d) This section provides a short introspective analysis of several broad institutional strengths and weaknesses identified as part of the self-study process.

Without question, the university-wide planning processes and mission provide a solid direction that continues to guide the institution into the future. (1d) Although they are just a decade old, these planning processes are well established and widespread throughout the university community, and they carry weight among decision-makers. The establishment of UP 3 ensures that the university has a strategic direction for the next five years. In addition, the maturity of these planning processes over time has allowed the institution the ability to approach other long-term projects such as the self-study and the response to budget reductions in the context of planning. As a result, the university finds itself both reflective of the past and focused on the future. (1d, 2d)

The University of Wyoming has a unique role in the State of Wyoming as it is the only baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral degree-granting institution. This role frames the way the administration, faculty, and staff view the mission of the institution, the way they approach their jobs, and the ways in which they serve constituents statewide. (1c) The

responsive nature of the university in meeting its constituents' needs has generated good will within the state, resulting in healthy budgets in terms of both operating and capital expenses. (5b, 5c) The university must also be careful to balance these needs with its institutional priorities and to work within the confines of its budget. In summary, the university takes its leadership role very seriously and accepts the accompanying responsibilities and obligations that come along with this role. In particular, the university recognizes the following responsibilities as especially important over the next several years.

Promoting access to higher education

(Core Component 5a)

The University of Wyoming and the State of Wyoming have been active and successful at addressing preparation and recruitment issues statewide in hopes of both increasing the student body and enhancing diversity at the university. However, more work remains in this important endeavor. It is important for all partners in education to swiftly implement the recommendations from the advisory committee assembled to review the Hathaway Success Curriculum, as well the program's scholarship awards. (5a)

Funding the college experience

(Core Component 2b)

The university takes pride in its reputation as one of America's "best college buys," but it is concerned that affordability is impacting perceptions about the quality of its programs. Tuition policy is central to any discussions around this issue. Specifically, the university should examine whether increases in undergraduate tuition actually enhance the institution's image as well as provide a more diverse funding profile during tough economic times. (2b)

Reinforcing areas of distinction

(Core Component 4b)

Over the last 10 years, the university has grown in its teaching and research endeavors in six areas of distinction: critical areas of science and technology; cultural assets, arts, and humanities; environment and natural resources; history and culture of the Rocky Mountain region; life sciences; and professions critical to the state and region. These areas have become the backbone of the institution's operations. It is vital to carry forward the successful research and scholarly activities in these areas in which the university has excelled. (4b) To do this, departments will need to continue to align with these areas to the greatest extent possible and implement curricular offerings that are focused on excellence. It should also continue to hire talented faculty and attract quality graduate students, knowing that these areas of distinction promote effective recruiting and hiring into scholarly communities, instead of trying to attract talented scholars to fill intellectually isolated pigeonholes in a vain pursuit of greater breadth.

Reinforcing interdisciplinary programs

(Core Components 2b, 4b)

To tie these scholarly communities together, the institution offers many interdisciplinary programs for an organization of its size. These programs allow more choice for students, and they allow the university to increase its offerings within budget constraints and economic limitations. (2b) In addition, the nature of these programs allows for increased collaboration among existing faculty. (4b) While interdisciplinary programs have several advantages, the university is still trying to determine best practices for their administration. Determining best practices will help to mitigate some of the challenges associated with offering such programs, including issues of administrative oversight, budgets, and the assurance of specialization for graduate students.

Promoting a learning-centered organization

(Core Components 3c, 3d)

While learning has always been paramount at the University of Wyoming, the institution has made major strides over the last decade in becoming a truly learning-focused organization. (3c, 3d) The university attributes this evolution in part to the development and implementation of its assessment of student learning processes, especially at the program level, and in part to an increased emphasis to connect research to credit bearing instruction. The university has worked to build a learning-centered culture where faculty ask critical questions about learning and engage in the assessment of that learning because it is important and meaningful. Evolution over the past decade of LeARN and transitions summit programs are prime examples of using outcomes information for continuous program improvement. (3c) The institution sees the value in assessment for continual improvement and remains committed at all levels to moving these processes forward. Formal conversations about learning are occurring broadly throughout the institution. The task now is to capture more of these conversations in the context of established assessment processes, and to cultivate departments and programs still reluctant to join in these important efforts.

SUMMARY

While the self-study was an all encompassing project for the University of Wyoming for the last two years, we have truly benefitted from the process and this introspective. The process itself compelled administrators, faculty, and staff to reflect on the last decade with an eye on using these reflections to strengthen the university's future direction. In addition, it expanded the important university-wide dialogue about critical issues and allowed the university to refine existing documentation processes.

The university's leaders are optimistic about the institution's future and the future of the State of Wyoming. While the last few years have been fraught with many national economic and political challenges, the University of Wyoming has emerged as a strong leader capable of serving as a champion for Wyoming and its citizenry through adherence to its long-term vision and plans. We are committed to following through on the key findings of the self-study. We also look forward to the comments and suggestions of the HLC site visit team. With the institution's commitment to quality, the university recognizes the importance of regional accreditation and takes very seriously its obligation to meet the policies of the Higher Learning Commission.
