

AN OVERVIEW TO UW'S ASSURANCE ARGUMENT

In preparation for the Higher Learning Commission comprehensive evaluation visit, Fall 2019

ABOUT THE ASSURANCE ARGUMENT

UW's Assurance Argument provides information about how our institution meets each of HLC's five Criteria and twenty-one Core Components. Our responses for each of the core components provides:

- an articulation of how each Core Component within the Criterion is met, and
- links to materials in the institution's Evidence File in support of each claim. Examples of evidence include our mission statement, budget documents, assessment and curriculum reports, minutes from meetings of governing boards and other prominent committees, materials submitted to specialized accreditation organizations and state agencies, and news articles, among other materials. These materials are uploaded to HLC's assurance system as stable pdf files. UW has collected over 3,000 pieces of evidence in support of the Assurance Argument.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: KEY POINTS OF UW'S ASSURANCE ARGUMENT AND CRITERIA FOR ACCREDITATION

Criterion 1. Mission

The institution's mission is clear and articulated publicly; it guides the institution's operations.

1. *The institution's mission is broadly understood within the institution and guides its operations.*
2. *The mission is articulated publicly.*
3. *The institution understands the relationship between its mission and the diversity of society.*
4. *The institution's mission demonstrates commitment to the public good.*

"Breaking Through: 2017-2022" is a broadly visible strategic plan, developed through a well-planned process, and it provides clear alignment between UW's guiding mission and related goals and targets. Related efforts to align unit-level strategic plans with "Breaking Through: 2017-2022" help ensure that the mission statement filters down to everyday operations.

The mission and strategic plan establish the value of acknowledging diversity and contributing to the public good. More importantly, the actions of the University demonstrate its commitment to diversity and to serving various state and global constituencies. The recent establishment of centers for diversity, equity, and inclusion; global engagement; transfer success; and student involvement and leadership are powerful indicators of the University's recognition that these focuses need to be integrated into the institution's traditional focus on teaching, research, and service

Criterion 2. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct.

The institution acts with integrity; its conduct is ethical and responsible.

1. *The institution operates with integrity in its financial, academic, personnel, and auxiliary functions; it establishes and follows policies and processes for fair and ethical behavior on the part of its governing board, administration, faculty, and staff.*
2. *The institution presents itself clearly and completely to its students and to the public with regard to its programs, requirements, faculty and staff, costs to students, control, and accreditation relationships.*
3. *The governing board of the institution is sufficiently autonomous to make decisions in the best interest of the institution and to assure its integrity.*

4. *The institution is committed to freedom of expression and the pursuit of truth in teaching and learning.*

5. *The institution's policies and procedures call for responsible acquisition, discovery and application of knowledge by its faculty, students and staff.*

The University aggregates important data about the institution, financial aid, student rights, health and safety, and student retention, completion, and diversity on its Consumer Information webpage. This page provides transparent information that helps ensure our compliance with the Higher Education Act of 1965; it allows data about the University to be collected and compared to other institutions; and it serves as evidence of responsible practices.

Additionally, a variety of University Regulations and other policies establish expectations for ethical conduct, including academic honesty, fair and respectful workplaces, and appropriate relationships between the faculty, administration, the President, and Board of Trustees. Trustee bylaws help to promote decision making that is autonomous from undue influence and that represents political and geographic diversity.

The values of free expression and responsible research conduct are established and directed most visibly in the Student Code of Conduct, UW Regulation 2-15 Academic Freedom in process of approval. in policies of the Office of Research and Economic Development, and in principles affirmed by the Deans Council and Faculty Senate.

Criterion 3. Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources, and Support. *The institution provides high quality education, wherever and however its offerings are delivered.*

1. *The institution's degree programs are appropriate to higher education.*
2. *The institution demonstrates that the exercise of intellectual inquiry and the acquisition, application, and integration of broad learning and skills are integral to its educational programs.*
3. *The institution has the faculty and staff needed for effective, high-quality programs and student services.*
4. *The institution provides support for student learning and effective teaching.*
5. *The institution fulfills the claims it makes for an enriched educational environment.*

Nearly all (93%) of UW educational programs are driven by clear and visible learning outcomes. In many cases those outcomes are aligned with professional accrediting bodies to help ensure that UW degrees are comparable to those offered by other peer institutions. Annual Program Review processes, adopted in 2018, provide additional assurance that our programs meet the needs of students, employers, and society more broadly, and that programs are underpinned by knowledge and skills appropriate to the degree type and level.

The University maintains a student-to-teacher ratio of approximately 15:1 and substantial investments in information technology on campus and for distance students, research infrastructure, and instructional facilities help ensure an environment for effective teaching and learning. An updated advising model, student centers for specific populations, and continued investment in a variety of student support programs ensure that we remain able to help the range of students we admit. The adoption of the SOAR experiential transcript application should make it easier for UW to develop a better understanding of its impacts outside the classroom. Student Satisfaction Survey data from the past 20 years indicate high measures of satisfaction with overall student experience, as well as with specific academic experiences and support programs.

***Criterion 4. Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement.** The institution demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs, learning environments, and support services, and it evaluates their effectiveness for student learning through processes designed to promote continuous improvement.*

- 1. The institution demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs.*
- 2. The institution demonstrates a commitment to educational achievement and improvement through ongoing assessment of student learning.*
- 3. The institution demonstrates a commitment to educational improvement through ongoing attention to retention, persistence, and completion rates in its degree and certificate programs.*

The newly adopted Annual Program Review process should help UW better evaluate the quality of academic programs on an ongoing basis. Participation in local and national assessments, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement, Collegiate Learning Assessment, and the Great Colleges to Work For survey, help us better understand factors shaping our learning environment and make valuable changes to improve practice.

UW has long collected and evaluated data on recruitment, retention, and completion dates; the Associate Vice Provost for Enrollment Management position created in 2017 is helping to focus and better coordinate our efforts to support students throughout their time at UW.

Despite several years of successful, centralized assessment report processes, the current assessment specialist is pursuing a more distributed model in which numerous individuals are responsible for small pieces of institutional assessment. For example, the assessment of two key pieces of the general education curriculum, first-year seminars and communication-intensive courses, now fall to the coordinators of these courses. Though this model has the potential for success, it is not yet achieving our goals for campus-wide continuous improvement.

***Criterion 5. Resources, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness.** The institution's resources, structures, and processes are sufficient to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its educational offerings, and respond to future challenges and opportunities. The institution plans for the future.*

- 1. The institution's resource base supports its current educational programs and its plans for maintaining and strengthening their quality in the future.*
- 2. The institution's governance and administrative structures promote effective leadership and support collaborative processes that enable the institution to fulfill its mission.*
- 3. The institution engages in systematic and integrated planning.*
- 4. The institution works systematically to improve its performance.*

UW's reasonable and incremental approach to goal setting can be seen in its strategic plan, which identifies baseline and 2022 targets for over two dozen performance indicators.

Although UW faced multiple years of reductions to its allocation from the State of Wyoming, the institution's forward-looking planning has allowed it to weather these storms and continue to move forward with a strong commitment to the educational mission of the University. Additionally, UW's participation in the Great Colleges to Work For survey will be used to gauge employee satisfaction and inform decision making in areas for improvement. Similarly, UW commissioned an institutional capacity study that informs planning, program assessment, and resource allocation for the next decade.

Decision-making processes for budgeting, hiring, and planning continue to be collaborative endeavors, and the University's program proposal policy informs and guides resource allocations that are made systematically, in line with strategic planning, and focused on educational purposes.

The adoption of Oracle-based WyoCloud data management system has presented some challenges, though in the long run it will increase transparency and efficiency for financial and human-resources processes. The implementation strategy coupled a shift in financial accounting principles used by UW with a new technology platform. Indeed, multiple changes at a rapid pace has been a feature of UW's landscape for the past several years. Together, this led to a low user acceptance rate initially. However, UW is optimistic that the next stages of the implementation of these and other new systems will begin to deliver on the system's promised benefits.



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