

Mid-Cycle Evaluation (Year 3)

Peer-Evaluation Report

Highline College

Des Moines, Washington

October 16-17, 2023

NWCCU Liaison to the Peer Evaluation Team:

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

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Introduction

On behalf of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), the evaluation committee reviewed Highline College's Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report and conducted a site visit October 16-17, 2023. The NWCCU liaison was Dr. Gita Bangera, Senior Vice President, NWCCU.

Highline College, located in Des Moines, Washington is a comprehensive community college and offers applied bachelor's degree programs. Highline College is dedicated and focused on supporting an extremely diverse student population and is noted as the most diverse student body in the State of Washington and one of the most diverse nationally. Highline College is committed to this diversity which is embodied in the institutions Core Themes, Mission, Vision and Values.

The purpose of the Mid-Cycle Review was to review and provide feedback to Highline College of their preparation and readiness on meeting the requirements and standards for the comprehensive year seven Evaluation of Institutional Effectiveness (EIE), reaffirmation of accreditation report and visit. The Committee also reviewed prior recommendations from the 2020 EIE visit to provide observations to the NWCCU Commission regarding the status and progress in addressing those recommendations.

The evaluation committee received a well-prepared Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report. The report included a significant number of links to various resources including website links and data. The Committee felt it would have been helpful to summarize the information available in the links in the narrative along with providing the links. The committee appreciates the work of the campus community in support of the Mid-Cycle visit both in advance of the visit and while on site. The Highline College community was thoughtful in their engagement in preparation of the report, participation and availability during our visit and responsiveness to our questions and observations during the visit.

The prior Year Seven review was conducted in October 2020 and as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic was performed remotely. Highline College was provided with three recommendations. The three recommendations were included as a part of this evaluation. The institution provided information to the team regarding these recommendations. This report includes feedback on the progress and observations which were informed by the Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation report, interviews, and review of evidence during the site visit.

Finally, the evaluation committee also completed the US Department of Education (USDE) Virtual Visit Follow-Up Certification document. This Certification required a review of facilities on the main campus of Highline College, verification that evaluations are being conducted in accordance with institutional policy, verification of adequacy of library resources including

facilities and collections consistent with the institutional mission and degrees offered, and verification that the institutions facilities are accessible, safe, secure and sufficient in quantity and quality based on mission and degrees offered.

Mission:

As a South King County college striving for social justice, Highline College partners with global students as they envision, plan and achieve their educational and professional goals. *Adopted October 2022.*

Vision:

Highline College creates anti-racist, equitable pathways in higher education to close opportunity gaps experienced by our students. We support employees to foster the conditions for student and workplace equity. We accept people as they are and honor the life experience they bring. We are cultivating a collaborative learning community that centers the well-being of the whole person and provides a sense of belonging. We highly regard the families and support systems that enable our success and acknowledge that by working together we are limitless.

Values:

Highline College seeks to live out these values in everyday practice:

- Accessibility
- Accountability
- Cultural Responsiveness and Agency
- Environmental Sustainability
- Equity-First Focus
- Life-Long Learning
- Partnership with local and global communities
- Respect
- Social Justice
- Student-Centered Approaches
- Transparency

Core Themes:

- **Core theme 1:** Reduce barriers and close equity gaps to access for all community members
- **Core theme 2:** Increase educational success and close equity gaps; collaborate to improve

- **Core theme 3:** Create a more inclusive working and learning environment and a more valued, visible relationship with communities we serve
- **Core theme 4:** Promote a campus culture which fosters equity and inclusivity supporting employee growth and development, and institution capacity for transformation.

The following report provides our assessment of Highline College's Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report including the Year 7 2020 visit recommendations and our observations based on information received during the site visit.

Visit Summary

The site visit was well-structured and provided opportunities to meet with faculty, staff, and administrators. Meetings were informative and provided adequate time for team members to address prepared questions and follow-up questions as needed. The evaluation committee's work focused on the following areas:

- Mission and Institutional Effectiveness
- Student Achievement
- Student Learning and Assessment
- Follow-up to recommendations related to assessment and program learning; data collection and use of data and how it informs planning, decision making and resource allocation in support of student success; and development of a plan that supports long-term financial stability and sustainability.

We greatly appreciated the time campus members provided to contribute and support the Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report, and to answer our questions. We would like to provide a participation appreciation for Dr. Emily Lardner and Ms. Carrie Davidson for their engagement and support in advance and throughout the visit. The team met with a large cadre of individuals throughout the institution including:

- Executive Team
- President Mosby
- Institutional Effectiveness Committee
- Student Success Council
- Dean of Advising/Enrollment
- Dean of Student Support
- Funding Services
- Program Assessment

- Equity First Strategic Planning Core Team/Diversity & Equity
- Faculty Representatives of Assessment Committee
- Assessment of Institutional Effectiveness & Student Achievement
- Facilities
- Student Learning Assessment
- Finance
- Student Support & Advising
- Student Services
- Library Resources
- Academic Leadership Team
- Human Resources
- eLearning/Teaching & Learning Support

Part I: Mission Fulfillment

Following its last seven-year evaluation, Highline College revised its college mission, vision, and values. That process was led by the Equity First Strategic Planning Core Team, a representative body that included faculty, staff, administration, and students (1.B.3). Highline College's mission statement clearly lays out its educational purpose and its commitment to student learning and achievement (1.A.1). The evaluators are impressed by the collaborative process college leadership developed to produce its most recent mission, vision, and values (1.B.3).

The evaluators find that Highline College has established a continuous process of assessing institutional effectiveness, including student learning and achievement and support services (1.B.1). Highline College created a process of institutional effectiveness led by the Institutional Effectiveness Committee (IEC). That committee produces a mission fulfillment report that lays out four core themes around access, learning, community, and capacity (1.B.2). Several objectives, indicators, and measurements address these four core themes. Various pieces of the mission fulfillment report reflect the contribution of different stakeholders at the college, and Highline uses the mission fulfillment report process to align the work of the college with the mission (1.B.3).

In response to recent enrollment challenges, Highline College also created a Student Success Council (SCC) charged with developing goals and objectives for the college. The SSC drafted a Strategic Framework for Equitable Student Success. The framework identifies four goals around access, learning, community, and culture/capacity with accompanying objectives. Through both the IEC and the SCC, Highline College has established meaningful goals, objectives, and indicators of its goals (1.B.2). The SCC also appears to be helping the college assess its strategic position and define its future direction (1.B.4).

Highline College engages in a highly collaborative and inclusive process when it comes to the work of the IEC and the SSC. There are opportunities for constituencies within the college to provide comment and contribute to the work of both groups. The evaluators see Highline College's inclusive planning process as a real strength, both in terms of including many units of the college in the process of continuous improvement and in supporting those same groups to align their work with centrally established themes. The evaluators were impressed with the level of collegiality among staff, faculty, and administrators.

Considerations for Mission Fulfillment in preparation for the seven-year visit

To summarize, the evaluators see that Highline College has established a mission that captures its educational purpose and commitment to students. Highline College is also hitting the mark in several key areas under standard 1B. The college has developed an inclusive, widely published, and participatory process for doing institutional effectiveness. The evaluators have identified four areas where Highline College can strengthen its institutional effectiveness process as it prepares for the year seven visit.

Closing the loop

While the college has developed a continuous process to assess institutional effectiveness, the evaluators do not see how the process systematically informs decisions around assigning resources or improving student learning and achievement. The expansiveness of the report presents a challenge when it comes to the institutional effectiveness process supporting decision making. It also wasn't clear who was consuming the report within the college. Highline College may wish to modify their process to make the report more user-friendly and incorporate it into the decision-making cycle.

It doesn't appear that Highline College measures or reports on the progress toward goals and objectives in its Strategic Framework for Equitable Student Success. It does produce a report that describes the activities in a select group of objectives in the Strategic Framework, but that report describes a set of inputs. When external evaluators see a document with named goals and objectives, it creates the expectation that the document will result in some assessment of the progress the college is making on those goals and objectives.

Integrating or aligning strategic framework and mission fulfillment report

The evaluators had a difficult time understanding the relationship between the Student Success Council (SCC) and the Institutional Effectiveness Committee (IEC) with respect to the overall institutional effectiveness process. The mission fulfillment report includes core themes, objectives, indicators, and measurements. The strategic framework includes a similar but not entirely matching set of goals and objectives. Highline has produced a crosswalk document to help readers understand how the report and the framework relate to each other.

The evaluators saw evidence of the institutional effectiveness process being distributed across two groups that are developing sometimes overlapping and sometimes distinct objectives. Highline College may want to consider further integrating this work. The crosswalk document

effectively starts that work of integration. For example, the evaluators questioned why a core theme around access is located in one document and a goal around access in another document both which have different objectives. Highline appears to be challenged in developing a continuous process of improvement when goals and objectives cut across two groups and frameworks. The reporting on mission fulfillment does not directly feed back into the college's understanding of how it is meeting goals in the strategic framework. Highline College has an opportunity to simplify and focus the work of the college around the four goals/themes.

There is not one correct approach to doing institutional effectiveness, so the evaluators respect how the two groups play different roles in the process. Several individuals described how they understood those different roles. (One intriguing metaphor that emerged was that the IEC developed the map while the SCC served as the vehicle.) Overall, though, the explanations were varied and not always conclusive, suggesting that the college has some work to do in defining the roles of these two groups. Can Highline still support the distinct work of both groups while having that work feed into one set of goals/themes, objectives, and indicators?

Defining mission fulfillment

The evaluators did not see a clear definition of mission fulfillment in the mission fulfillment report, nor could the evaluators obtain an understanding through our discussions with the campus. How does Highline determine whether it is achieving its mission? This doesn't have to be one measurement, but the collective work of the report should result in some summary account of mission fulfillment.

Breadth of mission fulfillment report

Alongside integrating the work of IEC and SCC, Highline College might consider trimming its mission fulfillment report, reducing the total number of objectives, indicators, and measurements. Highline College reports that the Mission Fulfillment Report reflects additions from other stakeholder groups who requested objectives and measures reflecting their priorities. The relatively distributed nature of the Mission Fulfillment Report has resulted in a document that accounts for several objectives, indicators, and measurements. Under the four core themes of access, success, community and capacity, readers encounter 19 objectives, 37 indicators, and 74 measurements. The evaluators are concerned that this isn't sustainable for the college. The breadth of the report may also hinder Highline College's ability to clearly define mission fulfillment, and it reduces the mission fulfillment report's overall coherence.

Finally, the college may want to adjust its approach to managing core themes, goals, objectives, and indicators. Highline College has hit upon a strong process for ensuring the participation of multiple areas of the college in the work of mission fulfillment. However, the college can be inclusive in its processes (1.B.3) while still empowering committees and college leaders to be selective when it comes to establishing a more curated set of college-wide goals and objectives. The evaluators understand that Highline College is already considering curating the mission fulfillment report objectives and indicators.

Highline College is doing good work to address standard 1B. It is dedicated attention, time, and resources to the institutional effectiveness work of continuous process improvement. It is authentically engaging several groups at the college, and it is focusing college work on relevant challenges. Highline's continued efforts to focus and refine this work should set the stage for a successful seven-year evaluation.

Part II: Student Achievement

Highline College has a comprehensive system for measuring student achievement. In alignment with Standard 1.D.2, the college collects data on student persistence, retention, course progress, completion, and post-college success. These measures are included in the annual Mission Fulfillment Report (MFR), published by the Office of Institutional Research, and were shared across campus for the purpose of monitoring the progress and informing strategic planning, resource allocation and workgroup formation.

As per Standard 1.D.3, the Highline data is benchmarked against other CTC, Regional and National Peers. All measures are disaggregated by race, ethnicity, sex and age. Most of the measures are also disaggregated by socioeconomic status. Because most of Highline's students are first generation college students, all their support services and student facing content are designed to support first generation students. Highline has decided that it is not helpful to disaggregate by this category.

Highline has developed strong initiatives to improve student success and close equity gaps such as:

- The Learning and Teaching Center promotes the use of the four-connections, an evidence-based retention practice, as well as Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TiLT) to promote success in courses, through ongoing workshops and the communities of practice.
- The Title III grant supports communities of practice focused on implementing anti-racist pedagogical practices to increase course completion rates and close equity gaps, including a community of practice for faculty in the English department.
- Math faculty continue to implement corequisite math courses, leading to increases in course completion rates and reduced equity gaps.

Feedback on Student Achievement

Highline has developed strong initiatives to improve student success and close equity gaps, however work should continue to better understand the results of the nine key measures of student achievement. What are the general takeaways from this data? Are the specific strategies to improve student success and close equity gaps having the intended impact? Do

adjustments need to be made with these strategies? Are there other key measures that should be considered? For example, should a measure for student engagement be added?

Highline College might consider gathering additional data on completion rates in online, hybrid, hyflex, and on-campus courses. Hyflex certainly offers students convenience in scheduling and attending class but are students as successful in that modality?

Highline College might more clearly define why it selected Valencia College as a national peer. Valencia College, with multiple campuses, is quite a bit larger than Highline College, and this particular selection was noted by the evaluation team. According to Standard 1.D.3., the institution's disaggregated indicators of student achievement should be widely published and available on the institution's website. The evaluation committee could not locate evidence that Highline College's student achievement data is published and available on the institutional website.

Part III: Programmatic Assessment

Program Offerings and Transfer/Credit for Prior Learning

Highline College offers over 100 degrees and certificates organized under 8 broad pathways within a Guided Pathways framework. Along with graduation requirements, program learning outcomes (PLOs) for Professional-Technical programs and either discipline-centered or Core Competency learning outcomes for transfer degrees are clearly stated in Highline College's online catalog and reflect appropriate levels of breadth and depth in recognized fields of study. Program maps located within the college's degree pathways web pages reflect course sequencing that allows for timely completion and culminates in a synthesis of learning. Highline's Transfer Credit Transcript Evaluation page within its Registration and Records website outlines its conditions for transfer-in credits and its process for requesting a transcript evaluation. As such, Highline College is well-positioned to demonstrate meeting Standards 1.C.1-1.C.4 and 1.C.8 in its Year 7 Evaluation of Institutional Excellence (EIE).

Program Review

Prior to academic year 2019-20, Highline College did not have a systematic process of program/discipline review in place. Instead, a review of a program was initiated by the administration, causing great apprehension. Furthermore, this practice was only applied to professional-technical programs, and departments in transfer disciplines did not participate. As a result, Highline's Assessment Committee developed a more systematic and cyclical Program Improvement Process (PIP) that included a supporting guidance document and reporting template used by both professional-technical programs and transfer disciplines. This process,

intentionally designed to be equity-first, inquiry-based, and improvement/growth-minded, was first implemented in 2020-2021 and has since had eleven reviewed departments.

Highline College's Mid-Cycle report included two examples of programs/disciplines that had undergone this relatively new program/discipline review, the Legal Studies program which offers 1-year Paralegal Plus Certificate and 2-year AAS in Paralegal, and the Life, Oceans, and General Science (LOGS) discipline that offers classes towards an AS direct transfer agreement. These programs/disciplines attempted different improvements described in the Mid-Cycle report. Legal Studies implemented in-class advising, and LOGS measured improvement on exam scores after incorporating embedded tutoring into their BIOL&160 course, a prerequisite for higher level Biology courses needed for the Nursing program. In speaking with Legal Studies and LOGS faculty who participated in the process however, these implementations were less than ideal, did not seem to reflect the needs or challenges faced by students in the program, and were not grounded in a reliable data set that could inform faculty about course pass rates and progression, program retention, or program completion. Legal Studies faculty felt that the advising project was encouraged more by an external consultant and the college's overall trend towards restructured advising at the time of the PIP. Conversely, they would have liked to have incorporated more elements of their program accreditation and received data that allowed them to analyze access, progression through their programs, and whether their graduates' got jobs. LOGS initially interviewed students in Biology courses about what they thought contributed to their success and found that Black female students identified connections with faculty as a contributing factor. Faculty expressed, however, that the implementation towards improving this connection by incorporating embedded tutors was a little different.

Periodic, recurrent program/discipline reviews are a standard practice of evaluating curriculum relevance, student learning, and metrics of equitable student access and success. It furthermore provides departments opportunities to set goals, implement planned, data-informed improvements for the next review cycle, and request resources to assist with making those improvements. While there are positive aspects around equity and inquiry, in its current form decisions including those about resource allocation are not being made based on the PIP. To better prepare for Standards 1.C.5, 1.C.7, and 1.D.4 in the Year 7 EIE, the college might consider redesigning its PIP to streamline efforts, include a relatively standard data set for faculty to analyze, and incorporate student learning outcomes assessment in a way that addresses both disciplines and defined programs. As described in their Mid-Cycle report, the college recognizes that it does not yet have an institutional data source to support a form of program/discipline review as a result of challenges with the legacy system/ctcLink integration and might thus consider prioritizing efforts. This data, if able to be disaggregated and made regularly available to departments could not only serve the purposes of a review process but also assist with ongoing monitoring of student success in programs and disciplines in a way that positions the college to mitigate perceived equity gaps.

Program Learning Outcomes Assessment

During the visit, the evaluation team spoke with the college's Assessment Committee, faculty, and academic leaders on the topics of program and institutional learning outcomes assessment. Highline's Assessment Committee consists of an extremely dedicated group of faculty who clearly care very deeply about best practices in learning outcomes assessment. The committee generally serves to develop, implement, and assist faculty with the college's assessment processes, including the use of an internally developed tool to capture and document faculty's individual and departments' overall course learning outcomes (CLO) assessment data and reflections. These data are also sent to Institutional Research and compiled for incorporation into the MFR. From the data and documentation, the Assessment Committee felt that department conversations around assessment results are not yet systematic but that pockets of good assessment are happening. This has driven the committee to continuously strive towards a culture of assessment that does not feel like an additional task for faculty, but committee members are somewhat fatigued after many different attempts to reinvent and streamline their assessment processes to improve faculty engagement.

Highline College faculty are well accustomed to assessment of student learning outcomes at the course level, including reflection on their assessment results and how they can use those results within their individual classes to improve teaching and student learning. They are not yet accustomed to assessment of program student learning outcomes (PLOs). This can be a difficult change in perspective after having an established practice of assessing individual CLOs and for 2-year colleges in general, which can have different criteria for what is recognized as a program. At Highline, there are clearly stated PLOs for Professional-Technical programs. Some of the AA- and AS-Direct Transfer Agreements (DTAs) have discipline-specific outcomes (e.g., Associate in Business, DTA/MRP) and others list the college's Core Competencies (e.g., Associate in Computer Science, DTA/MRP). To better prepare for Standards 1.C.5 and 1.C.7 in terms of program learning outcomes assessment, the college might engage in curriculum mapping of courses to PLOs and perhaps in some instances to disciplinary learning outcomes if sequential courses are offered within a discipline. Highline College is familiar with the practice of curriculum mapping. They might look to examples of how other colleges have developed a recurrent process for PLO assessment. The college will then need to show concrete examples of how programs assess PLOs and utilize the results to improve student learning in those programs for the Year 7 EIE.

Core Competency Assessment

Highline College has established a set of Core Competencies that were first introduced to faculty by the Assessment Committee in 2020-21. The committee is committed to a robust process of assessment that ensures students have multiple opportunities to engage the competencies throughout their curriculum and has been thoughtful and intentionally preparing faculty to assess the Core Competencies. Some faculty have piloted use of the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) VALUE rubrics to assess Core Competencies in

their areas. At the time of the visit a large effort to map all courses to applicable competencies was scheduled for the coming Friday during Opening Week. Faculty who participated in these initial assessments expressed appreciation for the opportunity to converse with other faculty outside their disciplines about how best to teach and assess the Core Competencies. Furthermore, they felt their efforts were supported by administration in terms of providing time and space for dialog, though some wished administrators would exercise more authority in requiring faculty to complete assessment. Academic leaders, including faculty coordinators, division chairs, deans, and the Vice President of Academic Affairs, also expressed support for faculty in instruction and assessment by way of internal and external professional development opportunities. The college can continue to prepare for Standard 1.C.6 in the Year 7 EIE by persisting in its Core Competency work, showing concrete examples of Core Competency assessment in a cross-section of disciplines and programs, summarizing data for the Core Competencies assessed across the college, and showing examples of how the college is making improvements based on its Core Competency assessment findings.

PART IV: Moving Forward

The evaluation committee was impressed with Highline's commitment to participatory planning and collaboration and significant engagement by stakeholders. We encourage the institution to review the mission fulfillment and effectiveness framework so that it is clearly understood, articulated and that progress and outcomes are clearly available. The alignment between the Strategic Framework and Mission Fulfillment Report was not understood by the evaluation committee and appeared to have objectives with inconsistent measures and indicators. Additionally, Highline may wish to revisit the number of indicators which could prove overwhelming for tracking and evaluation.

In advance of the year 7 report additional work of assessment of program-level student learning outcomes and program review to support improvement of instructional programs is necessary. Highline has the opportunity to increase participation in this area and to continue its work in mapping and assessing Core Competencies in its programs and disciplines.

PART V: Addendums (Prior Recommendations)

Below we share our observations about the three NWCCU Recommendations.

Progress on Prior Recommendations

Recommendation 1 (Fall 2020 Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability Peer Evaluation)

Continue to develop emerging systems of assessment to evaluate the quality of learning in its programs and through assessment of its Core Competencies, and to use the results of its assessment efforts to continuously improve student learning (1.C.5, 1.C.6, 1.C.7)

Progress on Recommendation 1

The evaluation team observed that Highline College has continued to develop its emerging systems of assessment to evaluate the quality of learning in its programs and through Core Competencies with varying degrees of progress towards systematic implementation and use of results to improve student learning. First, the college has developed and implemented a Program Improvement Plan as a means of scheduled and recurrent program and discipline review and highlighted two examples of programs (Legal Studies) and disciplines (Life, Ocean, and General Sciences – LOGS) that underwent this process. The college's Assessment Committee put considerable thought into designing a process and review template, outlined in a guidance document provided to the evaluators, which was grounded in equity, inquiry, and improvement. It was difficult, however, to see the connection between the template questions in the guidance document and the examples of program improvement described in the Mid-Cycle Report. Faculty who underwent the process further expressed that the review process was less than ideal and did not seem to reflect the needs or challenges faced by students in the program or the program itself. Furthermore, Highline does not yet have a college-wide data source to support the review process due to ongoing challenges with integrating the college's legacy system and ctclink. Conversations with faculty and administrators during the visit suggested that the process may need to be redesigned.

Second, the college engages in fairly regular assessment of course learning outcomes (CLOs) within its programs and disciplines and documents this assessment within an internally developed assessment tool. The faculty that the evaluators spoke with seemed knowledgeable about conducting and documenting CLO assessment. The Assessment Committee, who tracks the assessment, felt that faculty discussions around assessment were not yet systematic but that there were good pockets of assessment being done. A few examples of course assessment and reflection on how the assessment results could be used to improve student learning were provided during the evaluation visit. The examples included an individual course assessment report completed by a single faculty member as well as two department annual reviews (DARs), which summarize the number of courses assessed, the department's discussion of the assessment data, and plans for improving student learning. It was not apparent how direct assessment of program learning outcomes (PLOs) was being conducted despite evidence of stated PLOs in the college's catalog. The evaluation team was not provided with examples such as integrated curriculum maps that align courses to PLOs and identified assessments across the curriculum that show how and when PLOs are assessed in the program. Furthermore, the evaluation team was not provided with examples of PLO achievement data and how that data was used to improve programs.

Finally, Highline College has made noticeable progress towards assessment of Core Competencies, which serve as the college's institutional learning outcomes. Towards this effort, the college has elected to use the well-documented American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) VALUE rubrics

and provided the evaluators with a pilot assessment of the Oral Communications Core Competency, which included data for 40 students. These data followed a thoughtful process implemented by the Assessment Committee where faculty and students translated the rubrics into discipline-specific assignments for classroom use, and then completed an “overlay” to identify how students would demonstrate achievement of each rubric dimension. This work was presented at the AAC&U Annual Conference, and the college has since applied this process to two more Core Competencies. Their goal is to ensure students have multiple opportunities to engage the competencies throughout their time at Highline College by mapping every course to applicable competencies. At the time of the visit, this mapping of every course to an applicable Core Competency was scheduled for the coming Friday as part of the college’s professional development.

Recommendation 2:

Continue to develop systems of data collection and use that data to inform planning, decision-making, and allocation of resources to support student success and mitigate perceived gaps in achievement and equity. (2.G.1, 1.D.3, 1.D.4)

Progress on Recommendation 2

Highline College has developed strong systems of data collection. The Institutional Effectiveness (IE) Committee with representation from across the campus assisted with the initiative to develop Institutional Effectiveness plans at the department level. The College also has a process of continuous improvement of goal setting and aligning strategies with goals at the department level. Several examples of improvement were provided in the Mid-Cycle report. However, the Mid-Cycle report didn’t address how the allocation of resources has improved to support student success.

The department goals that need additional resources are considered for funding by the Executive Cabinet. Due to fiscal constraints, only a handful of requests were approved to be funded for FY24. The divisions and departments, however, could shift existing resources to fund requests that were not approved by the Executive Cabinet. This process doesn’t seem very strategic for funding student success priorities. The College should continue to work to improve its processes to allocate resources to be better aligned to support success and mitigate gaps in achievement and equity.

Recommendation 3:

Develop a comprehensive plan to focus divergent priorities, define a future direction for the institution, and to serve as a foundation for gauging long-term financial stability and sustainability. (2.E.2).

Progress on Recommendation 3

Highline College has experienced a decline in enrollment over the last several years. This decline in enrollment has resulted in an impact on revenues and budget constraints. The evaluation committee noted that the Mid-Cycle Evaluation Report included information regarding strategies the institution is undertaking to increase enrollment and retention however the report did not include specific data and information on status of the fiscal environment, status of the current fiscal year and future resource planning.

During the on-site visit the evaluation committee requested and received the Highline FY 2023-24 Operating Budget. The budget includes projected targets to include an increase in enrollment, expenditure reductions and utilization of fund balance to support the current year's operating budget. During discussions with institutional personnel, it was noted that salary savings and fund balance are being utilized to support projected revenue shortfall.

The institution should utilize planning, data and institutional effectiveness, student learning and achievement to guide decision making including but not limited to resource allocations. This is imperative for ensuring financial viability and long-term sustainability. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic over the past several years, higher education institutions received federal funding to address revenue shortfalls primarily through the CARES Act: Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund. With the sunset of these funds which have been primarily utilized to address institution revenue shortfalls and support student financial aid, institutions must address structural fiscal challenges realized in the absence of this one-time external funding.

Highline College notes in the FY 2023-24 Operating Budget report that the need to address the budget deficit is a priority of institutional leadership for financial sustainability; however, they are concerned with implementation of budget reductions and the impact this will have on employee well-being and morale. Temporary measures to address revenue shortfalls have been implemented for the current year, however these strategies will not address long-term sustainability if enrollment levels do not increase to support budget targets. The concern of the evaluation committee is that delaying structural decisions will be challenging.

Highline College is encouraged to engage the campus community in decision-making process regarding budget planning and strategies to address fiscal shortfalls. For future reporting the evaluation committee recommends including specific financial information and budget data in reports to the NWCCU that addresses the fiscal environment.