



# NWCCU Demonstration Project Report

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## I. Overview of the Demonstration Project

“Rewarding” — “Productive” — “Challenging” — “Problem Solving” — “Beneficial”— “Collaborative” — “Surprising” — “Fun” — “Celebratory” — Such have been the words used by participants and reviewers to describe their experiences in the Demonstration Project of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. Several participants noted that the project has felt like “more of a conversation” with accreditation reviewers, and has facilitated “more conversation” on their campuses about student learning than previous accreditation efforts.

The purpose of the Demonstration Project has been to show how General Education assessments at the institutional level can provide sufficient data to assess mission fulfillment. Each institution outlined a methodology for assessing mission fulfillment as required in Standard 5: Mission Fulfillment, Adaptation, and Sustainability. The end goal of the Demonstration Project has been to develop a “Toolbox” of best practices that other institutions can use. These practices are found within the broader areas of defining institutional mission and a general education framework, implementing methodologies for collecting data, analyzing the data, and utilizing the outcomes for continuous improvement. The full list of “lessons learned” and “best practices” from each institution has been included as Appendix A, but a few best practices for each institution are highlighted in the body of the report.

Four institutions participated in the project: Columbia Basin College in Pasco, Washington, the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington, the University of Montana in Missoula, Montana, and the University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon. Executive leadership at each institution played a substantial role in implementing the project, and included significant participation by the project leader, chief academic officer, president, and many others on each campus. The list of participants is outlined in Appendix B.

The Demonstration Project has been a three-year process that began in the fall of 2014. Face-to-face meetings occurred in Seattle several times a year, and updates of the project were provided at the NWCCU Annual Meeting in March 2016. Phone meetings and email exchanges among project members were regular occurrences. The Demonstration Project Coordinator and NWCCU leadership made consultative visits to each institution in the fall of 2016 as teams worked to finalize their reports. Formal site visits by two peer evaluators were conducted in April and May of 2017.

The best practices from the project are captured in the self-evaluation reports from each institution that are approximately 100 pages in length. These reports will be posted online as resources for other institutions to review. In addition, a NWCCU Summit will be held in October 2017 to share the findings of the Project with participants from all NWCCU institutions.

Many takeaways or “tools” have come from the project, including the following recommendations:

- Emphasize assessment for student learning more clearly in mission fulfillment standards, while allowing for flexibility in how this is accomplished
- Utilize a multifaceted approach for General Education assessment in order to collect more meaningful and comprehensive data

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- Involve all sectors in learning outcomes assessment, and not just in academic affairs. Broader faculty, staff, and student engagement enhances sustained efforts and the likelihood of data being used for continuous improvement.
  - Consider the benefits of outlining a requirement for a Quality Enhancement Plan for NWCCU institutions
  - Foster an environment of appreciative inquiry in the accreditation review process (see <https://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/intro/whatisai.cfm>) that assumes more of a formative and problem-solving approach.
  - Encourage cohort models of accreditation review that create dialogue across institutions (e.g., an Academy for Assessment, or an Academy for Persistence and Completion). By adopting these last two strategies, more participants would likely feel that “they are part of a conversation.”

## **II. Examples of defining institutional mission fulfillment**

A key component of the Demonstration Project was to define institutional mission fulfillment in relation to General Education and student learning. The four institutions in the project approached this task in a way that featured the unique learning environment and goals at each institution. The University of Puget Sound developed a framework focusing on its “essential learning dimensions.” Columbia Basin College emphasized its five core themes, and the University of Montana similarly focused much of its analysis on five Strategic Issues from its Strategic Plan. The University of Oregon used General Education learning outcomes as a proxy for student learning, and highlighted several strategic priorities. Each institution developed a visual figure that outlined its distinctive model for mission fulfillment.

The concerted effort to improve student learning was the key aspect that connected the four institutions, and student learning certainly is a central element for all NWCCU institutions. Regardless of institutional type, all colleges and universities in the region have components of student learning that are prominent in their mission statements, which allows these models from the Demonstration Project to be considered and adapted to the unique contexts of other community colleges, private colleges and universities, and public universities.

## **III. Methodologies implemented for evidence-based assessment**

Assessment approaches from the four institutions showed that a combination of many assessments typically provides the most comprehensive data on student learning. These approaches include the following:

- Classroom-based General Education assessments
- Programmatic assessments within each discipline
- Direct assessments
- Indirect assessments
- Other curricular assessments
- Co-curricular assessments

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Institutions in the project implemented a number of standardized measures and nationally adopted rubrics. For example, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) VALUE rubrics were used on several campuses. More common were locally designed rubrics, focus groups, surveys, and other embedded assessments that facilitated the assessment of student learning.

An analogy captures the efforts within each institution in the Demonstration Project, as well as the collective work across the four institutions. As described in the University of Montana report, the “approach for General Education assessment might be aptly described by the analogy of weaving a tapestry. By itself, any one thread in the tapestry does not create a full picture that is significant. However, when integrated in intentional and skillful ways, the combined threads cumulatively produce a work of art that is coherent and meaningful. Similarly, when examined in isolation, any one of the assessments does not definitively help us conclude that we are fulfilling our mission regarding student learning. In contrast, when classroom based General Education assessments are combined with assessments in the disciplines, when direct assessments are juxtaposed with indirect assessments, and when curricular assessments are intertwined with co-curricular assessments, a pattern of student learning emerges that confirms the quality of student learning.” Multifaceted approaches to assessing General Education were employed by each institution in the project, and collectively provide a wide range of tools in an assessment toolbox.

#### **IV. Analysis of the assessment data**

A comprehensive and thorough evaluation of quantitative and qualitative data was presented by each institution. In reviewing the reports, it was impressive to see how the results were captured in visually appealing graphs and charts. Statistical analyses were used in several studies, most notably in Columbia Basin College’s remarkable research using the Collegiate Learning Assessment. The University of Oregon highlighted data from the Multistate Collaborative study and Written Composition assessment, as well as General Education assessments in math and science. Data from the co-curriculum provided students’ self-reported gains in learning outcomes.

At the University of Montana, the quality of student writing was analyzed in the Collegiate Learning Assessment, Upper-Division Writing Assessment, the Franke Global Leadership Initiative, the Writing Center, and departmental assessments. The University of Puget Sound report showcased six different case studies or “stories,” including Writing Across the Curriculum, first-year writing seminars, and an initiative to expand experiential learning.

The four institutions were candid in sharing the student learning scores that were high, as well as those areas in need of attention and improvement. In all four reports, the analyses went beyond the quantitative and qualitative student data to discuss the broader implications of the data.

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## **V. Demonstration of how the assessment results are utilized for continuous improvement**

Institutions were asked to outline action steps that stemmed from the data, which prompted them to provide examples of closing the loop (i.e., assessing, making changes, and assessing again to see changes in learning outcomes). These included curricular modifications, institutional student success initiatives, the creation of committees, and the design (and redesign) of assessment measures.

At the University of Puget Sound, the use of data was directly tied to each of the six “stories.” For example, the process for vetting and finalizing the Education Goals was well documented, and many curricular changes related to Diversity and Inclusion were described in detail. Continuous improvement efforts at the University of Montana included summaries of changes made by the Mansfield Library, Academic Enrichment, and the Office for Student Success. In addition, National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data were tied to retention, persistence, and graduation rates.

The University of Oregon is “scaling up” General Education assessment efforts in writing, and reducing barriers for students in mathematics and chemistry. The University of Oregon also created a Teaching Academy, and engaged project leaders from the Wabash National Study to facilitate assessment conversations. At Columbia Basin College, the Teaching and Learning Committee has been diligent in promoting the use of assessment data on campus, and several course-level assessments have translated into enhancements in the curriculum. CBC is also revising its Program Review process to incorporate more assessment practices.

It was clear from the reports that General Education initiatives are most effective when they are institutionalized through formal committee and reporting requirements that help the institution translate its assessment findings into action plans. These findings and action plans should be communicated as widely as possible to students, faculty, staff, and other constituents of the campus community.

## **VI. Evaluation of mission fulfillment**

This section of the reports from the four institutions provided thoughtful interpretation of the data within the context of mission fulfillment, as well as summative statements regarding whether or not the institution is fulfilling its mission. The institutions were charged to relate the General Education student learning outcomes back to mission fulfillment, highlighting student achievement in relation to the institution's mission.

The University of Puget Sound provided a detailed audit and analysis of its High-Impact Educational Practices and Student Learning Outcomes, which were comprehensively broad in scope and impact. First-year seminars, capstone courses and projects, writing-intensive courses were all noted for their strong outcomes.

In its mission fulfillment efforts, the University of Oregon engaged its faculty in “robust conversations about assessment of student learning,” identified how they could “standardize a distributed approach to assessment driven by faculty in local units,” started discussions about revising their General Education curriculum, created a Teaching Academy, and reinvigorated assessment efforts in the academic

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disciplines. Mission fulfillment findings for the Writing Composition program, “Dear Professor X,” and other direct and indirect measures were analyzed in a summative manner.

Columbia Basin College provided a comprehensive “summary of the outcomes for each Core Theme, followed by a roll-up of the results into the Mission Fulfillment assessment.” Performance points were analyzed in the following five areas: Workforce, Well-Being, Cultural Competence, Academic, and Basic Skills. These analyses clearly articulated the degree to which CBC was meeting its mission.

The University of Montana report made several observations that are illustrated by all four reports: “The framework for General Education assessment is strongest when based on meaningful learning outcomes, supported by well-functioning committee work, balanced by a wide variety of methods, and informed by best practices in the field.” As a result, “the evaluation of mission fulfillment is probably not a “yes” or “no” question. Rather, a more appropriate question may be “to what extent”, and whether we are moving in the right direction.”

It should be noted that the current language for Standard 5: Mission Fulfillment, Adaptation, and Sustainability does not reference student learning. However, as noted earlier, the focus on student learning is one dimension that connects all institutions within the NWCCU region, and such learning at the institutional level can often be assessed through General Education. A revision of this standard to emphasize the central role of student learning may be beneficial.

## **VII. Discussion of “lessons learned” and “best practices” from the Demonstration Project**

Takeaways can be derived from both the process and outcomes of the Demonstration Project. Project participants will candidly tell you that evaluating and documenting mission fulfillment was a complicated exercise that involved a series of starts and stops at each institution. Challenges included getting the appropriate people on campus involved in the project, identifying relevant assessments, finding the time to implement these assessments, and then making meaning of the mountain of data in relation to mission fulfillment.

As described earlier, many participants described the process as “more of a conversation.” By having regular face-to-face meetings, phone calls, and email exchanges, those in the project were able to ask probing questions, get feedback about their strategies and approaches, and learn from one another. These collaborative conversations among the four institutions often led to more robust dialogues on the home campuses. Other institutions in the NWCCU region could take lessons away from how the Demonstration Project institutions involved a wide range of faculty and staff in the accreditation process.

Each of the institutions had very positive experiences during the formal accreditation visits in April and May 2017, and the institutions collectively provided meaningful feedback to NWCCU in a conference call at the end of May. The University of Oregon reported that the visit helped the institution “bring things together in a cohesive way,” and highlighted the importance of teaching effectiveness on campus. The University of Montana described their visit as a “constructive” and “formative” process that involved a lot of problem solving for ways to improve student learning, especially in the writing domain. Columbia Basin College was able to explore the viability of sustaining their assessment approach in other areas, and found that the visit confirmed the good efforts in their Teaching and Learning Committee. The University

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of Puget Sound appreciated the focus on learning outcomes, and the visit helped them to reflect on their “Stories” and help the faculty to feel included.

Participants from the four institutions gratefully noted that the review process was different from other accreditation experiences, in that it felt more collaborative, appreciative, and conversational. Participants felt more able to experiment in their assessment methodologies, and more at ease to be open and share their concerns and struggles in assessing student learning. Reviewers provided encouraging feedback and insightful guidance, and benefitted from the experience themselves. In contrast to previous accreditation experiences, several reviewers described the visits as more “intellectually stimulating” and “actually fun.”

To replicate these positive experiences, it may be helpful for NWCCU to consider ways of fostering an environment of appreciative inquiry in the accreditation review process (see <https://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/intro/whatisai.cfm>) that focuses more on strengths and opportunities, rather than focusing on deficits and concerns. Of course, the Federal requirements that correspond to Standard 2 need to be met, but it was useful to separate these technical reviews of compliance from the broader discussions about student learning. NWCCU may also want to consider the creation of cohort models of accreditation review that foster dialogue across institutions. This could take the form of an Assessment Academy, or a Persistence and Completion Academy, that focuses on the key area of student retention (see <https://www.hlcommission.org/About-the-Commission/academies.html>).

As a complement to the “lessons learned” about process, the Demonstration Project produced a number of tangible outcomes related to assessing General Education for mission fulfillment. Unfortunately, a “silver bullet” is not one of the tools in the Demonstration Project toolbox. There is no perfect way to assess General Education or to provide infallible evidence for mission fulfillment. However, the toolbox contains many, many tools that collectively can be used for institutional improvement (somewhat similar to Home Improvement!). The assessments used were often embedded or “home-grown” measurements, and many benefits were derived from these assessments that were specific to the institution. Other productive assessments included the Collegiate Learning Assessments and the AAC&U VALUE rubrics. NWCCU institutions may want to consider signing up for the VALUE Institute that begins later in 2017 (see <http://www.aacu.org/VALUEInstitute>).

Many benefits of this project stemmed from the opportunity each institution had to focus singularly on the area of student learning. The NWCCU Commissioners could possibly adapt the approach of a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) that is used in the SACS-COC region. As stated on their website (<http://www.sacscoc.org/genaccproc.asp>), “The concept of quality enhancement is at the heart of the Commission's philosophy of accreditation. Each institution seeking reaffirmation of Accreditation is required to develop a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). Engaging the wider academic community and addressing one or more issues that contribute to institutional improvement, the plan should be focused, succinct, and limited in length. The QEP describes a carefully designed and focused course of action that addresses a well-defined topic or issue(s) related to enhancing student learning.” The topic of this project could vary significantly from institution to institution, but the intellectual space and motivation provided but such a project could help move the needle on a critical priority at each campus. Such was the opportunity provided by the Demonstration Project.

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As noted earlier, the full list of “lessons learned” and “best practices” from each institution has been included as Appendix A for this report, but a few best practices from each institution are summarized below.

#### University of Oregon

The University of Oregon report skillfully connected its institutional efforts to the body of assessment literature and examples from across the country. The Multi-State Collaborative, the Transforming Education by Design (trED) project, the UO Advantage, evaluation of the percentage of students receiving D,F, and W grades, UO’s analyses of Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) data, the Teaching Academy, and many other efforts were laudable. The multifaceted nature of UO’s assessments was strong, and it was impressive to see the extent of faculty involvement.

#### University of Montana

The University used a broad range of direct assessments, indirect assessments, curricular assessments, co-curricular assessments, embedded assessments, programmatic assessments, and standardized assessments. In the area of Continuous Improvement, the Planning-Assessment Continuum is a well-designed process for connecting planning, budgeting, implementation, and assessment. The analysis of mission fulfillment involved a balance of indirect dashboard indicators as well as learning outcome assessment data.

#### Columbia Basin College

This strong report provided a thorough overview of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA+) study and other learning outcomes assessments at CBC. The "deep dive" into the research on critical thinking, which was then connected to CLA assessment findings, is a promising practice that many institutions should consider. The description of the metrics for each of the five core themes in the mission fulfillment section provided compelling evidence that CBC was meeting each of its core themes.

#### University of Puget Sound

The University of Puget Sound used an innovative approach for developing its Educational Goals by engaging an impressive number of faculty members in focus groups. The clear relationship between assessment and institutional efforts for improvement were persuasively described in its chapter on “Stories” that provided some great examples for other institutions. Puget Sound was also able to make connections between the Stories and mission fulfillment.

### **VIII. Future Opportunities for Using and Disseminating the Project Findings**

Some special outcomes came from the Demonstration Project, and it would be good to consider the following possibilities for sharing the lessons learned or “tools” in our toolbox:

1. Posting the four institutional reports (and this summary report) on the NWCCU website.
2. Hosting webinars that highlight strategies for connecting General Education assessment with mission fulfillment.

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3. Develop workshop(s) that provide guidance for ALOs at the ALO training or at an annual conference. Results and recommendations will also be shared at the NWCCU Summit in October.
  4. Revising NWCCU's accreditation standards to reflect a stronger emphasis on student learning related to mission fulfillment.
  5. Present the process and results at an upcoming AAC&U meeting or assessment conference (an overview of the project was already presented at the 2016 AAC&U General Education Assessment Conference).

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## Appendix A—Institutional Summaries of “Lessons Learned” and “Best Practices” from the Demonstration Project

### Columbia Basin College

#### *1A. What went well*

- The research study (data collection, analysis, write-up, literature review) proceeded as initially planned and contributed to our understanding of critical thinking behaviors at CBC
- The linkage with previous Teaching and Learning Committee critical thinking efforts was strong; the current study evolved directly from the earlier efforts
- The findings were consistent with current research in the areas of willpower, expert thinking, and behavioral economics. We can continue to develop a deeper understanding of critical thinking by incorporating these perspectives in our thinking.
- The study forced us to think more clearly about student learning. We need to focus more clearly on the student learning outcomes in the future, as a main purpose of the college
- We realized how complicated the issue of critical thinking actually is. It is related to student demographics (ethnicity, parent education level, socioeconomic status), as well as student time and effort.

#### *1B. What could be improved?*

- We need a larger Time 1/Time 2 sample size in order to make generalizable conclusions
- We could have sped up the time it took to analyze the data, complete the literature review, and write up the report—so that it could be shared more broadly across the campus
- We should have completed the literature review earlier in the process, so it could have better informed data collection and analysis
- Necessary shift in faculty culture from allegiance to courses to focus on programs.

#### *2. Recommendations for other institutions*

- Incorporate authentic assessment, including the use of the CLA+, in assessing Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)
- Provide support for faculty development in teaching critical thinking skills (research has shown the need for professional development in this area)
- Incorporate theory into the understanding and measurement of SLOs—too much effort is a-theoretical
- Focus improvements and interventions on “at risk” groups—minorities, immigrants, students from low socioeconomic status and low parent education backgrounds

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- Incorporate non-cognitive factors
  - Consider focus of learning is the individual, yet our structures and measures rarely focus on the individual.
  - Introduce the diverse frameworks of inquiry into freshman student success courses.

### 3. *Best Practices*

- Recommend use of Promising Practices/Interventions. Best Practices are the ones that work in your institution
- Using CLA+ and authentic assessment for SLO measurement
- Having a campus-wide strategy for critical thinking skills that includes stand-alone critical thinking coursework as well as domain-specific, explicit critical thinking content in coursework at the department-level
- Providing faculty development for teaching critical thinking skills and each of the other student learning outcomes.

### 4. *Recommendations for NWCCU*

- Share results of the pilot demonstration project findings through workshops, webinars or other means.
- Create affinity groups of institutions interested in similar approaches to assessment.
- Provide guidance, support, or direction to institutions, where requested, on how to assess student learning. This support might include encouraging cross-institutional collaboration in assessment or developing authentic assessment prompts, or might involve bringing CLA+ instructors from Denver up to the Northwest for seminars on conducting authentic assessment.
- Consider how to incorporate student learning outcomes into the mission fulfillment process while maintaining the integrity of the existing core theme framework.

## University of Montana

### *What went well:*

- It was very useful to have many, many authors who contributed to the report. The number of authors for each of the methods added to the quality of the assessments implemented, as well as the strength of the action plans.
- Analysis of mission fulfillment should involve a balance of indirect dashboard indicators as well as learning outcome assessment data.

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- We found it very helpful to use our “Strategic Issues” from our Strategic Plan as the Core Themes for accreditation. This overlap improved awareness and buy-in across campus.

*Areas for improvement:*

- In the coming months and years, we would like to collect more comprehensive data on our graduates and outcomes related to employment.
- The programmatic assessments (from the disciplines) could be evaluated more closely to cull data related to writing, critical thinking, intercultural competence, and other broader learning outcomes.

*Recommendations for other institutions in this process:*

- An Assessment and Accreditation Committee, comprised of representatives from across campus, is beneficial in making accreditation work a team effort.
- Establish deadlines for the drafts of report.
- If possible, collect data over several years, so that longitudinal analyses can be conducted.
- The involvement of faculty, staff, and students should occur in all stages of the assessment process.

*Overview of key takeaways or “best practices” that can be taken from the institution*

- Recognizing that there are no “silver bullets” for General Education assessment, UM has provided a very broad range of examples of direct assessments, indirect assessments, curricular assessments, co-curricular assessments, embedded assessments, programmatic assessments, and standardized assessments.
- The multifaceted effort to assess and improve writing skills is a collaborative initiative that could be replicated at other institutions.
- The Planning-Assessment Continuum is a well-designed process for connecting planning, budgeting, implementation, and assessment.
- As outlined in the Continuous Improvement chapter, the assessment data are being used to make many improvements across campus.

*Recommendations to the Commission for supporting institutions in these efforts*

- Have periodic face-to-face meetings where accreditation liaison officers and other institutional leaders can share their approaches and assessment initiatives with peer institutions.

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- Develop webinars that share “good practices” of General Education assessment with all NWCCU institutions.
  - Continue to allow for flexibility in core themes, learning outcomes, and assessments.
  - Disseminate research articles and practices from AAC&U, NILOA, and other national organizations that provide examples of these efforts.

## University of Oregon

### *Strengths and Weaknesses of Analyzing Mission Fulfillment Through General Education Assessment*

As stated above, we are reluctant to claim that mission fulfillment can be demonstrated by a measurement of general education student learning outcomes. Reframing that idea in terms of strategic priorities allows us to think more clearly about how general education learning outcomes, or any outcomes, fit into our strategic activities, and what assessment measures and methods make the most sense in that strategic context. This project has also driven discussions across campus around how our mission relates to specific programs and activities.

Furthermore, we’ve discovered a promising approach to assessing general education and program learning outcomes. This approach thus far seems to fit our basic assumptions about assessment, and can be deployed in our general education program. What follows are some lessons learned and best practice suggestions from our experience.

### *Lessons Learned*

1. Assessment for compliance provides little to no value to the institution. If assessment of learning outcomes is to continue as an accreditation standard, we have to find ways to do it efficiently and effectively.
2. The most significant challenges for an institution of our size have to do with scaling efforts and faculty buy-in.
3. There is no need to measure everything all the time—indirect measures can be used as alerts to investigate specific questions and use direct assessment strategically to test program changes.
4. Input measures, when supported by the literature on teaching and learning, can be just as valuable as output measures.

### *Best Practices*

1. Start with what faculty and administrators already do—find ways to capture and tie together the ongoing conversations and evaluations of programs and courses that already happen.

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2. To scale in a large, complex institution, use a distributed model, where assessment activities are designed and implemented locally and aggregated centrally, using the LMS or other technology already in the daily practice of faculty. This is the most efficient approach, and provides sufficient “data” to drive the important conversations about curricular change.
  3. By starting with what faculty already do, and using an embedded approach designed to make things better on the ground, a commitment to assessment will be easier to build and institutions can avoid a high-resource, low-value compliance approach.
  4. Focus on the processes of conversation and improvement, not just specific data points.
  5. Focus on the collection and evaluation of assessments that drive meaningful conversations among faculty about how to improve programs and curriculum.
  6. Ensure that assessment efforts clearly derive from your mission and values, provide value to your primary constituents, and represent responsible stewardship of resources.
  7. Find ways to align assessments with existing practices and embed them in teaching and learning. To the extent that assessment can be done without adding to faculty workload, or even to ease faculty workload, they might be embraced for the valuable information they provide.

#### *Recommendations to the Commission for Supporting Institutions in these Efforts*

We recommend a focus on improvement rather than assessment as highlighted in Roscoe’s essay (see <http://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/2017/winter/roscoe>). This has a better chance of encouraging assessment-oriented activities that are meaningful and action-oriented, and that represent a commitment to understanding strengths and limitations of programs. This is more likely to lead to activity that will provide a better learning experience and better outcomes for students. Genuine support for such efforts, as we have felt supported in this demonstration project, will foster a genuine commitment to improvement, rather than grudging activities to demonstrate mere compliance.

A “one size fits all” expectation for assessment cannot work with such a complex and diverse group of institutions as are accredited by NWCCU. The “mission fulfillment” approach, if it can be focused on strategic priorities, represents a step forward, as it is in our individual missions that the unique intentions and aspirations of each institution is most clearly evinced. However, like other institutions, we’ve found the concept of “core themes” to be challenging to define and not very helpful in terms of articulating mission fulfillment. As we’ve expressed in this report, missions are necessarily stated in broad, aspirational terms and don’t lend themselves to meaningful measurement easily. Core themes suffer a similar fate in that they seem to be a restatement of broad areas of focus from the mission.

We’ve found it more useful to focus on strategic priorities which will change over time as internal and external contexts change but which are nonetheless specific expressions of the mission. Strategic priorities more naturally fit an accreditation cycle in that a 5-7 year time horizon is a realistic window in which to set, implement and assess strategic institutional activities. They also serve to provide better on the ground direction in terms of activities and outcomes, such that local units can more easily determine how to contribute to strategic priorities, and assess their performance. Finally, “strategic priorities” is a

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concept more commonly used in organizational theory than “core themes”, and more likely to provide useful direction to institutions in an accreditation context.

### University of Puget Sound

We are honored to have been afforded the opportunity to participate in the Demonstration Project of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. It provided us with freedom to learn new lessons, to deepen our thinking about mission fulfillment, and, hopefully, to provide guidance to the commission and our colleagues about the challenges and rewards of approaching our self-study in this way.

A focus on general education as central to the mission of the majority of NWCCU members was wise. We took advantage of the opportunity to step back and think about the documents, both living and dusty, that guide the delivery of our general education as it pertains to our mission. The overarching guiding document for our general education sets forth our educational goals, which flow from our mission. The Demonstration Project gave us the impetus and opportunity to closely examine the faculty’s educational goals; in the process of looking at how to use the goals as the basis for student learning outcomes, we realized that they were ripe (or perhaps overripe) for review.

As we continue to work on that process, we appreciate the struggle to find ways to do direct summative assessment. While grades can provide summative assessment of individual student progress, there is no corollary for institutional progress that works well for small liberal arts institutions. Tests such as the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency may be worth exploring, as are the AAC&U VALUE rubrics, as described in the recent AAC&U report *On Solid Ground*. The period of time in which we worked on the Demonstration Project was not sufficient to define the measures, measure, make changes, and then measure again to “close the loop.” We suspect this will continue to be a challenge for institutions with missions that are about developing the whole person through a broad set of habits of mind.

We will continue to struggle with summative assessment, and be able to do so collaboratively as a result of the good will we established with our faculty in revisiting our educational goals. The faculty discussion group protocol used to examine educational goals was of value in getting faculty members engaged in the work of the project. We recommend this approach to other institutions looking to promote campus discussions of mission, educational goals, and essential learning dimensions.

In working with our faculty, we learned that ensuring a common understanding of the institution mission and learning outcomes is critical. Central to this is an awareness of institutional culture and language that will allow for productive communication. Aligned with cultural awareness is attention to the language at the institution. If “assessment” is off-putting, and “improvement” is valued, use the language that resonates. This common understanding allows work at the institution to be framed by a shared goal or goals. We would recommend that our colleagues make this an explicit point of emphasis by putting focus on student learning. At the same time, it is essential that institutions provide outlets for feedback and listen carefully, taking that feedback seriously. We used discussion groups to move in this direction; good practice would implement a regular opportunity for members of the community to share their thinking about mission, educational goals, and essential learning outcomes, and their contributions to the mission. It is the shared commitment to the mission, well understood, that leads to the ability to not only fulfill the mission, but to demonstrate mission fulfillment.

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Through our work with the demonstration project, we have come to a realization that a mission fulfillment framework can focus largely on outcomes as a way of addressing the question “To what degree are we fulfilling our mission?” With this in mind, we have merged and simplified the frameworks for mission fulfillment. At the same time, we are maintaining separate attention to the Puget Sound environment and student experiences within it as this is essential to addressing the question “How do we get better at fulfilling our mission?” This understanding led us to devote a significant portion of our report to ways in which we are using data to discover and attend to continuous improvement in fulfilling our mission.

In addition, we have come to see the environment as a “necessary condition” for mission fulfillment—in other words, while student retention and graduation do not demonstrate mission fulfillment, students must persist in order for us to fulfill our mission; we recommend that the commission consider allowing institutions to discuss or describe the necessary conditions for mission fulfillment at their institutions.

The concept of necessary conditions for mission fulfillment dovetails nicely with the direction piloted in the demonstration project to restructure the handling of Standard Two. We recommend that the commission move forward with the Resources and Capacity chapter focusing only on substantive changes with pointers to policies, and that institutions provide a separate table with links and/or descriptions of compliance with each substandard. This would minimize replication of text that exists in other documents at the institution, and allows for more narrative space to attend to mission fulfillment.

There may be alternatives to the mandated “core themes” that work better to demonstrate mission fulfillment. At Puget Sound, the essential learning outcomes, connected to our educational goals and to High-Impact Educational Practices, resonated in a way that the core themes did not. In our case, the core theme layer was a distraction; the time spent in trying to fit them into the model could be better spent in finding more direct ways to demonstrate mission fulfillment (in our case through educational goals). The core theme concept may be a valuable option for some institutions; for Puget Sound, they felt artificial and therefore not meaningful. We recommend that the commission consider providing flexibility in the ways that institutions demonstrate mission fulfillment.

As we developed our mission fulfillment framework, we focused on elements that are natural and meaningful on campus. In so doing, it was clear that we had areas of success and areas for improvement. In order for the evaluation of mission fulfillment to be meaningful to an institution, the institution must feel that it can be open about both strengths and challenges. This requires trust in the accreditation process and a sense of what is acceptable in terms of being authentic. We recommend that the commission consider ways in which institutions might use the self-study as an opportunity to be candid about shortcomings and plans for improvement, as opposed to setting low-bar mission fulfillment thresholds.

We found that the opportunity to work with the other three institutions (Columbia Basin College, University of Montana, and University of Oregon) fostered open and honest exchange of our struggles in the process of demonstrating mission fulfillment. We learned of resources and expertise outside of our own institutions that impacted the quality of our work. We recommend that the commission find ways to foster this type of collaboration among interested institutions. Perhaps cohort groups could be organized to meet annually at similar points in the cycle, or means for mentoring of one institution by another that has just completed a particular point in the cycle could be developed. We emphasize that there is value in learning not only from institutions of the same sector, but also across sectors.

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Finally, we wonder if an accreditation report could be a relatively brief narrative that serves as a guide to existing documents that tell the story of continuous improvement and mission fulfillment. The guide would be a combination of executive overview and any updates to those existing documents (with particular attention to responses to any recommendations made in those documents). This would only be possible if the institution has a rich collection of documents in place (e.g., internal reports such as our writing study and 2014 NSSE report) that describe analysis and use of evidence used, at some level, to evaluate mission and drive continuous improvement.

We reiterate that our participation in the Demonstration Project was fruitful in providing us an opportunity to think more purposefully about mission fulfillment in a more flexible way, to exchange ideas and roadblocks with colleagues from a variety of institutions, and to guide the commission in considering alternative approaches to demonstrating mission fulfillment.

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## Appendix B—List of Demonstration Project Participants

Literally hundreds of people contributed to these reports, but highlighted below are a number of key participants in the project:

Nathan Lindsay (Project Coordinator)

### Columbia Basin College

Rich Cummins (President)

Joe Montgomery (Project Leader)

### University of Puget Sound

Isiaah Crawford (President)

Ron Thomas (Prior President)

Martin Jackson (Project Co-Leader)

Ellen Peters (Project Co-Leader)

### University of Oregon

Mike Schill (President)

Ron Bramhall (Project Leader)

### University of Montana

Sheila Stearns (President)

Royce Engstrom (Prior President)

Nathan Lindsay (Project Leader)