

ADVANCEMENT SECTION

REPORT OF A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION VISIT

TO

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FOR

The Higher Learning Commission

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EVALUATION TEAM

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I. OVERALL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

The University of Cincinnati (UC) has made important and significant progress in many areas since the last comprehensive accreditation review, particularly during the past five years. The visiting team was impressed with and commends the university for the sense of direction established through the UCI21 process and for the accomplishments resulting from the implementation of this strategic plan, as well as for the overall morale of faculty, staff, and students found at UC, all of which earned the President accolades throughout the campus (and the extended community). Almost everyone the team met was pleased with the university's mission and vision, its commitment to serving a diverse student body, the extensive engagement with the larger Cincinnati community, and with the direction the university has taken to become a premier urban research university. Faculty and staff spoke of feeling energized with all that is taking place at UC and hope that the institution will continue on its current trajectory under the leadership of the next President.

II. CONSULTATIONS OF THE TEAM

The comments provided below are offered in the spirit of collegiality and simply with the intention of assisting the University Cincinnati in its quest to continue to improve and to achieve its vision of being a premier urban research university. As noted in several places throughout this report and in the Assurance section, the team found much evidence to lead it to conclude that UC is on a new trajectory and well on its way to achieving its vision.

The categories below are presented in alphabetical order and do not reflect any particular rank order of importance, except for assessment which is both listed first and represents the team's top priority.

Assessment

Since the last HLC visit to the University of Cincinnati, there have been significant academic improvements in the curriculum. President Zimpher's initiative in 2004 stimulated the strategic vision found in UCI21. One feature of this guiding approach is the new General Education program involving the entire university. Responding to the 1999 HLC team report, this General Education core had been coupled with the previous distinguishing undergraduate component, co-operative education. Together, the effects have influenced and enhanced UC majors.

While excellent progress has occurred, there appears to be a mix in the culture of assessment at UC. As noted, there are some very enthused and devoted people involved in assessment at the university. However, it appears that assessment of student learning and actual application in the classroom/program only arose as a critical institutional priority in the past two or so years. In many programs, assessment has relied on professional accreditation and reviews conducted by the Graduate School that

have recently been extended to undergraduate programs. The development and implementation of assessment efforts across the university has been noteworthy in the past two years, however, documenting the influence of assessment on student learning is in the early stages. The visiting team recommends that in order to understand the university assessment activity as a whole, UC should create a university-wide planning process for academic assessment with over-arching goals and time tables

The dilemma facing UC in the implementation of assessment of student learning across programs is found in the Self Study Report (Challenges section, Criterion Three):

“We seem unable to institutionalize what we value. The good intentions, commitment, and investment of the university’s academic leadership often fail to trickle down to the program level. Some programs encourage a culture that values effective teaching, others don’t.”

This observation is linked to the confusion associated with assessment activities and program reviews [program reviews conducted/facilitated by the Graduate School and e-reviews]. The intent is to link these together, and efforts are directed to this goal. Leadership occurs in administrative offices and university committees, particularly the Academic Coordinating Committee, Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, and the Academy of Fellows of Teaching and Learning. The Vice Provost for Learning and Assessment has provided significant leadership to facilitate the adoption and/or enhancement of assessment of student learning, and there are notable achievements in the implementation of assessment activities in several programs, including the Honors program and Nursing major. However, evidence of the feedback loop is lacking in many program majors. The presence of capstone courses provides assessment opportunities in various fields, although documents indicate that the faculty realizes that activities at the end of the capstone course offer little information to make changes while such courses are being taught, which points to a need to cultivate formative as well as summative assessment practices.

The team recommends that UC build on the enthusiastic and passionate individuals that we met as champions of assessment. For example UC could work with CETL and the Academy of Fellows of Teaching and Learning for training and mentoring regarding the value of research on teaching, learning, and assessment. First, create widespread consensus on a definition of assessment that involves help in understanding how to assess student learning outcomes. The faculty must own and value the process. There are portions of this effort described below that should be done with the unique needs of the program taken into consideration. This assessment approach could be aided by a pilot project using seed money and/or release time for faculty. Under this umbrella might be:

- a. undergraduate programs that have not assessed at the program level; and
- b. accredited programs that have received feedback from the specialty accrediting agency that student learning outcomes assessment should be a priority.

Each academic program’s faculty would create its own plan of action:

- a. Understand what students should be able to do to ensure success after UC. This

information could come from employer surveys, faculty, searches of the literature, etc. The identified skills and abilities should be mapped relative to where in the curriculum they are taught. It is possible that curricula may need to be re-designed to add topics and authentic measurements. Likewise, topics that may have become obsolete would be deleted.

- b. Program faculty design measurements, gather data, examine data, and determine how learning can be improved either by curricular change or other actions such as advising, providing practice and feedback to students, and/or faculty mentoring students.
- c. There should be a differentiation of the major from the touchpoints (time of measurements) that are currently focusing on General Education assessment. Although the goals of General Education can be measured at the end of the academic major, it will be necessary to develop a valid and reliable process as listed above in (a) to separate the majors' "value added" components beyond General Education. This latter step is important to trace the areas in the curriculum that may need revision.

On UC's horizon is the conversion to semesters, which presents a unique opportunity to further embed assessment into classroom, program, and General Education student learning. The conversion may yield substantial improvements in the assessment area, including in assessment cycles. The team strongly recommends that UC seize the opportunity provided by the conversion to reaffirm shared responsibility (between the administration and faculty) for assessment of student learning, for ways/stages enabling analysis and use of student assessment evidence, and for collaboration to evaluate and improve effectiveness of UC assessment of student learning efforts.

UC should consider building protocols for assessment of programs that will produce evidence of program impacts and the contributions of specific programs to the achievement of institutional goals. Programs implemented in variable ways across the university's colleges, such as First Year Experience, present challenges to comprehensive assessment. Common assessment practices and protocols for reporting would enable institutional evaluation, while respecting variation in approaches and programs across colleges.

The College of Arts and Sciences was acknowledged as the unit needing the most improvement in outcome assessment; the HLC team concurs. In reviewing the summary of the programs that were reviewed through the e-review process, most assessment included General Education, as appropriate, but relatively little assessment of majors. Some connection, using the competencies to connect to the major, was done consistently; however, there has been little investigation about how the majors could require different rubrics in order to measure the students' capabilities at this level. There should be more explicit articulation between General Education and major learning outcomes. Thus, the HLC team strongly recommends that UC give major assessment priority, including assessment that closes the loop.

Finally, we recommend that before 2019, when the Higher Learning Commission will revisit, there should be two cycles of assessment and continuous improvement actions. Also, symbolically, it would be wise to include a metric in the President's report card that measures the achievement of program goals. An example of this would be: total number of programs that have assessed their programs, designed revisions (if necessary), and implemented them to improve student learning outcomes.

Benchmarking

There appears to be a lack of clarity at UC regarding the benchmark for university success. UC has the ability to generate evidence of doing better each year according to self-identified metrics; however, the university lacks metrics that exhibit performance in relationship to peers and competitors. Current and aspirational peer institutions have been identified, but comparative data describing these institutions, their makeup and performance, were not evident. At present, therefore, UC can only measure performance on a year-to-year basis using internal performance metrics. Thus, the HLC team strongly recommends that UC regularly evaluate its performance against its peers.

Community Engagement

It is clear that the university understands its mission to be engaged and responsive to the needs of its students and the community. During the visit, several examples of outreach and engagement initiatives were demonstrated. Some of these seem to have been initiated at the university level, although most were begun within colleges or other units and have historically had minimal working relationships with each other or those at the university level. Indeed, the university's range of engagement activities would be hard to match or exceed. Many of the "showcase" engagement activities seem to largely be financed at the unit level ("tubs on their own bottom") with some university support through space or salary assistance. If the financing of public higher education remains stagnant or restrained, the university will inevitably have to prioritize. While some of these programs are careful to evaluate their impact, the assessment activities of some are less developed. Thus, the team recommends that assessment and evaluation become a critical ingredient if the university is forced to prioritize its investments in community engagement.

The HLC team believes that the university will benefit not only from assessing the scope and impact of various outreach activities but also from increasing coordination and collaboration in order to make these activities both more efficient and impactful. A synergic approach to outreach and community engagement is recommended. The newly proposed "Center of the City" concept could easily serve as the centralized conduit to these activities to avoid duplication and provide maximum impact. The UC Communications Committee's role in disseminating and sharing information, both internally and externally, should be continued and expanded.

The Center for Community Engagement is an example of the best outreach practices on the UC campus. It was impressive to note that close to 3,500 students volunteered their time directly or indirectly to benefit several worthy causes of the community, including but

not limited to Habitat for Humanity, international trips to help the needy, and working with the poverty stricken children in the community. This is one of the most positive facets of the University of Cincinnati in the community. It is recommended that additional support in terms of transportation be provided to the volunteers to enable them to be able to safely travel to the work sites.

The team was impressed with the several activities being undertaken under the STEMM initiative. The diversity of programs, their scope, and willingness of the faculty to volunteer their time to engage in STEMM activities was a strong component of the programs. The list of STEMM activities led by the College of Engineering was impressive. Again, however, it seems apparent that for many of these initiatives, student progress has not been tracked so it is difficult to measure their impact. It is recommended that an impact analysis be conducted for these activities to determine their benefit and effectiveness.

Conversion to Semester System

UC recognizes the opportunities that the shift to a semester calendar presents to advance a number of its goals. Streamlining curricula and increasing articulation of general education with major programs will be crucial to the success of efforts to promote timely graduation. Enhancing support for faculty to map student outcomes in relation to general education, major curricular requirements, experiential learning, and co-curricular programs will maximize the impact of the conversion. UC should consider supporting work of the faculty with fine grained analyses of student progression and expert facilitation for curricular mapping.

Desirable Size

The team believes that UC needs to give greater attention to the issue of optimum or “desirable” size. On the one hand, integrated planning encourages calculated growth. On the other hand, growth is a compelling goal because of its ability to generate resources. UC is caught between these important drivers and has not determined where it wants to land on size and scale.

Diversity

Diversity is a clear concern for UC and the institution has implemented numerous diversity initiatives, some recent (e.g., the appointment of the Diversity Council and the creation of the senior-level administrative position of Chief Diversity Officer) and others dating more than 20 years (e.g., Trio, STEP, and Upward Bound), and has made notable advances in this area (e.g., the representation of women in the faculty). The Vice President for student affairs has put in place a wide array of activities to both recruit and retain underrepresented communities, and he has a vision of how diversity should be embedded in every aspect of campus life. The Diversity Action Council has been providing leadership in aligning diversity efforts with institutional goals and in ensuring that institutional language relative to diversity, including in the mission statement. The Council and various individuals should be commended for their efforts and accomplishments in advancing diversity, still, it appears that some programs are personnel specific and

somewhat marginalized. Additionally, the university continues to be challenged, as are many institutions of higher education, in diversifying the faculty and administration, particularly to include people of color. The HLC team strongly recommends that UC give this issue the attention it deserves. Diversifying the faculty and administration is critical to the UC's ability to fulfill its vision and become a premier urban research university that serves the greater public good.

While diversity in its broadest sense appears to have been embraced by campus constituents, there is not a coherent teaching and learning focus nor an emphasis on curriculum transformation whereby diversity in the classroom becomes a focus. Also, there was a concern among students that some faculty and the institution as a whole were not well prepared to deal with diverse students and generational differences. Thus, the team recommends that UC develop and implement a plan that extends diversity throughout the curriculum and into the classroom.

Faculty Development

To increase the impact of its faculty professional development programs, UC would be well-advised to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the alignment among faculty development initiatives, teaching enhancement programs, and unit practices that affect faculty engagement. UC should also extend assessment of faculty development and teaching enhancement programs to outcomes: measurement of impact on instructional design/pedagogy and/or student learning.

Graduate Housing

Graduate students of the university expressed a concern with the closing of the on-campus housing complex. Their concerns were based on the fact that late night travel was not considered to be safe and that many of them needed to work on their research projects in the laboratories late at night. Discussions with the Office of Student Affairs revealed that there are plans to remodel one of the existing buildings into graduate student housing over the next two years. The HLC team recommends that this issue be given due consideration to help address the safety of graduate students traveling at late night.

Grant Imbalance

Grant success in the East campus overshadows that in the West campus. If the institution wishes to build its research reputation, expansion of research productivity and external funding on the main campus will be necessary. One way of doing this, which the Vice President for Research and some of the associate deans are pursuing without much fanfare, is to foster interdisciplinary collaboration between the biomedical enterprise and the rest of the university.

Library

Libraries are essential to the pursuit of a sound research mission. UC has more actively supported its libraries in the past decade or so, and continued dedication of resources to build the collections, even in the face of fiscal constraints, will demonstrate the institution's

commitment to research.

UCI21

The UCI21 plan led by the President must be commended for its inclusiveness and its ability to create a well informed unified vision for the university; indeed, some suggested the plan was long overdue. The plan is well disseminated and understood by internal as well as external stakeholders of the university. It is clear the Board of Trustees also accepts the central thrust of UCI21, having adopted resolutions so indicating. In some domains, however, interviews revealed concerns about sustainability and long range planning. Some of the areas of concern were diversity, assessment, merging the branch campuses, compliance, community engagement, and preparing for the future. While every new president will want to put his/her stamp on the direction of the university, the university community appears largely to expect the new president to carry forward with the UCI21 initiatives. Given the quality and favorable impact of the various initiatives of UCI21, including the new governance model, the team encourages the university to continue to pursue them so that they become more embedded in the institution's culture.

Also, as in most colleges and universities, there is an open question regarding what UC's overarching strategy will be for the future. What will be different tomorrow than today and where does the university want to make its mark in the more distant future? It would be important to give consideration to the idea of a representative futures task force or committee to weigh and filter long-term opportunities for future development.

III. RECOGNITION OF SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS, PROGRESS, AND/OR PRACTICES

The University of Cincinnati has transformed itself since the last HLC comprehensive review ten years ago. The transformation, first in its facilities with a \$1B initiative started by the previous president and then in its programs and activities led by the current president, resulted in a university that better serves all of its constituencies. A new governance model has been implemented that has had many positive results, including:

- Engaging many more faculty, student, and staff in the decision-making process;
- Bringing transparency to discussions and decision making;
- Unifying the institution vs. independent silo structures;
- Establishing more efficiency and effectiveness in decision making; and
- Creating an environment of trust throughout the university.

Equally impressive are the level and quality as well as the many ways in which students, faculty, staff, and administration are engaged with the larger community. It is difficult to imagine an institution of higher education that is more engaged with its community than the University of Cincinnati is engaged with the greater Cincinnati region.