
Spring 2015

Through the HLC self-study process, UNC had the opportunity to reflect on how we have evolved since our last accreditation visit in 2005. Key concepts emerged that illuminate both the many ways in which UNC meets the HLC Criteria for Accreditation as well as issues we must attend to as we move forward in a constantly changing higher education landscape. This document describes institutional strengths and future actions revealed through the self-study process as well as a brief analysis of our response to two institutional questions posed by President Norton in her charge to the HLC Self-Study Steering Committee. The information that follows is excerpted from the HLC Self-Study Report, which readers can read at www.unco.edu/hlc.

Institutional Strengths

Criterion 1. Mission

- Serving the public is a foremost commitment for the University of Northern Colorado, a dedication that is manifested in numerous ways: in its student-centered focus; outreach to underserved populations; desire to function as a vitally inclusive community; profile of academic programs that fulfill a broad array of interests for undergraduate students and primarily educational and professional orientations at the master’s and doctoral levels; close and mutually beneficial connections with the community; and research, scholarship, and creative works that are intertwined with community needs and enrichment.

- The public role of the university is understood and reflected in the university’s mission and planning documents. Considerable resources, infrastructure, and outreach demonstrate the university’s full commitment to its public role. A wide array of student services is implemented to enhance the success of UNC’s diverse student population.

- Consultation and collaboration with constituency groups characterizes the development and implementation of mission and planning processes. Planning processes support the mission, are robust and inclusive, and assure continual attention to the basic goals and values articulated in the university’s mission documents. There is broad understanding that the Academic Plan, Strategic Framework, and Planning Map, which drive many budgetary and curricular decisions, are direct manifestations of the mission.

Criterion 2. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct

- The university’s attention to policy and process is a definite strength. UNC has clear policies and processes that ensure fairness, equity, and transparency, and clear procedures to deal with concerns and grievances. UNC honors the shared governance process with efforts that are transparent and inclusive, is attentive to practices that ensure the integrity and rigor of conferred degrees, cherishes academic freedom, abides by ethical research practices, and employs meticulous financial practices that reflect the highest standards of accountancy and management. The university represents itself in a way that is honest and accurate. Information about UNC programs and requirements is presented clearly and accurately through publications, websites, and online materials that are accessible to all parties, internal and external. UNC has invested considerable resources to advance the integrity of our procedures.

- UNC is well served by our Board of Trustees. The Board collaborates effectively with administration, staff, faculty, and students in productive ways. Its foremost priority is the
university, and it acts independently and is not beholden to internal or external constituencies who might seek to exert influence that runs counter to UNC’s interests.

Criterion 3. Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources, and Support

- UNC employs a thorough and robust process for developing, delivering and evaluating all academic programs, including internal faculty review, administrative oversight, external curricular reviews, and accreditation. The university ensures that specific learning goals are consistent across all modes of inquiry and course delivery through the mechanisms entailed in program review, faculty evaluation, and established departmental criteria.

- UNC’s curricular design develops broad learning in the liberal arts and sciences through the Liberal Arts Core (LAC) and builds on that foundation, integrating major-specific skills and knowledge into a broader humanistic framework. Further, the LAC’s international and multicultural studies requirements provide a global vision necessary for understanding today’s changing world. Diversity is acknowledged both explicitly in the UNC curriculum and implicitly in its academic culture and environment, including an institutional action plan for Equity and Diversity where diversity of thought and culture are valued and infused into every aspect of our practices.

- Most programs require students to complete a degree-specific capstone or summative project, which can include research papers, performances, portfolios, or completion of external tests or practicum experiences. Graduate programs require comprehensive exams, a thesis or capstone project, or dissertation depending on the degree level. All of these promote an integrated learning experience.

- UNC has given attention to building, in numbers and qualifications, the faculty needed for effective, high-quality programs and student services. Criteria for faculty qualifications and credentials are clearly delineated in the Board Policy Manual and followed in university hiring processes. All instructors are evaluated regularly in accordance with established institutional and departmental policies. UNC promotes faculty and staff professional development through an extensive range of on and off campus professional development opportunities, funding, and other support mechanisms.

- UNC offers many options that promote opportunities for student-faculty interaction, including regular office hours and a residence-hall faculty-in-residence program. Moreover, all UNC staff members who provide student support services are appropriately qualified and trained through a range of ongoing and continually updated professional development opportunities and training.

- UNC provides quality academic and social support services for student learning and effective teaching, including Housing and Residential Education, support for diverse student populations, and a range of academic support and enrichment programs. Specific orientation, advising, and preparatory instruction processes are in place to adequately prepare and direct entering students to appropriate courses and programs. Academic support and advising is managed both at the faculty and advisor level, as well as through specific campus units dedicated to providing these tutoring and support services.

- UNC offers students and instructors an extensive infrastructure and resources (classrooms, technology, scientific laboratories, libraries, performance spaces, clinical practice sites, and museum collections) necessary to support effective teaching and learning. These are continually reviewed, evaluated, and maintained in order to meet functional needs.

- UNC fulfills the claims we make for an enriched and comprehensive educational environment, and our co-curricular programs are well suited to our mission and effectively contribute to the
educational experience of our students. These contributions include the ways in which UNC provides services that support equal learning opportunities for all students, coupled with a vibrant learning and living community.

Criterion 4. Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement

- UNC’s program review process has moved the university forward significantly. It is tied to planning and resource allocation; it is directly connected to the Provost; it makes use of external review; it is not merely a bureaucratic exercise but is designed to give meaningful feedback for improvement; and it is structured to leverage the work done for special accreditations.
- UNC maintains specialized accreditation for all programs where it is required for licensure or certification. The university considers the value added to students and the institution in deciding whether to pursue and maintain specialized accreditation.
- The university has improved our assessment practices through investments in infrastructure, such as Digital Measures, LiveText, the Student Success Collaborative, and staff positions in the Office of Assessment.
- UNC has brought about increasing levels of faculty involvement in assessment. The university has worked to increase capacity by providing resources and opportunities for faculty development and leadership. Notable examples include the Faculty Assessment Fellows, the University Assessment Council, and faculty participation in the Assessment Leadership Institute, Annual Assessment Fair, and Assessment Mini-Grants. Also, two different faculty teams have participated in the HLC Academy for Assessment of Student Learning and have brought their projects back to the campus for implementation.
- The university has made student persistence and completion a strategic priority and uses student data thoughtfully and appropriately to develop improvement initiatives that promote student success.

Criterion 5. Resources, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness

- The university understands, anticipates, and responds to changing environmental conditions with a focus on financial sustainability in support of our core mission.
- UNC’s planning and budget processes are guided by the university’s educational purposes and reflective of the institution’s mission, goals, and priorities.
- UNC has invested in its employees as evidenced by the adoption of the Compensation Identity and the numerous resources and opportunities devoted to professional development.
- On the whole, the institution has a well-developed and explicit process for budgeting and monitoring expenses. The university forecasts operating results for all revenues, expenses, and transfers quarterly.
- The university has established appropriate structures to support participation and collaboration by university stakeholders. A broad array of formalized institutional bodies, committees, and groups represent multiple and diverse perspectives from campus and others concerned with UNC’s operations. In fact, the committees that worked on the self-study include broad representation, which allows for a great deal of reflection regarding the work we do and how we contribute to the campus community.

Future Actions

Criterion 1. Mission

- Over the last ten years we have operationalized our mission through strategic planning that engages all campus constituencies. Because we have chosen to move to a more de-centralized,
systemic planning process, we need to be attentive to connecting, integrating, and communicating our efforts. In particular, it will be important to regularly advise constituents of the priorities and progress of the nine Core Plans and to continue to seek their input. Along with this need, we must remain vigilant in assuring that review of all plans occurs periodically, includes an assessment of outcomes, and is accompanied by appropriate revisions to goals and strategies.

- New models of instruction that achieve high levels of learning need to be explored in the context of UNC’s fiscal realities. Continued efforts to support high-quality instruction by part-time instructors, full-time adjunct faculty, and teaching assistants are crucial, yet it is also necessary to review other types of instructional assignments and cost-effective models that permit individualized and small-group interaction among faculty and students.

- UNC’s mission statement needs to be reviewed in the next few years to ensure that it allows us to take advantage of opportunities inherent in the changing landscape of higher education. Potential revisions for distilling the lengthy mission statements into one or more briefer statements that are collectively inspirational and compatible with the university’s exemplary heritage should be considered. The updated mission should represent the current Carnegie classification for the institution.

- Attention to fostering a welcoming climate will be essential for realizing our role in a diverse society. We will continue to make access and success of diverse students a priority. Plans underway for integrating advising and for building the Campus Commons will provide one important forum for these efforts.

**Criterion 2. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct**

- In order to address student concerns about the existence and clarity of information about thesis, capstone, and dissertation policies and procedures, the Graduate School is revising manuals for graduate students.

- Although we have clearly defined policies regarding student rights and responsibilities, we have not previously had a centralized process for collecting, analyzing, and using data related to complaints. The Dean of Students, working with the Steering Committee for the Oversight of HLC and Legislative Academic Compliance, has developed a new process that will be implemented in Spring 2015 to address this issue.

**Criterion 3. Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources, and Support**

- Although UNC is doing a commendable job in academic advising, we still lack agreed-upon institutional standards for quality advising. Advising standards have been implemented at the college and unit level but might be characterized as piecemeal. In conjunction with the “one-stop” student service model that is proposed for the Campus Commons project and the adoption of the Student Success Collaborative for data-driven advising, we anticipate that advising will become more consistent across the university, and the adoption of Degree Works will add powerful resources for faculty and professional advisors, which is also expected to improve advising.

- The Integrated Student Support Plan is beginning to take shape through the implementation of the Student Success Collaborative, planning for the one-stop model, and supplemental academic instruction programs in mathematics and English. However, there is significant work to be done to organize our disconnected student advising efforts into the one-stop advising program. The goal is to coordinate and integrate various forms of non-faculty student advising and support into a seamless process where students are provided a one-stop, case-management approach to
assisting them in succeeding to graduation. This means working together with over ten different units that are currently involved in some form of academic advising and coordinating the one-stop model with faculty and staff involved in advising within the colleges.

- While there is significant work being done across campus to assess student learning in and out of the classroom, there are some areas for improvement. Most notably, the university has not conducted systematic direct assessment of learning in the Liberal Arts Core (LAC) at the institutional level. Such assessment is localized within the departments that contribute courses to the LAC. This was one of the motivating factors for the university’s application to participate in the HLC Assessment of Student Learning Academy, and the Task Force participating in the Academy has made recommendations we are beginning to implement. The adoption of LiveText is expected to improve our efforts in this area as well as the quality of data available within and across programs to better understand what and how well students are learning.

**Criterion 4. Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement**

- Recent efforts to evaluate assessment practices revealed that some programs continue to rely on indirect assessment methods or engage in assessment as a reporting activity rather than a process for improving teaching and learning. Investments in assessment resources and participation in the HLC Assessment Academy suggest the university has the capacity and the will to address these issues. UNC will continue its efforts for faculty and staff development and deploy LiveText more widely as a tool for assessment.

- The university has set specific goals and standards regarding student retention and degree completion, and there is a university-wide interest in improving student success. UNC must work to ensure that student-success and completion goals such as those established in the Enrollment Plan become more fully integrated with unit- and program-level goals and their assessment, so that these efforts are operationalized in a systemic, coordinated fashion across the university.

- UNC’s undergraduate retention and completion rates are not optimal, and improvement is a priority. As the university continues developing the Integrated Student Support Plan and expands our use of the Student Success Collaborative, information about student persistence and completion goals and activities should become more readily available to all stakeholders. More specifically, the promise of the “one-stop” student-support model that is the cornerstone of the Campus Commons project should be used as a key strategic venue for integrating data and practices.

- As UNC grows our presence in the graduate education sector, the Graduate School will place even more emphasis on market analysis and data collection from existing students and program graduates in order to meet the needs of a changing market and enhance its role as an evidence-based practitioner in graduate education.

**Criterion 5. Resources, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness**

- The university has improved its capacity to tie planning, evaluation, and budget processes together; however, some challenges remain. First, we need to identify ways to increase our communication across campus about how strategic planning drives priorities and how these priorities are linked to budget decisions. Currently, methods for disseminating information about the strategic planning process are decentralized and informal, which has not been effective in getting this information widely disseminated.

- In addition, an evaluation process for our nine Core Plans and five Support Plans must be implemented, which examines the effectiveness of our planning process, the extent to which we translated plans into action, and whether there has been an appropriate level of investment
among the nine Core and five Support Plans. Formalizing the evaluation process so that information and data are evident and available in a single place will help constituents and decision-makers understand the rationale for certain allocation decisions and whether the institution is in fact meeting its stated goals and mission. Closing the planning, implementation, and evaluation loop and communicating these results to campus will help address the fact that it is not always clear among campus members how final decisions are made.

• There is no finish line for our work on shared governance. We must continue to communicate existing opportunities for involvement, we must be diligent about making new opportunities, and we must be transparent and inclusive in genuinely collaborative decision-making.
• We have designed a planning process that is true to UNC’s culture and relies on significant campus engagement. However, because the process is complex, we must be attentive to managing it. This will require attention to prioritizing actions identified in the nine Core Plans and five Support Plans, ensuring we have the resources to sustain our priorities, and evaluating and communicating about the results of investing in priorities.

Response to institutional Questions
In her charge to the HLC Steering Committee, President Norton included two questions for the committee to consider when completing the self-study process:

1. How does UNC’s distinctive role among Colorado’s public doctoral universities position the university to meet future challenges in an evolving higher education landscape?
2. How does UNC create, nurture, and use institutional processes and strategies in support of the university’s distinctive role? What are we doing to evaluate this effectiveness and the importance of these processes and strategies, given our current environment? What promising things are we doing, and how do we build on them as we leverage UNC’s distinctive role to meet future challenges? Where do we have opportunities for improvement, and what have we learned in the self-study process that will help us build our capacity to fulfill UNC’s distinctive role?

We began the process of answering the questions by discussing what UNC’s distinctive role is. UNC is uniquely positioned among Colorado’s public research universities and distinguished by the combination of:

• the individualized nature of the transformative educational experiences we offer students;
• our outreach to and support of underserved students;
• the world-changing research, scholarship, and creative works our faculty and students do together; and
• our commitment to working together as a community through a culture of inclusive collaboration.

A point of pride for UNC is the opportunity for students to work closely with faculty, forming mentoring relationships that promote educational, personal, and professional growth and development. Surveys of current and former students show that they value these relationships and see them as one of the primary benefits of attending UNC. Further, the integration of teaching and research in our faculty’s teacher-scholar model not only creates a strong curricular foundation, but also gives our students opportunities to work closely with productive faculty scholars whose work contributes directly to local, national, and international communities. The intersection of personalized learning opportunities with
high-quality instruction that is informed by faculty members’ research creates a definite advantage for UNC. Through this model, we offer students value-added experiences in and beyond the classroom that prepare them to succeed in an increasingly complex and dynamic environment.

In fulfilling its mission as a public research university, UNC has long sought both high-achieving students and students with potential who oftentimes are not welcomed and nurtured by research universities. Our goal is to “bend the success curve” for these students—to help them achieve greater success than traditional indicators predict. Like all UNC students, these students have opportunities to work closely with faculty teacher scholars in an environment that nurtures student’s individual talents. In addition, we provide customized academic and co-curricular support that fosters the success of these students and helps them make the most of their time at UNC.

The self-study process has given us deeper understanding of the many ways in which UNC actualizes its distinctive role and how we might leverage it in the future. It has become increasingly clear that our history of serving underrepresented students positions us well. Because we value students of diverse backgrounds, experiences, and abilities and have a history of supporting these students’ success, UNC has developed the ethos, expertise, and infrastructure to cultivate the talent of individual students. Our expertise equips us to serve all students who aspire to chart their own paths. We have the opportunity to make UNC stand out among students’ myriad choices by building on and communicating the opportunity we offer for a customized high-quality academic experience.

Another strength on which UNC can build is the culture of collaborative forward thinking we have been developing over the past decade. It is a culture of not only shared governance, but also shared responsibility for UNC’s future. Our systemic, organic approach to planning supports UNC’s distinctive role, beginning with the Academic Plan, further defining our vision for an exemplary teaching and learning community with the Strategic Framework, and providing the Planning Map to ensure all of our efforts are connected and grounded in the reality in which we operate. Ongoing assessment and adjustment are embedded in the planning process to ensure that it continues to serve us well in the future. Efforts such as the development of the Campus Commons, the Innovation@UNC initiative, and the articulation of our Five-year Fiscal Sustainability Plan are a promising start. At the same time, we have learned that we need to communicate more systemically about how we are progressing with the implementation of our Planning Map.

A final asset to leverage is UNC’s heritage in serving the public. We prepare graduates who become the bedrock of their community as teachers, artists, scientists, entrepreneurs, mental health experts, healthcare specialists, and engaged citizens. Students today are looking for—even demanding—a college degree that prepares them for a career. The special way that we combine the spirit of inquiry with professional skills prepares our graduates for a changing world. Thus, our students learn not only practical ways to serve society but also how to shape it.