



# HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION

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September 12, 2022

Dr. Dennis Rittle  
President  
NorthWest Arkansas Community College  
One College Drive  
Bentonville, Arkansas 72712-5091

Dear President Dennis Rittle:

NorthWest Arkansas Community College's interim report on Assessment has been reviewed. The staff analysis of the report is attached.

On behalf of the Higher Learning Commission, staff received the report including: Documentation of identified processes for assessing performance in its operations including KPIs, frequency of assessment, tools used for data collection, and how results will be communicated; assessment data collected up to 5/1/2022 to demonstrate on-going assessment activities have occurred; evidence that data have been shared broadly with the institution's constituent groups; and details of how data have informed institutional decision-making/improvements. No further reports are required.

The institution's next Mid-Cycle Review is scheduled for 03/25/2024.

The institution's next reaffirmation of accreditation is scheduled for 2029-2030.

For more information on the interim report process, contact [interimreports@hlcommission.org](mailto:interimreports@hlcommission.org). Your HLC staff liaison is Linnea Stenson, [lstenson@hlcommission.org](mailto:lstenson@hlcommission.org).

Thank you,

Higher Learning Commission

cc: Laura Cates, Accreditation Liaison Officer  
Linnea Stenson, HLC Staff Liaison



## STAFF ANALYSIS OF INSTITUTIONAL REPORT

DATE: September 5, 2022

STAFF LIAISON: Linnea Stenson

REVIEWED BY: Steven Kapelke

**INSTITUTION:** Northwest Arkansas Community College, Bentonville, AR

**EXECUTIVE OFFICER:** Dr. Dennis C. Rittle, President

**PREVIOUS COMMISSION ACTION AND SOURCES:** An interim report is required by 09/01/2022 to include: Documentation of identified processes for assessing performance in its operations including KPIs, frequency of assessment, tools used for data collection, and how results will be communicated; assessment data collected up to 5/1/2022 to demonstrate on-going assessment activities have occurred; evidence that data have been shared broadly with the institution's constituent groups; and details of how data have informed institutional decision-making/improvements.

**REPORT PRESENTATION AND QUALITY:** The Northwest Arkansas Community College (NWACC) interim report is presented in a clearly written narrative supported by supplementary materials presented in a three-part appendix (Appendices A through C). These items include the "Institutional Effectiveness Committee Structure" organizational chart and two co-curricular assessment reports—the Library and "Pride at MWACC Assessment" documents. The evidence provided in the report indicates that the document is, generally, thorough and candid.

**REPORT SUMMARY:** The report's narrative begins with an overview of the institution's efforts in forming the Institutional Effectiveness and Strategic Planning Committee in response to the dissolution of the AQIP Pathway and NWACC's reassigned pathway. According to the report, the Committee's structure and was shared broadly within the institution—including through communication with the faculty (via the Faculty Senate), the Cabinet and the Deans. The report goes on to describe changes in the use of data within the new framework and the means by which decision-making will take place with regard to the development of the budget and strategic planning development and review.

The institution then formed an Institutional Effectiveness Task Force for the purpose of evaluating how "NWACC oversees and engages in ongoing and systematic assessment of the college's programs and services with the goal of continuous institutional improvement." The report provides some detail in this area, noting the evaluation of features such as "productivity, quality, resource efficiency and stakeholder satisfaction."

Here the report cites the creation of three working committees—General Education Learning Outcomes Committee, the Cocurricular Committee, and the Operational Effectiveness Committee—that serve to ascertain that the College collects and uses data effectively for the purposes of operations and the development of policies and procedures. The document then points out the “*next steps planned for the leadership of the college*” with regard to the collected data, noting the College’s mission and how the institution consistently seeks to create a student-centered learning environment that aligns with the mission.

Here the report cites Library assessment practices as “*prime examples of how cocurricular and academic assessment overlap*” and support student learning. The document describes structural and other changes implemented in the Library based on data derived from the NWACC Library Annual Report, which has been shared with the College Cabinet and the Board of Trustees and is accessible on the Library website.

The institution has in place a new Strategic Plan that include “*institutional priorities that align to our Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)*.” Cabinet members provide annual updates on the sections of the strategic plan objectives for which they are responsible; these are collected into a Year End Report by the Associate Vice President for Learning and Institutional Effectiveness, working in collaboration with the Marketing department. The report is available on the NWACC webpage under “College Leadership,” and is shared widely with campus constituent groups, including the Board of Trustees.

The report notes that the three assessment committees noted above have a charter and reporting lines that include the Cabinet, the Faculty Senate, and other constituent groups. According to the report, “*the committees have worked hard in the past two years to implement good processes that are inclusive and utilize the data collected to make decisions.*” The work of each of the committees is regularly represented in the planning and annual budgeting process through the Institutional Effectiveness Office. The report provides updates on the work of each of the committees.

General Educations Outcomes/Learning Assessment Committee (GEO): The GEO produces an annual report that addresses the student learning experience pertaining to the general education outcomes. The report is communicated broadly through the website and in meetings of constituent groups that include the Cabinet and the Faculty Senate. The report states that the work of the Committee has led to productive discussions within the institution regarding student learning, and “*to review of our program review processes, the data collected and the timing of the requirements.*”

Among the recent changes recommended by the Committee include those to the information literacy learning outcome and which courses have been selected in which to measure the outcome. These recommendations were approved by the Faculty Senate and published on the website and in the AY2022-2023 Catalog. The report cites the assessment plan followed by the Business and Computer Division, which is reported annually and made available under the Division of Business and Computers on the College’s website.

Co-Curricular Assessment: Here the report provides an overview of the institution's efforts pertaining to co-curricular assessment in the recent past, citing the results of an AQIP project begun in Spring 2017, which ultimately led to the substantial progress in this area. The College now has in place a permanent Cocurricular Assessment Committee; the Committee has crafted 11 assessment plans and updated the Cocurricular Handbook, among its other activities. According to the report, these initiatives, which provide a basis for how the institution measures student learning in the co-curriculum "*have been invaluable to our school and the progression in college culture...*" The report goes on to give a list of bulleted examples of the assessment results from different areas, including this from Student Life: "*Student Life—Collected data on First Gen students and resources they need. First step in the program was to create a First Gen Mentoring program. Our first attempt at this program we learned that we need increased direct contact with the students and email was not the way to do that. We now use a texting and phone call approach.*"

This section of the report concludes with a brief description of other examples that show the results from co-curricular assessment in student services, including the conversion of part-time positions to full-time with the goal of hiring Peer Mentor advocates whose efforts center on student retention. The institution believes that the current cohort of Peer Mentor advocates, which will be situated in Admissions and Recruiting, will increase the total number of applicants and increase the applicant yield.

Operational Effectiveness Committee: This section of the report outlines several actions taken by the institution to better understand its operational effectiveness, in part through a survey distributed to the College community. The results of the survey were used by different units of the College in operating budget planning and "*service operation to the college.*" Among the improvements noted here is that there are now sixteen offices with assessment plans, the data from which will be collected every year, using the institution's college-wide assessment calendar.

In a section titled "Forward Motion," the report notes the "great strides in assessment processes campus wide," based on the work of the three assessment committees. The document points to the results of the survey cited above in identifying specific areas of training conducted by the Institutional Effectiveness Office, including Program Review and HLC standards. Also, according to the report, the Chief Academic Officer is planning to use assessment data in developing FY24 strategic objectives.

The report then provides a list of upcoming priorities and recent accomplishments since the Institutional Effectiveness Office was created in Fall 2020. These are shown in the bulleted lists below.

#### **April 2021 – Set priorities for 2021-22 academic year**

- Update the Calendar/Process for collecting and archiving assessment data/reports
- Update the Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan
- Review the communication process of assessment data
- Define “program” type of assessment and/or program evaluation needed. Create a list and responsible individual(s) for providing assessment or evaluation

#### **2021-22 Accomplishments**

- Assessment Calendar developed and will be added to the Assessment website
- Library has built an assessment resource and reporting site to provide resources for faculty and staff working on assessment and to house assessment reports
- Program review schedule has been updated; continuing discussions on programs not covered by other assessment initiatives/committees
- Preliminary work on an Environmental scan to be continued in 2022-23 academic year
- Updated strategic planning and budget forms
- Reviewed and adopted new computer literacy general education learning outcome
- Revised Co-curricular Handbook and offered training on Co-curricular assessment
- Created five (5) new assessment plans for Administrative Services

The report notes that the Office of Accreditation and Assessment is offering regular workshops on assessment and has collaborated with individual units across campus, resulting in the creation of 27 new assessment plans. The Office is also communicating its practices through an annual newsletter. To create a more effective means of storing data and making it accessible to college faculty and staff, the institution purchased Weave during the summer of 2022. The report notes the value of Workday, which “*is a singular system that will allow us to better align and unify business processes and will provide us with tools to better understand and take immediate action on data...*”

The report then goes into more detail on the benefits of Workday, pointing to the College’s ability to enact employee benefit actions within the Workday system, in paperless fashion. At the same time, the system has created a more efficient approach to internal controls; here the report cites as examples the efficiencies created in payroll processing and in recruitment and hiring procedures.

**REPORT ANALYSIS:** Materials presented in the Northwest Arkansas Community College interim report provide evidence that the institution has made discernable progress with respect to implementation of a broadly-based assessment system and the collection and use of the data derived from assessment.

The institution has formalized many of its procedures for evaluating performance and assessing student learning. At the heart of this process is the Institutional Effectiveness and Strategic Planning Committee structure, which emerged from the institution having been assigned a new HLC Pathway. The report provides adequate detail about the impact of this change in terms of operations, such as the development of the annual budget--and strategic planning, which is led by a Strategic Planning Team that reviews strategic goals on a five-year cycle.

Other “infrastructure” changes that support the improvements made by NWACC include the formation of an Institutional Effectiveness Task Force and creation of three assessment committees, each with its own remit with regard to assessment. The report offers some detail about the workings of each of the assessment committees, with particular attention given to the efforts of the Co-curricular Assessment Committee. The graphic below shows how the committee structure is designed.

## Institutional Effectiveness Committee Structure



Course level learning assessments are the responsibility of individual faculty members and are guided by the standard course outlines developed by the academic departments. Coordinators/Chairs/Deans should monitor and conduct norming exercises to ensure grading standards and learning outcomes are being met.

Academic Program assessments are the responsibility of academic chairs/coordinators and culminate in the ADHE program review reports due every 7-10 years following the state calendar. The Office of Accreditation and Assessment will survey annually for data relating to state program review.

Based on the evidence provided in the report, it appears that the institution has worked diligently to develop a campus-wide culture of assessment and evaluation, which are designed to provide working data that can be used to improve student learning and operational efficiency. For example, the report cites the activity of the Office of Accreditation and Assessment, which is offering two assessment workshops every semester and has collaborated with individual offices/units in the development of assessment plans, resulting in a significant increase in the number of plans that will provide data the institution believes will be useful in planning and continuous improvement.

The report's appendices include two co-curricular assessment reports, one from the Library, the other from Pride. Each of these is acceptably thorough and follows a format that includes a section on "Assessment Method" and "Assessment Results Review." These reports should have some value in the institution's decision making, though the report doesn't include any data from General Education Assessment, which would have been valuable. It appears, however, that progress has been made in this area, where the report cites instructional areas where plans are in place.

NWACC set out specific priorities for AY2021-2022, which are listed in the report—shown above in the Report Summary section—and an accompanying list of accomplishments during that same period. Among the notable AY2021-2022 achievements are the development of the Assessment Calendar and the program review schedule update, both of which are, clearly, related to the College's efforts in the systemization of its assessment/evaluation procedures.

**ANALYSIS CONCLUDING STATEMENT:** The evidence demonstrates that NWACC has made adequate progress with regard to its assessment and evaluation procedures, and that the improvements are designed to assist the institution in its planning and improvement efforts. The Higher Learning Commission acknowledges the institution's effort to date and will not require additional reporting on these matters. (Please see the Staff Finding section below.)

However, the institution's work in this regard is still very much "in progress," partly a function of the changes that accompanied the shift away from the AQIP Pathway. While the College's activity to date has produced what appears to be an effective organizational approach to assessment and evaluation, the relative newness of the system means that, currently, there isn't a wide range of data available for review. It also isn't clear exactly what KPIs are being measured in terms of overall improvement as it relates to planning. NWACC should assume that the HLC Peer Review Team conducting the institution's Mid-Cycle Review in 2024 will examine closely the institution's continued progress in these areas. In particular, the Team will almost certainly wish to review a wide range of assessment data, from both the instructional and co-curricular areas—and study the College's use of data with regard to its efforts in planning and continuous improvement.

One final word: Based on what can be deduced from the report, the institution is using the term "assessment" as a kind of catch-all that includes both assessment of student learning and a means to measure unit/office effectiveness. NWACC should be aware that, in HLC lexicon, "assessment" should be employed primarily in terms of student learning, as distinct from "evaluation," which has more broadly-based usage and should be used when measuring performance that isn't directly connected to student learning, such as the efficiency of an administrative office. Both are important and are connected to overall institutional performance and continuous improvement but are distinct in terms of usage.

**STAFF FINDING:**

Note the relevant Criterion, Core Component(s) or Assumed Practice(s): Core Component 4.B pertaining to learning outcomes assessment.

Statements of Analysis (check one below)

- Evidence demonstrates adequate progress in the area of focus.
- Evidence demonstrates that further organizational attention is required in the area of focus.
- Evidence demonstrates that further organizational attention and HLC follow-up are required.
- Evidence is insufficient and a HLC focused visit is warranted.

Note the relevant Criterion, Core Component(s) or Assumed Practice(s): Core Component 5.D pertaining to informed institutional decision-making processes.

Statements of Analysis (check one below)

- Evidence demonstrates adequate progress in the area of focus.
- Evidence demonstrates that further organizational attention is required in the area of focus.
- Evidence demonstrates that further organizational attention and HLC follow-up are required.
- Evidence is insufficient and a HLC focused visit is warranted

**STAFF ACTION:** Receive the report including: Documentation of identified processes for assessing performance in its operations including KPIs, frequency of assessment, tools used for data collection, and how results will be communicated; assessment data collected up to 5/1/2022 to demonstrate on-going assessment activities have occurred; evidence that data have been shared broadly with the institution's constituent groups; and details of how data have informed institutional decision-making/improvements. No further reports are required.

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