INTRODUCTION

Boise State University provided the reviewers with a timely and well-written Mid-Cycle Report that clearly and systematically addressed the questions posed to the institution for that purpose. The University provided a welcoming atmosphere, excellent working and interviewing arrangements, and efficient logistical support for the reviewers.

The reviewers have chosen to provide the required feedback by responding to the seven Necessary Institutional Conditions outlined by the Commission for Mid-Cycle Evaluations.

NECESSARY INSTITUTIONAL CONDITIONS

1. Does Boise State University have an intended mission statement defined in terms sufficiently pragmatic to guide institutional process and to provide a logical connection to the analysis of institutional outcomes and ultimately assess mission fulfillment?

Boise State University has an appropriate mission statement defined by core themes that cover the essence of its critical activities, as currently approved by the State Board of Education. However, the university has concluded that while it expects to be able to demonstrate mission fulfillment, recent planning efforts have shown anew the role that adaptability and sustainability plays in that success.

To that end, BSU is considering the incorporation of an additional core theme on stewardship, which would contribute to readying the university to demonstrate “that it is capable of adapting, when necessary, its mission, core themes, programs, and services to accommodate changing and emerging needs, trends, and influences to ensure enduring institutional relevancy, productivity, viability, and sustainability.”

Boise State University has a strong Strategic Plan designed to support fulfillment of its mission. The Plan is based on five goals that, in combination, encompass its mission. Each goal is defined by a set of 5 – 7 objectives tracked by measurable indicators that BSU calls Key Performance Measures (KPMs). Each of the 40+ KPMs includes tracking data for the past four years, and performance targets for 2015 and 2019.
Building on this base, BSU has recently completed a Program Prioritization Process that included every academic, administrative, and support unit on the campus. For academic programs, it included reporting – among other criteria -- learning outcomes and assessment methods and results, which were reviewed and “graded”. It was an all-in effort that, in some ways, left the campus exhausted, but the participants proud of what they accomplished. There appears to be a general belief that they finally applied meaningful (for the most part) criteria – through the lens of their mission -- to everything they do, and that it has led to real actions to improve both the quality and the efficiency of the university. Both the written Mid-Cycle Report and conversations on campus pointed to the number of ways that institutional resources have already followed the recommendations of the PPP process, with more planned. Chairs and deans, as well as central administrators, expressed a strong preference for future iterations of this process, as long as it does not mean starting from scratch and building new criteria and metrics.

Several other sets of overlapping plans and processes are a function of Idaho’s governance structure, but all seem to be similar enough in their goals, metrics and targets to provide convenient reporting mechanisms for specific audiences or purposes, and to reinforce the critical nature of certain indicators.

Within this scenario, the core themes from BSU’s Year One Report seem in some ways to play the role of a vision statement, expanding on the mission in an aspirational tone. Less clear is the role of the objectives that define the themes and the 200+ indicators (which include most of the 40+ KPMs in the Strategic Plan) that are intended to measure them. The university notes that they have a good deal of work to do to reduce the number of metrics and/or to define the relationship among the different plans and processes. These reviewers concur.

2. Does BSU have programs and courses, including essential learning goals, defined in terms sufficiently pragmatic to guide institutional process and to provide a logical connection to the analysis of student learning outcomes and ultimately assess mission fulfillment?

BSU has long required every program and course to define its essential learning goals in terms that could be assessed and analyzed and that could track improvement. Since their last full accreditation review, however, learning goals and assessment reports were reviewed in conjunction with each program’s five-year academic program review. Both methodology and subsequent use were defined by the program, and the quality of the process and its effectiveness in generating improvement were not evaluated. The recent PPP process, however, systematically reviewed this aspect of each program, giving the institution a better
picture of strengths, weaknesses, and where help was needed. Resources have been made available to make assessment of student learning stronger and more consistent across the campus.

While the chairs interviewed by these reviewers (12 of 44) agreed that syllabi needed to include course learning outcomes, and while all of those chairs noted that their programs had program-level learning outcomes that could be found “somewhere on the Provost’s website,” a number of them could not point to where a student or prospective student could readily locate such outcomes for their programs.

The recent redesign of foundational studies (general education) gave a boost to this process, since the university learning outcomes (ULOs), including those in the finishing foundations (major capstone) course were all revised and widely vetted.

The two degree programs highlighted for the Mid-Cycle Report have well-developed learning goals, and both are early adopters of the e-portfolio process. If all academic programs at both the undergraduate and graduate level have similarly relevant and pragmatic learning goals, the institution will meet this requirement, whether or not all utilize e-portfolios by the time of the next review. One caution will be to insure that both knowledge and skills outcomes are identified at the program level.

3. Does BSU have learning outcome indicators that efficiently demonstrate the achievement of intended outcomes?

The Foundational Studies Program and the two degree programs highlighted by the institution for this review have identified learning outcome indicators that efficiently demonstrate the achievement of intended outcomes. If all undergraduate and graduate programs are utilizing similarly relevant and assessable learning outcomes, the institution will be well-prepared in this area for its next review.

Students in both programs who were interviewed for this report understood, in general terms, what their programs intended for them to learn, as well as the role of the e-portfolio in both documenting and assessing that learning. The students in one program believed their faculty to be focused on preparing them for graduate school, and those in the other program on preparing them to succeed in finding employment, which they appreciated as that is not a foregone conclusion in their field.
4. *Does BSU have a systematic and scientifically valid procedure or methodology used to gather evidence of outcomes achievement over time?*

The ULOs will be assessed via e-portfolio using agreed upon rubrics by trained faculty raters. It is not clear whether this approach will be fully implemented before the Year Seven Review, but resources and staff have been committed, and deans and chairs are warily optimistic. The Foundational Studies Program has worked with faculty in all areas to define learning outcomes and assessments, including signature assignments in ULO courses, and to build the new e-portfolios that span program levels. They have identified a careful process of evaluation and redesign covering all of the ULOs on a multi-year timeline.

The visitation team met with a number of BSU faculty/staff/administrators who indicate that the campus processes developed to gather evidence of outcomes achievement across the entire university – not just at the academic program level -- is systematic and will provide the data needed for continuous improvement. A number of BSU personnel commented on the high-quality data now being provided to the campus by “central administration.”

5. *Does BSU have thoughtful analysis comparing outcomes to institutional intention?*

In its appendices to the Mid-Cycle Evaluation Report, BSU provides evidence of a process which “maps” indicators from the many initiatives currently underway on campus to one another. The visitation team was able to verify a number of examples as to the efficacy of these processes. For example, the campus demonstrates a process in which performance measures from its NWCCU Core Themes and Core Objectives are mapped to performance measures from the University’s Strategic Plan, Strategic Enrollment Plan, and to annual Performance Measures report submitted to the Idaho Board of Education. One issue that could result from assessing all of these different initiatives may be an “overload” of campus indicators. BSU is aware of this potential issue and is examining ways to develop or refine indicators that can be used across all of the initiatives currently underway on campus.

Two programs of note that have been implemented by BSU to assist in the assessment of mission fulfillment are the *Foundational Studies* (General Education) and *E-Portfolio* programs. These new programs are designed to collect and analyze data, review the findings and integrate faculty development to address the findings. As identified in BSU’s Mid-Cycle Evaluation document, the *Foundational Studies* program “is organized around eleven University Learning Objectives (ULOs) that every BSU graduate will be expected to have met, regardless of major.” The *E-Portfolio* program has been implemented to document and evaluate the achievement of ULOs. The visitation team met with faculty in two programs, Spanish and Anthropology who are early adopters of the software platform. The faculty is excited about the preliminary results.
of the E-Portfolio system but they are also cognizant of issues such as the large number of adjunct instructors offering courses at a number of remote sites and how these sections will be included in the assessment process.

6. **Does BSU have a communication process that feeds back assessment results to be used for continuous institutional improvement?**

All parties interviewed by the visitation team indicate that the assessment processes developed by the campus have been transparent and participative. The participants have been addressing how the NWCCU accreditation process will be integrated with the other planning and evaluation processes currently underway, and are confident that they are mutually supportive.

The P³ initiative recently undertaken by BSU was, by all indicators, a comprehensive process that required all the constituent components of the campus go through a thorough assessment. An upper level administrator indicated that “the P³ process has changed the culture in a number of areas on campus” while an Academic Dean characterized the P³ process as being “one of the best things to have happened to this campus in the past 20 years.” And BSU personnel shared with the visitation team examples of how the “feedback” of assessment results has resulted in tangible changes to the campus. There are many examples of the breadth of its impact: faculty lines have been moved within colleges, programs have been consolidated, facilities no longer charges departments for painting and recarpeting, and the bowling alley - initially slated for removal from the Student Union Building - was “saved” after analyzing the results of both quantitative and qualitative assessments. One Dean indicated that the process has resulted in “a massive overhaul of the curriculum within [his] college.”

A number of respondents commented on both the openness and actions of the PPP process. It was noted that communication was constant and – unlike so many planning activities – actions followed evaluation.

7. **Does BSU have sufficient evidence to demonstrate how institutional assessment is used to meet the requirements of Standard Five?**

Following up on last year’s Program Prioritization Process, BSU has available an abundance of institutional assessment data that encompasses all of the academic, administrative, and support functions of the institution more uniformly than ever before. The institution is still analyzing the data and has been making resource allocation decisions based on that analysis.
The one significant challenge to BSU’s preparation for the Year Seven Report and Visit is, in fact, the over-abundance of plans, processes, and metrics with which they are currently contending. At this rate, the faculty, chairs, and deans could easily be overcome by metric fatigue. However, efforts are underway to focus attention on analyzing and responding to the most important metrics through leadership and resource allocation. Once the task of streamlining and converging some of the plans and their metrics is addressed, BSU should be in a good position to demonstrate how it meets the requirements of Standard Five.

As one example, for much of the last decade, BSU has been engaged in a rapid, but deliberate evolution from a comprehensive to a research university. With the support, and at the direction, of the State Board of Education the institution has spun off its long-embedded community/technical college units into a separate institution, the College of Western Idaho, and has expanded its research, technology transfer, and graduate activities and programs. The goals, metrics, assessment, feedback, and resource decisions involved in this endeavor position the institution to demonstrate the adaptability, relevance, and sustainability required by Standard Five.