Highlights and Areas for Improvement
HLC Initial Report
Spring 2021

Institutional Strengths

Program Review, Academic Assessment, Student Success and General Education

The Higher Learning Commission visiting team noted that the University of Northern Iowa adhered to strong practices of both program review, which occurs every seven years, and program assessment, which occurs annually in the assessment of student learning outcomes. The team noted in its discussion of Criteria 4.A.1 that "UNI's program review process meets the criterion by having a robust program review process and acting on its findings" (p. 39). Similarly, the team noted, "Significant and commendable work by UNI has taken place in the areas of learning outcomes with differentiation being made between undergraduate and graduate programs" (p. 22).

The review team also praised our focus on student success:

> The institution documents overall improvement in graduation rate and strong first year retention rates compared to peers. The institution has plans to address gaps in retention and graduation rates for underrepresented students. Attendees at the Criteria 3 & 4 Open Forum corroborated the information from the Assurance Argument regarding a strong culture of data gathering which is constantly examined to inform retention and completion strategies (p. 44).

Finally, the team praised the new general education program's link to the Strategic Plan and its "ongoing work in the areas of human and cultural diversity" (p. 37). They further observed that the revision of the General Education program has been done with both student learning outcomes and sustainable assessment processes in mind:

> Additional evidence that supports the institution's culture of assessment is seen in the current work related to creation of a new general education program designed around student learning outcomes rather than a focus on independent disciplinary content or themes. Criteria 3 & 4 Open Forum attendees reported deep engagement and energy around the inclusive discussions that led to this approach and their commitment to the work (p. 40).

Community Engagement

In its overview of the institution's strengths, the team highlighted UNI's commitment to community engagement, sharing several quotes from students and stakeholders that they heard at one of the open forums during the site visit. The report describes the benefit to students, highlighting two students' comments in particular, and concludes: "It is clear the community

benefits from the initiatives and services provided to the community through the Service Learning Institute."

Technology & Planning

The HLC review team recognized the impact of the innovative planning within Information Technology Services to implement technology upgrades in classrooms across the institution. As the report describes:

> ...the institution was able to leverage the standard technology platform to redesign large meeting spaces across campus into new socially distanced classrooms. In one example, the IT and Facilities partnership resulted in the ability to reconfigure a classroom space in 30 minutes due in part to the stable technology platform. The ability to safely offer 80% of Spring 2021 courses in a face-to-face or hybrid format was strongly supported by this planning and innovation effort (p. 35).

Areas for Improvement

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

The team flagged several areas related to diversity, equity and inclusion that will need to be addressed before the Year 4 Assurance Review that will occur in the 2024-25 academic year. While the report praises UNI's commitment to diversity, it notes that our definition of diversity was created in 2009 (p .24). The report acknowledges that there are resources in place to address Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the campus community (including the Chief Diversity Officer and the Director of Multicultural Education, and the Center for Multicultural Education). However, it highlights a number of observations that the team made during its review of our Assurance Argument and its site visit that suggest challenges implementing our plans and making progress toward our goals:

- "Despite hiring a Chief Diversity Officer in 2016, and the Establishment of the Center for Multicultural Education, student comments in the Open Forum and on a student survey indicate underrepresented and marginalized students are less satisfied with their campus experiences than their White peers" (p. 11).
- "Climate assessment reviews presented in the Assurance Argument, including the annual graduating senior survey and the student climate survey, point to continuing opportunities for growth in creating an inclusive campus environment. Disaggregated data of students of color from white students suggest that students of color report less agreement with statements such as Different perceptions are valued in the classroom, Appropriate and inclusive language is used in your classes, and Instructors model cultural sensitivity. Data also suggest that students of color agree with the statement There are interracial tensions in the classroom at a rate of 40% while white students agree at a rate of 20%."
- Criterion 5 Open Forum attendees articulated an awareness of the performance gap and have attributed some of the causality to recent events that have uncovered significant

climate issues for underrepresented students. "There does not seem to be a full understanding of all the factors that contribute to the gap, but the university is engaged in using data to inform them of specific gaps and working to address those. For example, while the cornerstone program is designed primarily for first and second year students, an examination of the data showed that the greatest impact for some student populations such as black male students was seen in second to third year retention. The retention and completion council has plans to continue to disaggregate data to inform next steps."

The report further highlights the following student comments:

- "Administrators do not see diversity as a priority - there are no active discussions"
- "Reactionary conversations happen often - follow-up does not happen."
- "The bias response form has become the bias report form - nothing happens after a form (complaint) is submitted."
- "UNI needs to do a better job supporting minority students"
- "Some folks on campus are fantastic advocates for students."
- "Some departments are set-up to do good things."

The report urges "continued, focused attention" to diversity initiatives, pointing out that the recently formed President's Council on Inclusion, Transformative Social Justice & Advocacy will be a potential avenue to achieve systematic change for a truly diverse, equitable and inclusive campus community. Further, the report notes that the close of the 2017-22 Strategic Plan and the start of a new strategic planning process "will provide the opportunity for the university to report on the progress of this Council and provide direction for continuing attention to DEI efforts" (p. 3).

Enrollment

The HLC review team recognized the challenges that UNI has faced recently regarding enrollment and observed that awareness of the challenge appeared to be widespread on campus. The team acknowledged UNI's efforts to increase enrollment by recruiting students from surrounding states, keeping our programs updated so that they are relevant and attractive to students, and creating strong partnerships with community colleges.

Still, the team emphasized that while UNI "demonstrates effective mechanisms for managing short-term challenges (e.g., enrollment contingency fund used to support pandemic related enrollment declines in FY21)," efforts are needed "to support and perhaps accelerate long-term planning for rightsizing the institution [that] may help to strengthen the university's position in the future" (p. 54). In short, the team concludes, while UNI has "demonstrated the ability to manage enrollment declines in the short term, the current lack of success in the 2017-22 Strategic Enrollment Plan indicates additional efforts may be necessary to stabilize enrollment, to discern likely enrollment scenarios, and to develop long term institutional strategies that align with current circumstances" (p. 54).

Facilities / Accessibility

The team pointed to the student open forum and its review of comments in the student opinion survey that indicated "some challenges in accessibility due to the configuration of building entrances and number of stairs to access classrooms and services" (p. 35). It also called attention to the potential impact of deferred maintenance on university facilities, stating "the university is experiencing a dramatic increase in deferred maintenance with an increase of $30M to $201M in FY20. The institution relies on a budget of $1.4M for building repairs, representing 0.12% of replacement value that is below the Board of Regents Policy Manual benchmark (1.5% of replacement value)" (p. 50).

Staff Professional Development

The team observed that while the university does an excellent job of assuring that we hire qualified staff and make resources available to help them develop general skills, "it is less clear how the institution supports specialized skill development within the professional areas" (p. 49).

Academic Advising

The report indicates a need to examine academic advising across the institution. It calls attention to the fact that student perceptions of advising differ across campus. "While a review of the NSSE data indicates an increase in the percent of students rating their interactions with advisors as excellent (71% in 2020), the comments shared in the opinion survey and student forum indicate that the quality of advising or satisfaction with advising is uneven across the institution and may warrant additional attention" (p. 34). It concludes that this "perception that advising is uneven across the institution warrants additional attention" (p. 35).

Assessment and Continuous Improvement

Finally, the team concluded that UNI could leverage its excellence in the assessment of student learning to enhance assessment of co-curricular activities "in order to demonstrate how [student] services are making a difference in enrollment, persistence, and completion" (p. 34). The report also recognizes an opportunity to expand the use of the UNI Program Vitality Metrics (PVC) within our continuous improvement efforts. On multiple occasions during the team visit, team members noted the importance of using academic program data to guide faculty hiring decisions and allocation. The [PVC] demonstrates the integration of essential data to guide decision making and strategic allocation of resources, which can be further leveraged in the academic program review process" (p. 48).