Mid-Cycle Evaluation (Year 3)

Peer-Evaluation Report

Great Falls College Montana State University

Great Falls, MT

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Introduction

Visit Summary

The Mid-Cycle Evaluation visit of Great Falls College (GFC) Montana State University was conducted in-person. The Executive Director for Institutional Effectiveness worked closely with the evaluation team to develop the meeting schedule, coordinate visit logistics, and respond to requests from committee members before and during the visit. The meetings scheduled for the visit were aligned with the three parts of a Mid-Cycle Evaluation and contained informative conversations about the work in which college faculty and staff are engaged. Evaluation team members met with executive leaders as well as a cross section of faculty and staff who were members of college councils and committees including the Executive Council, DREAM Committee, StAR Committee, Internal Academic Program Review Committee, Student Learning Assessment Committee, Administrative Unit Review Committee, and the College Council. College representatives were open, honest, responsive and collegial in their interactions with visiting team members. Additionally, one member of the evaluation team conducted a US Department of Education virtual follow-up certification since the Evaluation of Institutional Effectiveness conducted in 2022 was completed virtually.

Part I: Mission Fulfillment

GFC has developed a mission fulfillment framework and process that is based primarily on Mission Fulfillment Indicators (MFIs) and Strategic Plan Metrics.

The institution has adopted a set of 12 MFIs, some of which are student achievement measures of retention, persistence, completion and post-graduate success. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness has begun compiling an annual report showing the current status of each MFI, coloring each with green, yellow, or red based on progress made toward meeting target scores for each indicator. A summary of the report was shared with the campus community during 2024 fall convocation with the intent of giving a similar presentation at the beginning of each academic year. Each of the MFIs are aligned with either the work of the DREAM committee or specific college departments. However, there is no mechanism for reporting progress towards meeting MFI targets. A tighter connection between the MFIs, strategic plan, and implementation strategies could be helpful. The college has created Tableau dashboards containing additional detailed information regarding the MFIs

The current strategic plan, *Forging Futures*, is comprised of three pillars of Inclusivity, Opportunities, and Excellence, with supporting goals and metrics. The college has developed

Tableau dashboards showing performance for each metric.   All college units and committees have at least one strategic goal aligned with at least one goal. College units and committees submit a report twice per year summarizing their progress in achieving their strategic goals. If they accomplish a strategic goal, they are required to set a new goal. The StAR Commitee reviews the strategic goals reports and tracks progress. Once per year, each unit or committee gives a presentation about their strategic goal work in the College Council, a body open to all employees and the public. The StAR Committee compiles a report summarizing the work being done to implement the strategic plan and presents it at the fall convocation.

The college uses the strategic plan to guide resource allocation decisions. During the budget building process, if a college unit requests additional funding beyond its base allocation, it must align the request with elements of the strategic plan. In 2024 college leadership identified funds that could be allocated on a one-time basis to support work that would support implementing strategic goals and engaged the college community in a process of requesting and awarding the funds. In anticipation of future funding that could support additional positions, the college leadership implemented a similar process to prioritize potential new positions.

To support and enable the implementation of the mission fulfillment structure and planning process, the college updated and clarified its shared governance process composed of councils (decision making bodies) and committees (recommending bodies). Membership, charge and scope of responsibility, relationship with other bodies, and oversight by members of the college Executive Council are some of the details clarified and implemented. The structure is embraced and well understood by college employees.

The mission fulfillment framework is quite new to the college, with the MFI and strategic plan summary reports shared with the college community for the first time in fall 2024. However, those involved seem to understand and appreciate the process. As the college community engages in the process iteratively, they will find ways to streamline the process, make connections, and find additional meaning that will guide the college in its continuous improvement and resource allocation efforts. Staff have already drawn some conclusions about how to strengthen the process. For instance, they note that there is not enough connection between the MFIs and strategic plan metrics and the StAR committee members have concluded that some strategic plan metrics do not provide useful data, baselines are needed for some data, and there are not action plans designed to improve outcomes for all the MFIs. Additionally, the college should intentionally incorporate the assessment of student learning and disaggregated student achievement data into the institutional planning process.

Part II: Student Achievement

GFC uses student achievement measures to monitor retention, transfer, college-level math and writing completion, degrees awarded, graduation rates, and postgraduation employment rates. GFC has identified three peer groups (national, regional, Montana) to compare trends in student achievement. GFC has begun efforts to disaggregate data by select characteristics, including a customized "Underrepresented" category of student, which includes Pell recipients, American Indian or Alaska Native, veterans, or age 25 or older. Additional efforts to disaggregate data were found on individual dashboards mentioned in the report (e.g. Fall 23 to Fall 24 persistence rates, which disaggregates by categories including male/female, first generation). The College has described a willingness to be critically reflective, and embrace continuous improvement, as illustrated by labeling their indicator of "Completions by Academic Year" as "needs improvement," as shared with the campus community at fall 2024 convocation.

In its mid-cycle report, GFC describes the systems and structures related to use of student achievement data as "relatively new." While select reports make disaggregated data available, the College is still working towards a complete understanding of which student groups are thriving or struggling with their current approach to support for learners. GFC should move towards their year seven report and visit with a goal of establishing some standard categories for disaggregation that are used across data sets/dashboards, to normalize and routinize the potential for comparison, contrast, and deeper analysis of gaps between student groups.

GFC has been thoughtful in researching and establishing regional and national peer groups. In practice, it seems the most frequent group for benchmarking is with in-State institutions—due in part to the potential for faculty and staff to connect with colleagues and these peer institutions, and explore the meaning behind benchmarked data. The visiting team encourages GFC to continue and elevate this practice of reviewing benchmarking data—regularly, and with a balanced emphasis on State, regional, and national peer groups. Use of these regional and national comparators will help solidify targets for key metrics, help identify stretch goals, and/or illuminate other areas for critical reflection.

As the College solidifies a foundation in disaggregated and benchmarked data, there will also be opportunity to deepen the meaning made from data collected. The College's mid-cycle report repeats an emphasis on monitoring data, and identifies how various metrics have been assigned to different Councils and committees for regular review. This is a strong start, and reflects a compelling investment of time and energy in data infrastructure. The College is still building a track record of using data to identify and prioritize needs, and align resources. There are some examples of how use of data has directly impacted a decision (e.g. use of qualitative user input to inform the design of the Military Family Center, and Native and Indigenous Cultural Center), which signal the potential for good progress in this area. As the College moves towards year seven, the visiting team encourages GFC to continue its journey to move beyond monitoring data (and into deeper reflection and analysis of achievement gaps), and to infuse

data into planning processes that ensure resources (e.g. personnel time, organizational budget) are aligned with areas of greatest need.

Part III: Programmatic Assessment

Program evaluation at GFC is conducted through two primary processes: academic program review and administrative unit review. In its Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation report, GFC highlighted two examples of program-level review: the Accounting Associate of Applied Science program and the General Studies certificate program.

The academic program review process is overseen by the Internal Academic Program Review Committee (IAPRC), which includes three faculty and three staff members. This process involves an analysis of program data and a required self-study. Academic programs are reviewed on a five-year cycle.

GFC has established three Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILOs)—Critical Thinking, Communication, and Professionalism—which are clearly defined on the college's website. Each academic program's Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs) are also published on the college's website and in its catalog. However, discrepancies exist between the catalog and website in several programs, leading to potential confusion.

Since 2022, GFC has significantly revised its Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) assessment process. The newly formed Student Learning Assessment Committee—primarily composed of faculty—has led these efforts. Over the past two years, all programs have reviewed and rewritten their PLOs. Additionally, each program has developed a Program Assessment Plan to align PLOs with Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs). It was evident to the evaluation team that GFC's faculty have wholeheartedly embraced the new assessment process.

Although GFC intends to implement program-level outcome (PLO) assessment across campus in the near future, it currently lacks a systematic process to collect, analyze, and disseminate PLO assessment data. Faculty and staff often struggle to distinguish between SLO assessment data and student achievement metrics such as pass rates, retention, and completion. Faculty and staff would benefit from clarification of the differences between assessment of learning outcomes and student achievement data. Similarly, assessment of the Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILO) remains in the planning phase. At present, there is little evidence that either PLO or ILO assessment data is being collected and used to inform or improve the quality of education.

Based on the two programmatic evaluation examples provided, the evaluation team observed that GFC's academic program review process emphasizes student achievement data and

program health indicators—such as enrollment, retention, completion, and employment outcomes—while giving minimal attention to SLO assessment data. The evaluation team urges the college to begin implementing a systematic evaluation and inclusive planning process that includes student learning outcomes assessment.

Overall, GFC has set a solid foundation and made meaningful progress in its SLO assessment work, and its faculty appear committed to the college's evolving assessment processes. The next critical step is to begin collecting and using student learning outcome assessment data to inform and support continuous improvement. The college would benefit from implementing the assessment process early enough to complete multiple assessment cycles.

PART IV: Moving Forward

The evaluation team was impressed by the engagement, enthusiasm, and collaboration among individuals at the college. The team noted multiple accomplishments that merit acknowledgement and even celebration:

- The college is building a strong foundation for its mission fulfillment process, gathering and interpreting data, and assessment of program and institutional learning outcomes,
- The campus facility is beautiful, clean, and well maintained,
- The Native and Indigenous Center, Military Family Center, Food Pantry, and student support services show intentionality in striving to create a welcoming atmosphere that meets student needs,
- The rebranding effort with Mo, the river otter, was a source of pride and enthusiasm,
- The establishment of an intentional shared governance structure with clearly defined roles, broad representation, and strong communication channels creates a robust structure for engaging the campus community in continuous improvement work,
- A strong assessment foundation that includes the rewriting of program and institutional learning outcomes, mapping of courses to them, and selecting signature assignments for purposes of assessment,
- Training of assessment committee members and their positive engagement in preparing a process that is understood and embraced by faculty.

The evaluation team also identified areas of improvement where the college should continue to focus its efforts in order to prepare for the upcoming evaluation of institutional effectiveness report and visit.

- **Enhance Institutional Planning:** Seek to refine, streamline, and improve the annual institutional planning process through ongoing implementation. Incorporate results of program and institutional learning assessment as well as disaggregated student

achievement data into the process with a goal of using the results to improve student learning and achievement.

- **Optimize Use of Student Achievement Data**: Continue to strengthen and refine the use of student achievement data. Standardize and normalize data disaggregation that illustrate achievement gaps the institution would like to address. Incorporate peer comparator data that includes state, regional, and national peers.
- **Implement Comprehensive Assessment Processes**: Expedite the full implementation of a process for assessing program and institutional learning outcomes and use the results to make meaningful improvements that enhance student learning. Incorporate the results into the institutional planning process.
- **Streamline Processes for Sustainability**: Look for ways to streamline processes so they are meaningful and sustainable to implement with scarce personnel, time, and financial resources.

PART V: Addendums

Progress on Recommendation 1

Recommendation 1: Spring 2022 Evaluation of Institutional Effectiveness; Continue to develop an ongoing and systematic evaluation and inclusive planning process to inform and refine its effectiveness, assign resources, and improve student learning and achievement (2020 Standards 1.B.1; 1.B.3).

The college has launched a process to assess institutional effectiveness, as described in the Mission Fulfillment section of this report. The planning process is comprehensive and inclusive. A key component in the implementation is a revised shared governance structure of college councils and committees that have members from departments across the institution, including at least one faculty on each committee. The college has started incorporating resource allocation decisions aligned with the strategic plan into the planning process and discussing data that can inform decisions aimed at improving institutional effectiveness.

The current process is still missing some key elements. The results of student learning assessment is not incorporated into the process because assessment of program and institutional learning outcomes is not happening. While student achievement measures are included in the MFIs, which are a part of the process, a clear focus on addressing specifics gaps identified through data disaggregation is lacking. The process includes intentional steps for reporting data to the campus community. More attention could be given to interpretation, reflection, and taking actions to implement or refine strategic efforts based on the data collected. GFC has made admirable and tremendous strides in organizing people and processes, it now simply needs to continue to refine its process through ongoing implementation, which will make its processes ongoing and systematic.

Progress on Recommendation 2

Recommendation 2: Spring 2022 Evaluation of Institutional Effectiveness; Widely publish and use disaggregated indicators of student achievement to identify and mitigate gaps in achievement and equity through planning, decision making, and allocation of resources (2020 Standards 1.D.3; 1.D.4).

GFC publishes data related to twelve Mission Fulfillment Indicators via Tableau dashboards available via publicly-accessible websites. One link included in an MFI Snapshot of Results page was not working at time of latest review (4/3/25) and should be updated: https://www.gfcmsu.edu/about/Planning/full_report_for_mission_fullfillment_indicators.html

GFC has begun efforts to disaggregate data by select characteristics, including a customized "Underrepresented" category of student, which includes Pell recipients, American Indian or Alaska Native, veterans, or age 25 or older. As noted in the section on Student Achievement, select dashboards linked from the mid-cycle report include additional approaches to disaggregation, though active review of those data to identify achievement gaps is still emerging as standard college practice. We advise GFC to empower the office of Institutional Effectiveness to accelerate the identification of achievement gaps by creating reports that name the most urgent and compelling gaps among the student body. These reports could then be shared with appropriate departments and councils/committees, and paired with well-scaffolded and supported approaches to meaning-making, action planning, and resource allocation.

During the team visit, we observed that a substantial amount of data infrastructure has been established, which can serve as a great foundation for future use of data in key processes. The report offers brief descriptions of key decision-making and resource-allocation processes, and the role of data in those processes (e.g. strategic funding requests, p. 24). During our visit, team members reviewed select submissions during recent cycles of strategic funding; the form used for this process encourages authors to cite data as part of evidence of need (though neither proposal reviewed chose to include data in their submission). GFC should continue building and refining a regular practice of calling on meaningful data sources to consider and prioritize options for resource allocation and other decision-making. With concerted effort, GFC should have substantial examples to use when demonstrating progress related to Recommendation 2 during the Evaluation of Institutional Effectiveness in year seven.