

Year One Peer-Evaluation Report

North Idaho College

Coeur d'Alene, Idaho

May 2011

*A confidential report of findings prepared for the
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities*

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Introduction

In accordance with the newly-revised accreditation process of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (hereinafter “the Commission”), this report provides an overview and analysis of Standard 1 - Mission, Core Themes, and Expectations for North Idaho College (hereinafter, “the College” or “NIC”). As such, it reviews the eligibility requirements; mission and extent of mission fulfillment; and Core Themes with objectives, indicators, and rationale for selection that comprise the body of the report. The intent of the evaluators is to offer collegial input on the quality and usefulness of the report and to provide a critical analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the College’s response to the standard.

North Idaho College (NIC) located in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho was originally founded in 1933 as a junior college, changing to its current name in 1971 to more accurately reflect its mission as a comprehensive community college. As such, it is one of three community colleges in Idaho and serves a five-county area spanning more than 7,000 square miles. The NIC main campus is situated on 45 acres at the confluence of Lake Coeur d’Alene and the Spokane River. In addition, services are offered in four Kootenai County locations, three county outreach centers, and at the Coeur d’Alene Tribal Education Center.

In fall 2010, the College served 4,435 full-time equivalent students (6,347 headcount) with 1,400 students enrolled in Adult Basic Education courses and more than 8,000 students enrolled in non-credit community education and workforce training classes. As the only higher education institution within its five-county service area, NIC maintains an “open door” admissions policy and assumes significant responsibility in serving as a provider of educational opportunities for its citizens. With the economic downturn in its region, NIC has responded successfully to a 12.6 percent enrollment increase in for-credit courses.

Since its 2008 Interim Report, the College has remained stable with only minor changes occurring in its organizational structure. Any positions added have been in response to increased enrollment and to provide capacity for further program development.

North Idaho College’s response to Standard 1 is the first time the College has submitted a report under the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities’ revised accreditation standards and process.

Assessment of the Self-Evaluation Report and Support Materials

The Evaluation Team acknowledges the Board of Trustees, administration, faculty, staff, and students for their efforts in addressing Standard 1 - Mission, Core Themes, and Expectations. Clearly, high levels of participation occurred in the development of overall concepts, indicating a serious and intentional approach to articulating NIC’s foundation for assessing its mission and therefore, developing the report itself.

The overall document was essentially error free, competently written, and closely followed the recommended format guidelines. It carefully applied the principles of Standard 1 and the

expectations for the Year One Report. Both the introduction and institutional context (preface) contained salient information that provided a solid overview of the College itself. Information on governance, increases in enrollment, strategic use of land purchases, academic and career and technical programs, and its assessment processes allowed the evaluators to better understand the context in which mission, Core Themes, and mission fulfillment were articulated. While the supporting materials provided general information and timelines, they did not directly serve as evidence of how NIC articulated and aligned their Core Themes, indicators, and outcomes with its strategic plan.

In developing its Core Themes, the College again designed an effective process that was highly collaborative utilizing campus-wide “theme teams” for input. Following determination of the themes, an Accreditation Steering Committee was developed to work in unison with the Accreditation Executive Committee to solicit recommendations for the objectives, outcomes, and indicators. Actual and virtual “community rooms” were set up over a three-week period to ensure broad contributions. The evaluation team assessed these processes as vibrant and innovative approaches to ensuring that a clear understanding of the purpose and nature of accreditation and the newer approach to Core Themes was widely disseminated.

North Idaho College derived its Core Themes directly from its mission statement and aligned both with its strategic plan. Specific strategic themes and goals within the themes reference aspects of the Core Themes. Objectives are triangulated with outcomes and multiple indicators. Given the similarity in its mission statement elements and Core Themes, the Evaluation Team found it challenging to determine if the overall alignment will inform meaningful judgments of achievements, particularly as they relate to mission fulfillment. In other words, the Core Themes do not appear to be individual manifestations of elements of the mission, rather they seem to simply be a re-statement of the mission parts themselves.

Overall, North Idaho College has set an ambitious agenda of indicators to assess its mission and the extent of mission fulfillment. The strength in this effort lies in its commitment to providing a complete institutional scan; the challenge is in generating a plethora of data that is difficult to reconcile with assessment of Core Themes and strategic plan goals.

While NIC suggests use of direct indicators, it appears to be in the process of establishing many indirect indicators that will require substantive development to provide the degree of evidence needed to benchmark and assess related objectives and outcomes; e.g., implementation of non-instructional review (Core Theme I); consistent statements and publication of student responsibilities (Core Theme II); biannual ADA Code and Compliance Report, NIC Foundation fundraising support, participation in community service and governmental entities (Core Theme III).

Eligibility Requirements

Recognizing that the Commission's communication of the requirement to respond specifically to Eligibility Requirements 2 and 3 was a late request, the Evaluation Team understands that NIC was well-engaged in the process of preparing this Year One Report at the release of those guidelines. Thus, the Evaluation Team has extrapolated the pertinent information from within NIC's report, as well as other College materials (e.g., catalog, website). In its next report, the College is encouraged to follow the guidelines released March 2, 2011 to address the Eligibility Requirements separately.

ER 2. Authority

The institution is authorized to operate and award degrees as a higher education institution by the appropriate governmental organization, agency, or governing board as required by the jurisdiction in which it operates.

Addressed briefly in its report, and according to the College's website, NIC addressed Eligibility Requirement 2 (Authority) in its introduction, stating the sections of the Idaho Code from which it derives authority to function under the governance of its Board of Trustees.

ER 3. Mission and Core Themes

The institution's mission and core themes are clearly defined and adopted by its governing board(s) consistent with its legal authorization, and are appropriate to a degree-granting institution of higher education. The institution's purpose is to serve the educational interests of its students and its principal programs lead to recognized degrees. The institution devotes all, or substantially all, of its resources to support its educational mission and core themes.

The College addressed Eligibility Requirement 3 (Mission and Core Themes) in the body of the self-evaluation report related to its response to Standard 1. The Evaluation Team found evidence within the report to suggest NIC substantially meets this Eligibility Requirement. Specific compliments and concerns relating to Mission and Core Themes are addressed in later sections of this document.

Mission, Core Themes, and Expectations

Standard 1.A Mission

North Idaho College's mission statement is:

North Idaho College is committed to student success, teaching excellence, and lifelong learning. As a comprehensive community college, NIC provides quality educational opportunities that expand human potential and enhance the quality of life for the students and the communities it serves.

North Idaho College established its current mission statement during a strategic planning process in 1998-1999. The College reports the mission has not changed since that time, and its focus on "student success, teaching excellence, and lifelong learning" remains appropriate to its purpose. The mission is widely published on the College's website, in many printed materials, and in campus facilities. NIC asserts that the mission statement gives direction to all of its educational efforts.

More recently, NIC engaged in an eight-month strategic planning process leading to the establishment of its current 2008-2013 Strategic Plan. The plan identifies goals for the institution that guide NIC's progress. The plan was developed using a comprehensive process of data review along with internal and external constituent input. The goals relate broadly to individual aspects of the mission. For example, the mission element of "student success" is interpreted as *improve student success* (Goal 1), *implement initiatives to increase student success* (Goal 2), and *improve student communications* (Goal 3). Thus, the mission of the institution is further delineated by its strategic plan goals, which ultimately drive the work of the College. The Evaluation Team found substantive evidence to suggest NIC has a mission derived from its community, fitting its purpose as a comprehensive community college, and provides direction for the work of the institution (Standard 1.A.1).

In spring 2009, an NIC Accreditation Executive Committee was created to identify Core Themes, objectives, outcomes, and indicators. This process also engaged campus wide input from constituent groups. As a result, the Core Themes of *student success, instructional excellence, and community engagement* were identified. The overall process resulted in aligning the College's Core Themes with its strategic plan. North Idaho College "created its vision for mission fulfillment through its Core Themes." Specifically, NIC states (p. 6):

NIC's Core Theme Objectives are derived from the College mission. They define the Core Themes and lead to the outcomes which are observable results of actions and accomplishments based on one or more of the related Core Theme indicators.

In this sense, NIC is defining mission fulfillment as the College's performance in meeting the expectations of its Core Themes. Outcomes (derived from the goals) and objectives are used along with indicators to provide a basis for analysis of the Core Themes. On review, the Evaluation Team found that rather than serving as an interpretation of the mission, the Core Themes are nearly indiscernible from the mission itself. Since Core Themes represent essential

elements of the mission and collectively encompass it, the panel members encourage NIC to more clearly define how its Core Themes, outcomes, objectives, and indicators align to guide assessment of mission fulfillment.

In addressing the extent/threshold of mission fulfillment, NIC has seven objectives with related indicators that will measure the accomplishments identified in the Core Themes that are tied to the goals and outcomes. A Likert-type rating scale is currently under development that will provide percentage ranges for each level of the indicators as well as establish criteria and levels for each one. The intent is to use a color coding system (Exceeds Expectations – green; Meets Expectations – yellow; Needs Attention – red) to demonstrate progress or lack of it based on the established benchmarks. The committee encourages NIC to continue to clarify its definition of the extent of mission fulfillment to ensure all measures are defined, verifiable, and assessable, and give direction to its efforts.

Compliments:

1. The evaluators compliment North Idaho College for its efforts to engage a meaningful cohort of College and community members in development of its Core Themes and institutional planning processes.
2. It is evident the College has given considerable thought to the conceptual framework with which it will define mission fulfillment and articulate the extent to which it is attaining that mission (1.A.2). The evaluators compliment NIC for this effort.

Concerns:

1. The Evaluation Team is concerned that the mission and Core Themes of NIC may be too similar in nature to provide meaningful direction. Core Themes are defined as individual manifestations of essential elements of the mission, whereas the College's Core Themes seem to be nearly literal re-statements of their mission (1.B.1).
2. The evaluators found substantive evidence to suggest NIC has conceptually defined mission fulfillment through the measurement of its Core Theme objectives and indicators. However, the evaluators are concerned the College has not completed its work in clearly defining the indicators nor has it articulated a threshold at which it believes it is fulfilling its mission (1.A.2)

Standard 1.B Core Themes

North Idaho College has identified three Core Themes (1.B.1) that mirror the essential elements of its mission and collectively encompass it – *Student Success, Instructional Excellence, and Community Engagement*. The College has aligned its strategic plan elements (themes and goals) with these Core Themes. The Core Themes are further delineated through seven objectives divided among the Core Themes, and each objective has multiple outcomes and indicators of achievement.

NIC has carefully aligned its mission elements, new Core Themes, strategic plan themes and goals, objectives, outcomes, and indicators. It is clear that considerable work occurred in the

design and development of a conceptual framework leading to the indicators. However, the evaluators were unclear as to how some of the indicators related back through the objectives (and intended outcomes) to inform judgment about the Core Themes. For example, for Core Theme II – *Instructional Excellence*, it is difficult to trace how Objective 3 – To promote innovation and excellence in teaching, provides assessment through the Indicator – Training and education reported through the Diversity Steering Committee Annual Report. In this sense, the rationale for the indicator did not provide a strong connection that allowed for assessment of the Core Theme (1.B).

While there are many direct indicators related to the assessment of mission fulfillment, NIC has also elected to incorporate indirect indicators that represent important qualitative aspects of its Core Themes. The evaluation team recognizes that these processes are difficult to measure and create a positive challenge for the institution.

NIC states many indicators are well established with analysis methods in place while others will take time to establish before benchmarks are identified. While the evaluators acknowledge that iterative process, the Evaluation Team did not find substantive evidence the College had assessable and verifiable indicators of achievement for evaluation of the accomplishment of Core Theme objectives (1.B.2). It is unclear as to whether this work has not been completed, or if the College's Year One report simply lacked that information. NIC is encouraged to continue development of its assessment rating process, and fully define its indicators of achievement in order to be able to identify an acceptable threshold of mission fulfillment.

Overall, NIC appears to have adopted a significant number of factors and indicators for its Core Themes:

- Core Theme I – *Student Success* is aligned with 3 strategic plan goals, 2 objectives, 5 outcomes, and 12 indicators
- Core Theme II – *Instructional Excellence* is aligned with 4 strategic plan goals, 3 objectives, 12 outcomes, and 15 indicators
- Core Theme III – *Community Engagement* is aligned with 5 strategic plan goals, 2 objectives, 6 outcomes, and 8 indicators

On review, the evaluation committee found that assessing 35 indicators which require alignment with outcomes, objectives, and ultimately Core Themes to assess mission fulfillment, given the potential plethora of data, is a challenging task. It is not the Evaluation Team's role to suggest an appropriate number of indicators of achievement. The evaluators are concerned, however, that the work of defining specific indicator measures and clearly linking those to benchmarks to establish acceptable thresholds of achievement still needs to occur as the College proceeds with subsequent Commission accreditation processes and sustains its own framework for continuous improvement. Determination of definitive indicators that are directly assessable, meaningful, and provide clear evidence would perhaps mitigate these concerns and allow NIC to better articulate an acceptable threshold of mission fulfillment.

A review of Core Theme III – *Community Engagement* is indicative of the College’s serious interest in assessing the quality and degree in which the College is “enhancing the quality of life for the students and the communities it serves.” Many of the outcomes, however, as they relate to the objectives and indicators do not appear to relate back to the Core Theme itself. For example, it is unclear as to how the Indicator – Strategic initiatives accomplished that are designed to attract and retain quality staff and faculty, directly relates to Objective #2 – to establish and maintain a supportive and sustainable learning and working environment, that ultimately relates back to Core Theme II *Community Engagement*. In this sense, more clearly refining its goals, outcomes, and indicators may assist with assessing essential elements of its mission.

Summary

The Standard 1 – Mission, Core Themes, and Expectations Peer Evaluation Panel reviewed North Idaho College’s articulation of its purpose, Core Themes, and its parameters for mission fulfillment. Identification of Core Themes with related objectives and indicators were also assessed as a basis for evaluating accomplishment of the Core Themes. This is the first time the College has submitted a report under the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities’ revised accreditation standards and process. As such, the evaluation team acknowledges the college community for its serious and intentional approach in carrying out a reflective self-evaluation. As indicated in the report, both Eligibility Requirements are met.

North Idaho College, while retaining its mission from 1998-1999, updated its five-year strategic plan in 2007 for implementation in 2008-2013. Given the long endurance of the mission and its broad distribution, it is widely understood and embraced by the college community (1.A.1). Alongside the strategic plan, the College adopted three Core Themes that directly reflect the mission: *student success, instructional excellence, and community engagement*. The alignment of goals found in specific themes in the strategic plan, objectives, outcomes, and indicators represent the overall framework through which NIC is assessing its extent of mission fulfillment (1.A.2). While many indicators have both baselines and benchmarks, others are under construction. The intent of the College is to use a color-coded Likert-type rating scale that will provide percentage ranges for each indicator.

NIC has identified 12 strategic plan goals, 7 objectives, 23 outcomes and 35 indicators that represent a significant level of data analysis (1.B.2). Some indicators are generally tied to outcomes while others are more direct. The College defines mission fulfillment as occurring through assessment of its Core Themes although not all of the indicators and measures can serve as a basis for evaluating accomplishment of the objectives of its Core Theme (1.B.2).

In general, the report has a strong conceptual framework that is attempting to align all sectors of the College. The report was consistent with the guidelines and expectations of a Year One Report. Further alignment and/or refinement of objectives, outcomes, and indicators will more closely tie continuous improvement to the extent of mission fulfillment.

Commendations and Recommendations

Commendations

1. The evaluators commend North Idaho College for the inclusive processes used to identify Core Themes and related objectives and indicators (1.B.1).

Recommendations

1. It is evident NIC has made considerable progress in establishing a framework for continuous improvement centered on the assessment of how progress on indicators and objectives of its Core Themes illustrates the College's attainment of its mission. The evaluators note that NIC is using a Likert-type rating to benchmark its Core Theme objectives/indicators. The levels are color-coded to indicate areas that meet, exceed, or need attention. From this report, it was not evident what the acceptable threshold of mission fulfillment is. The evaluators recommend NIC provide further articulation of how the thresholds will suggest it is meeting its mission (1.A.2).
2. NIC established through its rationales that its indicators of achievement are meaningful to the continuous improvement of the College. While NIC suggests the use of direct indicators, it appears to be in the process of establishing many indirect indicators that will require substantive development to provide the degree of evidence needed to benchmark and assess related objectives and outcomes. The Evaluation Team recommends that NIC review its indicators to ensure they are assessable and can provide direct evidence of intended achievements (1.B.2).