

# **Mid-Cycle Peer-Evaluation Report**

**Great Basin College**

**Elko, Nevada and Associated Counties Served in Rural Nevada**

**April 13-14, 2016**

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

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## **Great Basin College Mid-Cycle Evaluation Committee Report**

**Evaluators** The Evaluation Committee selected for the Mid-Cycle Evaluation (MCE) visit to Great Basin College consisted of Dr. Gary Smith, as Chair, Former Vice President for Academic Affairs at Snow College, in Utah, and Mr. Miles Jackson, Dean of Social Science and Fine Arts, Clark College, in Washington state.

**Overview of MCE process and visit to Great Basin College** The MCE visit to Great Basin College (GBC) was conducted on April 13-14, 2016. Logistical arrangements, including local travel and lodging as well as agenda scheduling, coordinated by the Vice President of Academic Affairs Office/ALO and staff members, were excellent. Materials provided by GBC, including their report and related documents provided in advance, and on-site supplemental resources were insightful and sufficiently detailed to provide the evaluators initially with focused and discerning points of evidence for the review. The visit was planned with care and focus to address not only the report and prior recommendations of the Commission but also the evolving nature of the College in light of the NSHE changes, fiscal and mission approval, including potential implications for the College as it prepares for its future as well as the upcoming comprehensive evaluation of mission fulfillment. Prior to as well upon arrival the team received some additional items including an overview of the status of assessment for General Education at GBC, and “Great Basin College Poised for Next Step: State College Status,” the latter a document prepared by the President of the College.

The sessions scheduled for the visit were aligned with the three parts of the “Guidelines” and were conducted in the spirit of collegial and formative conversations coupled with assessing evidence related to the key questions raised. Participating individuals from the college, including Dan Klaich, Chancellor of the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE), GBC President Mark Curtis and senior college leadership, and faculty and staff members were notably collegial, cordial, responsive, open, candid, and receptive in their interactions with the visiting team. The visit was focused on achieving readiness for the College’s seven-year review while attending to both recent activities and “next steps” that might be taken by the College to not only achieve that readiness but continue to prosper as a place of teaching and learning for Elko and rural Nevada at large for decades to come.

### **Overview of the Report of the Evaluation Committee to the Commission**

The following report is presented in as succinct a manner as possible, with care to address the key questions noted in the “Guidelines” as addressed by the College and the many informative conversations conducted during the visit to GBC. To provide a framework of conversation with the College, and in particular during the exit meeting, the report and the site visit was centered on identifying “observations” and “encouragements” in each of the three parts of the guidelines for the College as it continues in its preparation for their Year Seven review with the focus on mission fulfillment.

**Part I: Informed and guided by Standards 1 and 3-5, emphasis on the institution’s plan and actions linking/aligning mission with mission fulfillment and sustainability**

Overall, the Evaluation Team found Great Basin College to be very dedicated and committed in their understanding of and willingness to continuing work on the key items of this component. Overall, the Team found evidence of increasing a developing and evolving “culture of assessment.” Throughout all of the conversations conducted with the various constituencies of the College, the Evaluation Team identified three primary areas of observation and opportunity for consideration by the College as it refines its processes at the institutional level during the upcoming years in preparation for determining mission fulfillment and being prepared for the Year Seven evaluation visit.

The first observation was the clear and changing situation for Great Basin College vis-à-vis the NSHE and its relatively new and evolving funding formula for colleges and universities statewide—a fiscal landscape characterized by both a high degree of uncertainty matched with the positive and proactive posture and set of actions by the college. The leadership of the college has taken on a vision for the college that addresses the challenges while emphasizing changes and programmatic expansion in areas which they can control: quality distance education programming and evolution into being a state college for the rural Nevada. Based on evaluative interviews with all involved (President Curtis, administrative leadership, faculty and staff as well as NSHE Chancellor Klaich) this strategy and programming initiatives represented a realistic, grounded, and rationale vision—one coupling an element of taking calculated risks while sustaining quality of operations of the college both in Elko and for all of the College’s service region. A singular nagging challenge for the college at present and for the next horizon of their of their evaluation, and one well recognized by the leadership of the College, is, in their own expressed statement, one of the “tipping point” of sustaining the very highest of quality in product and process while facing possible continuing shortfalls of funding. Recent lessening of state funding has necessitated cuts in staffing; however, these cuts have been on the non-faculty side of operations. That said the leadership of GBC clearly and candidly recognizes that they have approached a point where any such curtailments of staffing may create issues in the future. This observation should not be seen as an overall issue of sustainability of the college, but rather one of sustaining what “has been”—the accustomed way of the College that may need to be redefined if the funding formula drives that decision. That said the optimism and positive posture of the College are clear...rising to the challenge of serving rural Nevada through adding quality distance education offerings to its core mission and evolving into being the state college for rural Nevada.

The second set of observations is related to the first. Given the seemingly rapidly increasing portion of course offerings provided by the college throughout an expanded service region across rural Nevada, evaluators (one in particular with extensive distance education background) raised questions of quality vis-à-vis the “whatever, wherever” dynamic of course and program delivery as well as requisite support services. The resulting feedback and evidence was quite affirmative—particularly in regard to the fact that the College had not “rushed to do this” in the sense of plugging fiscal holes in budget. The College maintains a firm

hand in both quality control of instruction, anchored at the department level of course and program responsibility and in the quality of technology to deliver the distance programming. Further, the College is active in “last mile” concerns, with college leadership and faculty connecting with distance sites, with instructors and students, actively and energetically to maintain quality. Given this finding, coupled with the openly-stated admission of the college that in some cases new offerings have resulted from the College “backing into” expansion to meet requested needs and desires from far-flung sites (across 86,000+ square miles), the evaluative team strongly suggested the College to develop a strategic plan for distance education, including regional, statewide, and national options coupled with a rigorous calculation of fiscal benefits and risks.

Included in this second set of observations is the proposal of the leadership of the College to become a state college for (rural) Nevada—as proposed as “Great Basin College Poised for Next Step: State College Status,” a report received by the team from President Curtis. Again, a casual reviewer might speculate that GBC is “jumping” forward to relieve fiscal distress by seeking state college status. In the opinion of the evaluation team, and, again, one with extensive background in the realm of community/junior colleges transiting to meet new service designations, this is not the case for GBC. Based on evaluative conversations with the leadership of the College and a thoroughly analytical proposal prepared by the President, the evaluation team finds highly creditable evidence that the “next step” proposed by the College is evolutionary, with demonstrated creditability in incremental development of offerings since 1999. GBC seeks to be a hybrid college for Nevada—and, in particular, for rural Nevada. GBC has been offering 4-year degrees for 17 years, *without* depreciating its long history of quality associate degrees in both transfer and technical arenas. In short, the evaluation team found the College’s seeking of the new status and its proposals to accomplish such well thought out, well grounded, and realistic—deserving of consideration of the NSHE leadership and, at some point in the future, NWCCU.

As a closing comment for this second set of observations, the evaluation team notes that the mix of external and internal factors for the future of the College, and for the answers evolving related to planning and sustainability, is still, very much, a work in progress. The snapshot of the visit provided some meaningful insight, but the picture at the end of the day—this year, and fiscal 2017-19, is still to be determined.

The third set of observations is of more serious concern for GBC in the view of the evaluation team. While the evaluation team found considerable evidence that the College has moved forward in realm of delineating course level student learning outcomes and conducting assessment of these outcomes, the nearly absent focus on student learning outcomes at the program level and lack of systematic action of the basis of program learning outcome assessment is of concern. And, again, while the College has identified a (fairly/significantly large) number of outcomes it seeks to accomplish, and has done data collection on such, the vast majority of the identified outcomes are not student learning outcomes. Many, if not most, are what would be considered as “activity outcomes,” i.e., “provide access to,” “maintain a range of,” et cetera. Seldom was there discernable evidence of direct measures of student

learning outcomes and, importantly, the assessment and analysis thereof, and actions resulting from such routinely and regularly in the planning and decision-making processes of the college. The evaluation team highlighted this observation in the exit report and suggested that value-added direct measures of student learning outcomes become a more central part of assessment, planning, and preparing for determination of mission fulfillment—perhaps with less emphasis on the many “activity” objectives and indicators currently utilized. For instance, for core theme objective 1.2, “Foster cultural awareness”, the socio-demographic characteristics of the student population does not directly measure this objective. However, the General Education outcome “Personal/cultural awareness” is directly relevant to this objective, and valid measures of student learning in the general education curriculum would allow the college to assess whether or not this core theme objective is fulfilled. Additionally, the team suggested that “less could be more” in terms of not needing to assess every operation of the College every year, but to focus on direct measures of value-added student learning outcomes as the driver of decisions throughout the college and to be prepared to present evidence of such in the determination of core theme accomplishment and mission fulfillment as they prepare for the next regularly scheduled self-study and evaluation visit.

## **Part II: Representative Examples of Core Theme Focused on Student Learning**

Great Basin College presented two examples to illustrate how it has operationalized its mission and core themes progressing from objectives to indicators to outcomes to mission fulfillment.

### **Example One: Millwright Program**

One Evaluation Team member met with the Dean of Business and Technology and the lead instructor for Industrial Millwright Technology. The Millwright Technology program is engaged actively in the assessment of student performance—particularly actively at the course level with strict adherence to NCCER standards for the training modules incorporated into the program and active interactions with relevant local industry advisory council and external reviewers. The “related education” component, e.g., general education requirements are reviewed regularly by the advisory councils and assessed by the general education committee of the college.

### **Example Two: Teacher Education Program**

The evaluation session for this example consisted of one Evaluation Team member and the two program supervisor professors in the Teacher Education Program. Ten Teacher Education program outcomes directly aligned with state teaching requirements have been established, and student learning relevant to these program outcomes is regularly assessed via multiple measures (capstone portfolio, employer surveys, and student surveys). The program supervisors report that program improvements often emerge from ongoing, informal review and evaluation of the student and employer feedback (e.g., adjusting math course requirements to better prepare elementary education teachers). However, more formal and systematic analysis of program learning outcome data as a core component of the program review process would help the program and the college as a whole make evidence-based decisions that lead to tangible, documented improvements in student learning.

### **Part III: Moving Forward to Year Seven—What has been learned? What needs to be done?**

It is clear from both the College's report and the many conversations occurring during the on-site visit that Great Basin College has taken and continues to take seriously and energetically the processes of assessment and continuing improvement—all directed to mission fulfillment and the evolving sustainability—and prosperity—of the College as it seeks to serve rural Nevada. It is evident that a multitude of resources, politically, fiscal and human, have been dedicated to such—across the college in participatory, collaborative, reflective, and responsive ways to address challenges both statewide and locally. Evidence indicates the patterns of activity and initiatives, structures and functions, and continuing efforts noted in Part I of this report. Primarily these observations can be characterized as follows with noted encouragements to the College:

- Challenges to the College from the NSHE and the state legislature are compounding—and not yet known for consequences—short-term and longer-term. However, given such, GBC has taken positive, pro-active steps to address such, both externally and internally. The College has responded to changes by down-sizing staffing where possible, but without directly impacting instruction, and, more importantly, by seeking new opportunities through expansion of distance learning programs regionally, statewide, and (very selectively) nationally, and by proposing to serve rural Nevada in the role of the state college serving rural Nevada. Such efforts, while in some cases of distance education programs being more immediate, are now evolving to be pro-active and planned for sustainability. The evaluation team encouraged such evolving measures as a key tool for planning and sustainability.
- Evaluative conversations revealed considerable focus on the identification and assessment data collection on course level student-learning outcomes—although many were of a student satisfaction and survey nature, and included “course evaluations” as an accepted form of “student learning outcomes” indicator. Amongst such observations were some exemplars of value-added student learning outcomes, such as the endeavor of the community/continuing education programs effort to refine the sequencing of courses, e.g., improving completion outcomes, by assisting students in self-assessment for placement in courses.

**Conclusion** Great Basin College is at a key juncture in its preparation for the Year Seven Evaluation. All faculty and staff, Board members, and administrative personnel engaged in the two-day Mid-Cycle Evaluation visit were enthusiastically engaged in their various roles—highly dedicated as college employees and as part of the assessment process. Their comments and questions during the numerous conversations and dialogues of the two-days were candid and represented awareness of the complexities of assessment and the overall process. They as well as the Evaluation Team members recognize that continued and focused work needs to be done over the next months in preparation for the upcoming visit. Key messages shared were, as reflected in this report, the dual focus on the assessment, analysis, and action phases of

focus on student learning outcomes as the value-added focus of the college in the larger context of planning for sustainability within the external and internal context and constraints, some yet to be known, of the NSHE formula changes and state legislative funding.