



ROCKY MOUNTAIN
C O L L E G E

Mid-Cycle Report
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities

Rocky Mountain College
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Table of Contents

Institutional Overview	1
I. Overview of Institutional Assessment Plan.....	2
II. Examples of Operationalized Assessment	5
A. First-Year Writing Seminar	5
B. Core Curriculum Redesign.....	7
III. Next Steps	10
Conclusion	11

Institutional Overview

Rocky Mountain College has a long and rich history. The story of Rocky Mountain College is really a story of three colleges. The first was Montana Collegiate Institute in Deer Lodge, which enrolled its first class in 1878. Shortly after classes began in Deer Lodge, Wesleyan College opened its doors in Helena. Billings Polytechnic Institute began recruiting students from across the country at the turn of the century. The three schools became one entity in 1947: Rocky Mountain College—“Montana's first and finest.”

Drawing on strong traditions in both the liberal and practical arts, Rocky Mountain College provides students with the foundations for achieving personal and professional success: rational inquiry, creative expression, critical thinking, and the practical application of knowledge. RMC graduates have become educational leaders, successful business people, physicians, physician assistants, attorneys, pilots, and leaders in virtually every imaginable profession. Rocky Mountain College has marked them all with an appreciation of ethical responsibility and the tools for handling the challenges of changing times.

From its humble beginnings, Rocky Mountain College has developed into a vibrant, primarily residential school serving both traditional and non-traditional students. The College's low student-teacher ratio and its high rate of financial support for students attract those seeking an intellectually rigorous yet personally supportive environment. RMC's 992 students (Fall 2017 enrollment) come from 42 states and 16 countries, with 52% of the population coming from Montana. Minority students comprise 11% of the student body, and more than 39% of RMC students are from the first generation in their families to attend college. All freshmen and sophomore students are required to live on campus, and many other students choose to, giving RMC its residential character. Rocky Mountain College is a member of the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics and the Frontier Athletic Conference and sponsors seven men's and seven women's varsity sports. In addition to their academic pursuits, approximately one-third of RMC students participate in varsity athletics.

Rocky Mountain College offers 24 undergraduate academic programs and three master's-level programs and a recently approved Doctor of Occupational Therapy program. Students can choose from 53 major concentrations, with majors in business, education, exercise science, aviation, equestrian studies, and biology accounting for more than half of all majors. Programs in psychology, history, English, communication studies, environmental science, computer science, and the fine arts also generate significant enrollments.

I. Overview of Institutional Assessment Plan

The mission and core themes of Rocky Mountain College guide college decision making and strategic planning. It is the mission of Rocky Mountain College to “*educate future leaders through liberal arts and professional programs that cultivate critical thinking, creative expression, ethical decision-making, informed citizenship, and professional excellence.*” This mission was reaffirmed as part of the Year-One Self Evaluation submitted in the Spring of 2016. RMC’s core themes were also reaffirmed:

Core Theme One: Academic Excellence

Rocky Mountain College creates a culture of learning by providing distinctive academic programs designed and executed by outstanding faculty. The College is committed to the liberal arts and sciences as the basis for all academic development and as the foundation of the student experience. This commitment directs the College’s general education requirements and the expectations of students engaged in the various disciplines. Graduates possess knowledge and abilities that promote professional excellence and lifelong learning through the combination of programs in the traditional liberal arts and sciences with professions-oriented disciplines.

Core Theme Two: Transformational Learning

Rocky Mountain College embraces its role as a transformational agent in the lives of students and elevates them educationally, economically, socially, and culturally. The College promotes the development of the whole person to maximize students’ human and leadership potential. The College, more than the sum of its curricula and programming, affords students opportunities to engage in a wide range of curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular opportunities, enhancing the student experience.

Core Theme Three: Shared Responsibility and Stewardship

Rocky Mountain College strives to be the embodiment of its mission. By serving as a capable steward of resources and by employing a participative and effective governance model, the College demonstrates application of the concepts expressed in its mission. Specifically, the College strives to engage in informed and ethical decision-making through the application of best practices as a means to promote organizational development and excellence. In short, the College endeavors to manifest the ideals of critical thinking, ethical decision-making, informed citizenship (from an organizational perspective), and professional (organizational) excellence. In doing so, the College models abilities, dispositions, and behaviors expected of students.

The core theme objectives and indicators were recently reviewed and revised and are considered by the College to be valid. A recommendation from the Year-Seven peer evaluators included a request by the time of our Year-One Self-Evaluation to “re-evaluate [our] objectives and indicators for each core theme to better identify meaningful and manageable measures.” This recommendation was appreciated by the College. Beginning in September 2015, an ad hoc committee chaired by the Provost, Dr. Stephen Germic, met weekly to discuss and re-evaluate all objectives and indicators. The ad hoc committee drew three primary guiding principles from the request that measures be more “meaningful and manageable”: 1) the language of objectives and

indicators would be refined to more accurately identify the object of measurement; 2) the number of indicators would be reduced to focus on those that provided more clearly actionable data; 3) the College would increase its use of externally comparable indicators to better situate data in the context of higher education standards. In sum, eight objective indicators were eliminated for a total of 31 remaining and more focused objective indicators. The Commission accepted RMC's Year-One Self-Evaluation, including the response to this particular recommendation, on July 8, 2016. (We note here that a summary of the College's ongoing response to the remaining Year-Seven recommendations is attached as Appendix A.)

The overall institutional assessment planning and the operationalization of actions toward fulfillment of the mission and core themes occurs through our current strategic plan and the plan's ongoing implementation. Mission fulfillment is measured through a comprehensive process of assessing outcome achievements in particular operational areas. The most mature of these plans is the academic assessment plan, though student life also has a robust outcomes assessment process. Other principal operational areas—including advancement, admissions, and facilities—base their assessment of achievements by establishing specific goals that align with annual and strategic planning. Evaluation and reporting on goal or outcome achievement in these particular areas tends to be subsumed in more general institutional planning for, principally, the core theme of shared responsibility and stewardship in so far as this core theme emphasizes prudent resource management and sustainability.

For example, admissions sets annual new student enrollment goals (295 for Fall 2017 and 315 for Fall 2018) that are effectively operationalized in budget and capacity planning. Robust analysis occurs regularly. Financial aid awarding models are continuously reviewed and adjusted through regular meetings with admissions and financial aid staff and our consultants at Ruffalo Noel-Levitz. Key performance indicators (applications, admittances, commitments) are monitored by student profile tiers throughout the recruitment cycle and virtually real-time adjustments may be made to general and individual awarding packages. Such continuous data review and awarding adjustments certainly contributed to our success last year in exceeding new student enrollment predictions.

While we feel that we have developed a strong assessment culture in recent years, the College recognizes that improvements need to be made in outcomes assessment processes both within but principally outside of academics and student life. For example, we are in the process of developing more meaningful baselines and data points (e.g., more disaggregated athletic and tier-based scholarship) for predicting returning enrollments and net tuition revenue. Although this has been predicted successfully in the past, changes in our awarding models and personnel transitions have presented us with some challenges in our modeling. We failed to accurately anticipate a returning student enrollment that was discounted more heavily than anticipated in fiscal year 2016. Furthermore, our prediction for returning students was higher than the realized yield. This had a strong influence on an overall budget deficit for 2017. Analysis and implementation of a refined model has allowed us to mitigate by approximately 40% the anticipated loss for this year as compared to last, and we are anticipating a return to budget surpluses for the 2019 fiscal year. So, while the admissions area does not currently have a formalized outcomes assessment process, it is subject to continuous review and improvement toward the accomplishment of core themes-based institutional planning.

Overall, our current planning is guided by our Strategic Action Plan, each element of which is aligned with a core theme.

Sample of Current Strategic Action Plan Document:

Code	Core Theme	Strategic Initiative	Action	Action Officer	Action Team	Time-frame	Estimated Budget	Indicator of Success
A1.1	Academic Excellence	Enhance Academic Student Support Systems	1. Implement best-practices tutoring program.	AVP	Current Student Support staff, Associate VP for Student Life, AVP.	Three years	30-40K	Improved retention rate and lower discount rate.
A1.2	Academic Excellence	Enhance Academic Student Support Systems	2. Expand the Leadership, Engagement, and Achievement Program (LEAP).	AVP and VP for Student Life	Current Student Support staff, Associate VP for Student Life, AVP	Two years	n/a (re-allocate within current work study budget)	Improved retention rate and lower discount rate

All academic and student life programs have established outcomes assessment processes that are formalized according to a continuous improvement cycle that identifies outcomes, measurements, benchmarks, analyses, and action plans. For example, every academic program has established student learning outcomes that are reviewed and assessed annually to “close the loop.” For an example of an Academic Program Assessment Report, see Appendix B.

Outcomes assessment is overwhelmingly performed by faculty and student life staff for core operational academic, student support, and co-curricular programming. The faculty assessment committee oversees the collection of program assessment data and collects and analyzes core curriculum assessment data. The committee also suggests and implements core-related actions. The cabinet oversees and monitors general institutional planning, particularly through the provost and dean of students. The Board of Trustees is regularly apprised of institutional planning and has ultimate oversight responsibility.

While the institution believes the current iteration of core theme indicators and objectives provides adequate and appropriate data to inform and assess mission fulfillment for our upcoming Year-Seven Report, we recognize that regular review across all areas of outcomes development and assessment is necessary, and we look forward to continuing to refine our assessment processes throughout institutional operations.

II. Examples of Operationalized Assessment and Implementation

A. First-Year Writing Seminar

Over the last several years RMC has allocated significant resources to enhance student support services. We have expanded our peer mentoring Leadership, Engagement, and Achievement Program, created an Academic Resource Center (ARC) with the help of a Bair Family Foundation Grant, hired a full-time ARC director, and, in the Fall of 2017, a full-time holistic conditionally admitted student advisor. Our most significant curricular change and resource allocation led to the creation of our new First-Year Writing Seminar (FYWS) as part of an enhanced First-Year Experience. The initiative primarily aligns with the core themes of Academic Excellence and Transformational Learning, though it also has implications for Shared Responsibility and Stewardship.

The value of the first-year seminar is well established as a high-impact practice that is especially effective with more at-risk students (see, for example, *Assessing Underserved Students' Engagement in High-Impact Practices*, AAC&U, 2013). The FYWS, as a central feature of our enhanced First-Year Experience, includes other high-impact practices as described by the AAC&U: a **common intellectual experience** (RMC Common Read), a **service-learning component**, and **student collaboration**. Additionally, the course is **writing-intensive**. The design and implementation of the FYWS was informed by the AAC&U LEAP Challenge.

The seminars replaced our introductory English composition course. Course caps were reduced from 22 to 12 students, classrooms were chosen that allowed for a seminar-style experience, and work-study student assistants were assigned to each section to provide an enhanced peer-mentoring environment. The learning outcomes for the seminar are currently being revised to better align with AAC&U VALUE Rubrics. The outcomes' next iteration will better complement the First-Year Experience "key questions" relative to the program's theme of "Self and Society": "How do we define the 'self' in a world of multiple and shifting personal identities? How do we identify the sources of our personal values and beliefs, and how do we keep ourselves open to the growth and development of these beliefs and values? What are our individual responsibilities to urgent matters of local, national, and global justice?"

The principal data that informed the decision to design and implement the FYWS focused on the core theme outcomes and indicators described below. Internal data included the ongoing assessment of core curriculum outcomes related to effective communication and critical thinking. Below is the data as it appeared in our Year-Seven Self Evaluation and thus the data point at which we began the process of "closing the loop" through implementation of programmatic changes. The benchmark is based on a three-year rolling average. The table cites the indicators that by our "color signal" system appeared as either yellow or red and thus indicated areas for concern and action.

Core Theme: Academic Excellence Core Theme Objective: (2) Graduates communicate effectively orally and in writing.		
Indicators that presented areas of concern (yellow or red):	Benchmark	Achievement
Level of student achievement as indicated by assessment of Core Learning Outcome 1.	3.27	3.0
Level of student achievement as indicated by assessment of ETS proficiency profile.	23%	22%
Student perceptions as indicated on the National Survey of Student Engagement: Frequencies and Statistical Comparisons.	2.75	2.65

Core Theme: Academic Excellence Core Theme Objective: (3) Graduates demonstrate critical, analytical, and creative problem-solving skills.		
Indicators that presented areas of concern (yellow or red):	Benchmark	Achievement
Level of student achievement as indicated by assessment of Core Learning Outcome 2.	3.21	3.10
Student perceptions as indicated on the National Survey of Student Engagement. Data from Engagement Indicators: Higher-Order Learning, Reflective and Integrative Learning, Learning Strategies.	Higher-order learning: 41.4 Reflective and integrative learning: 38.8	Higher-order learning: 38.7 Reflective and integrative learning: 38.5

External data were drawn from the ETS Proficiency Profile, a standardized assessment exam administered to graduating students, and can be seen in as a data graph in Appendices D and E. We have included an internal summary data graph of Core Learning Outcomes 1, 2, and 3 in Appendix C. While the data demonstrate that the College outperforms our sector (based on over 50,000 student scores), it also shows that we have recently declined rather than improved in the key areas of writing proficiency and critical thinking.

Assessment of internal and external data and a review of best practices suggested that RMC could pursue an improved delivery of writing instruction with enhanced focus on critical analysis under a seminar model that implemented high-impact practices. As demonstrated above and in the attached appendices, the College believes that the development of the FYWS has been appropriately and meaningfully informed by the selected indicators. The College will track the success of the FYWS through the student learning and student perception indicators referenced

above, but also through the key student achievement indicators of fall-to-fall first-time/full-time student retention and four- and six-year graduation rates (Appendices F and G).

B. Core Curriculum Redesign

The data and indicators used to inform the implementation of the FYWS also informed the decision of the faculty of the College to initiate a comprehensive review of the core curriculum, beginning with a review and revision of the core curriculum outcomes. Between 2014 and the present the College invested capacity and resources in development to engage administrators and key faculty in the discourse and models of emerging and best practices of general education design, delivery, and assessment. Administrators and faculty have attended key meetings of the AAC&U with a special focus on “essential learning outcomes” and the LEAP initiative which “responds to the changing demands of the twenty-first century—demands for more college-educated workers and more engaged and informed citizens” (from “The LEAP Challenge: Education for a World of Unscripted Problems,” AAC&U, n.d.). Under the leadership of the assessment committee and the provost, faculty researched, discussed, and have begun the process of implementing core curriculum changes.

For a better understanding of the discussion below, it is important to understand that RMC has core area learning outcomes that are mapped to overarching core curriculum learning outcomes. An overview of the core curriculum is available at the following website:

<http://www.rocky.edu/academics/catalog/program/40/ Core Curriculum Requirements>.

And here, additionally, is a link to our entire current catalog:

<http://www.rocky.edu/academics/course-catalog/pdf/catalog1718.pdf>

Currently, we have the following overarching core curriculum learning outcomes:

Students who complete the core curriculum requirement at Rocky Mountain College will be able to:

1. *Compose essays that demonstrate critical thinking, command of standard grammar, and logical organization;*
2. *Demonstrate critical, analytical, and creative problem-solving skills.*
3. *Analyze texts and other materials critically and creatively;*
4. *Construct and analyze models using approximation or statistical techniques;*
5. *Construct and deliver clear, well-organized oral presentations;*
6. *Demonstrate an understanding of key concepts and methods of the natural sciences;*
7. *Demonstrate an understanding of key concepts and methods of the social sciences;*
8. *Demonstrate an understanding of key concepts and methods of the fine arts;*
9. *Demonstrate an understanding of key concepts and methods of the humanities.*

Under the leadership of Dr. Emily Ward, chair of the assessment committee, the faculty of core curriculum areas have been engaged over the last two years in discussions of current core area outcomes with the objective of introducing the faculty to the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics and the

current discourse on learning related to the AAC&U initiatives. These discussions have been quite productive, and the outcomes of several core curriculum areas have been revised to better align with the VALUE Rubrics. Over the 2016-17 academic year, the faculty of the social sciences, math, and writing reviewed the VALUE Rubrics and revised outcomes. Currently, the humanities, communication studies, fine arts, and natural sciences faculty are engaged in discussion and revision. Below is an example of the revisions from the social science core area:

Old outcomes: Social Sciences

- 1. Demonstrate critical thinking about major ideas in the field through writing;*
- 2. Use the appropriate disciplinary approach to study human behavior;*
- 3. Identify ethical issues relevant to the human condition.*

New outcomes: Social Sciences

- 1. Name and describe ethical and/or normative perspectives and concepts in the social science discipline;*
- 2. Recognize ethical and/or normative issues in a variety of settings;*
- 3. Synthesize existing knowledge, research, and/or views within the discipline;*
- 4. Analyze evidence to gain a better understanding of complex topics or issues;*
- 5. Extrapolate findings from evidence that result in informed judgments;*
- 6. Discuss limitations and implications of findings.*

Complementing this work, in the Spring of 2017 the provost convened an ad hoc committee to review the overarching core outcomes and to begin the process that is expected to lead to a comprehensive redesign of the general education program. It is anticipated that this redesign will move the College away from a primarily distributive model and toward a more integrated model of general education.

As part of its process, the ad hoc committee spent time discussing the articulated or implied values of our current general education model and repeatedly returned to a few key questions:

- Do the core outcomes reflect what we in fact most value at the “core” of an RMC education?
- Is the Core Curriculum and its execution well aligned with what we are currently trying

to achieve?

- Do we value critical and analytical abilities more highly than content knowledge? Should we value these abilities more highly?

The ad hoc committee has drafted revised outcome language and engaged in general discussions of recent and emerging models of general education curricular design. The draft language was presented to the faculty at a well-attended forum in January 2018, where the draft language was quite well received. A slightly revised draft will be presented on March 22nd with an anticipated vote by the faculty on April 5th.

Below is the current iteration of the revised core curriculum outcomes:

The Core Curriculum of Rocky Mountain College is aligned with the College mission to “educate future leaders through liberal arts and professional programs that cultivate critical thinking, creative expression, ethical decision-making, informed citizenship, and professional excellence.” The core curriculum is essential to achieving the educational mission and core themes of the College, and it is characterized by thoughtful and intentional design of courses and overall curriculum to most effectively achieve the following outcomes:

Students who graduate from Rocky Mountain College will be able to:

- *Think critically:*
 - *Analyze and reflect on the assumptions of oneself and of others by demonstrating understanding of the complexity of the modes of thought, expressions, and behaviors of other individuals and social groups;**
 - *Identify, articulate, and solve problems using multiple approaches drawn from multiple disciplines;*
 - *Use evidence-based practices to arrive at compelling conclusions;*
 - *Integrate modes of inquiry and analysis from multiple disciplines.*
- *Communicate effectively:*
 - *In writing that demonstrates successful execution of appropriate conventions particular to a specific discipline and/or writing task(s) including organization, content, originality and/or creativity, presentation, formatting, grammar, and style;**
 - *Orally through audience-appropriate organization, use of evidence, language choices, and delivery style;**
 - *In non-verbal, graphic, or visual forms that convey complex information, including but not limited to information related to data sets or the symbolic representation of ideas.*
- *Acknowledge and value difference:*
 - *In culture by demonstrating an understanding of the values, expressions, and meaningful differences among social groups;**
 - *In discipline by recognizing and appreciating respective disciplinary values, knowledges, and methodologies;*
 - *In expertise by assessing the reliability of information sources and by the use of appropriate sources to arrive at reasonable conclusions to complex problems.*

(*indicates the language is informed by the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics)

These revised outcomes align the College with emerging models of general education. These models are well summarized in the following statement by Richard Arum, Josipa Roksa, and Amanda Cook from *Improving Quality in American Higher Education: Learning Outcomes and Assessments for the 21st Century*: “Faculty from across the higher education landscape are explicitly moving away from surface content knowledge and are instead emphasizing the importance of being able to perform more complex tasks from analyzing and evaluating information to applying knowledge to new circumstances and even to creating knowledge by asking questions and following disciplinary practices to answer them” (Josey-Bass, 2016). The College looks forward to the final implementation of the new outcomes. Coordinated with the implementation, the College intends to offer increased faculty development in engaged learning and high-impact practices beginning in Fall 2018.

Assessment of internal and external data and a review of best practices suggested that RMC was due for a comprehensive review of our general education/core curriculum program. The faculty has engaged and continues to engage in robust discussions. As demonstrated above and in the attached appendices, the College believes that this process is driven and meaningfully informed by appropriate indicators. The College will track the success of the revised core curriculum through the student learning and student perception indicators referenced above, but also through the key student achievement indicators of fall-to-fall first-time/full-time student retention and four- and six-year graduation rates.

III. Next Steps

Rocky Mountain College is acutely aware of predictions regarding the anticipated impacts of demographic changes in traditional college-age students for both the near and long term. As a tuition-dependent institution, our planning is organized principally around enrollment initiatives. This year we implemented a college-wide strategic enrollment management process that is intended to engage all areas of the College in enrollment-based planning. We are seeking to develop a more balanced portfolio of graduate and undergraduate programs, and we are focused on enhancing our comparative advantage in Billings, Montana, the health-care center of the region. Current planning includes a new Doctor of Occupational Therapy Program scheduled to enroll its first cohort in January 2019. We have also developed a Center for Health Sciences and have added a new tenure-track faculty to our biology program as we work to develop our undergraduate pre-health professions profile.

However, with regard particularly to outcomes assessment practices, the College recognizes two principal areas of concern relative to most effectively implementing and operationalizing assessment data for overall institutional continuous improvement.

Firstly, while we have recently grown our institutional research function and focused the efforts of the function, we do not yet have a College-wide institutional effectiveness capacity. The oversight for general institutional effectiveness tends to fall principally on the Office of the

Provost, largely as a result of the role of this office in accreditation-related matters. As demonstrated in the attached organizational charts (Appendix H), besides all academic functions, institutional technology, enrollment, and media and communications all report to the provost. Assessment oversight also falls heavily on the Office of the Dean of Students to which student life, athletics, and facilities report. Currently, assessment processes tend to be somewhat siloed in these two areas, coming together primarily through cabinet discussions related to strategic planning and accreditation.

The strategic planning under development currently includes plans to evolve the institutional research function into an Office for Institutional Effectiveness. This evolution will address our second and related concern, namely, robust mechanisms for reporting out data and data analysis to all campus stakeholders. Many campus constituents can quite rightly assert that there seems to be a lot of data collection but far less reporting of the purpose and the results of the data collection. Recently, the academic assessment committee has been more intentional in reporting to the faculty the results of core curriculum assessment, and, it should be mentioned, academic programs are expected to reflect annually on the results of their respective assessment processes, but the College simply needs to do a better job of analyzing the data, sharing the analysis, comprehensively aligning the analysis with core themes, and sharing the resulting action plans. For example, though the implementation of the enhanced First-Year Experience and First-Year Writing Seminar were driven by internal data, external data, and best practices, there are probably few faculty who are aware of the data and the analysis that went into this decision to make these robust curricular changes and resource allocations. The College needs improvement in this regard.

A robust Institutional Effectiveness function will also be essential to developing the full outcomes assessment cycle in all operational areas of the institution including advancement, admissions, and facilities.

Conclusion

Rocky Mountain College appreciates the opportunity for self-reflection represented by this Mid-Cycle Self Evaluation. We have included our ongoing response to the recommendations from our Year-Seven Evaluation because those recommendations have served as the welcome impetus for the changes described above. We have grown and evolved our assessment processes toward a much more robust alignment with externally established indicators and best practices. In many ways, this has refreshed and revitalized many faculty, staff, and functions of the institution. Our developing strategic vision includes ambitions predicated on this revitalized and engaged campus climate. By pursuing further implementation of emerging and innovative models for curricular and co-curricular reform we hope ultimately to be regarded as the premier private institution of higher education in the State of Montana founded on an enhanced reputation for engaged and transformational learning. We thank the Commission and its representatives for the opportunity to reflect upon the ongoing effort to best achieve our mission.