

WSCUC Re-affirmation Overview and Findings from our *Review under the WSCUC Standards* Fall 2016

Overview

In February 2015, UC Merced initiated its efforts to reaffirm accreditation by the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC, formerly WASC). This document summarizes the reaffirmation timeline, key steps, and required elements, together with key findings and related recommendations for action stemming from the work undertaken thus far under the guidance of the [WSCUC Steering Committee](#).

Re-affirmation Timeline & Accomplishments

The major steps of Institutional Review Process (IRP) for re-affirmation of accreditation follow.

Hyperlinks take you to brief descriptions of each stage on accreditation.ucmerced.edu/re-affirmation and/or to related documents.

Date	Re-affirmation Step	Complete?
January 2015	WSCUC Steering Committee established	✓
March 2015	UC Merced hosted Barbara Gross Davis , UC Merced's WSCUC staff liaison, to provide an overview of the Institutional Review Process	✓
May 2015	Campus completes Review under the WSCUC Standards	✓
Fall 2015	Themes for improvement identified from UC Merced's <i>Review under the WSCUC Standards</i> and shared with the campus for response and action	✓
Late spring 2016	Campus completes outline of Institutional Report (see below)	✓
December 2016	Draft Institutional Report completed	
Spring 2017	Campus review of draft Institutional Report	
July 25, 2017	Campus submits Institutional Report to WSCUC (50 -75 page document)	
October 3, 2017	UC Merced Offsite Review conducted	
Feb 27-Mar 1, 2018	UC Merced Accreditation Visit conducted	
June 2018	WSCUC Commission renders a decision regarding re-affirmation period	

In Brief: The Required Elements of the Institutional Report ("Self-Study")

The Institutional Report is a 50-75 page document comprised of **eight required essays**. Institutions may choose to include an optional ninth essay on an institution specific theme. A brief description of each essay follows. Full descriptions are available in this [excerpt](#) from the [2013 WSCUC Handbook of Accreditation](#). In writing these essays, we must be sure to substantiate assertions about UC Merced - our students, their learning, our practices, etc. - **with evidence. This evidence should answer the reader's question "How do they [UCM] know that "X" is the case?"**

Essay Title	Brief Description of Essay
Essay 1: Introduction to the Institutional Report	Introduce our report, our institutional context, <i>and</i> our response to previous Commission actions.
Essay 2: Compliance with Standards	<p>Report on our findings in relation to two required documents</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Review under the WSCUC Standards and Compliance with Federal Requirements 2. Inventory of Educational Effectiveness Indicators <p>These documents guide reflection and reporting on UC Merced’s compliance with expectations established by the Federal government and the WSCUC Commission. The documents are appended to the report in <i>evidence</i> of our conclusions.</p>
Essay 3: Degree Programs: Meaning, Quality, and Integrity of Degrees	Describe the meaning of our undergraduate <i>and</i> graduate degrees and how we ensure their quality and integrity. The WSCUC Commission understands “quality” and “integrity” to mean a rich, coherent, and challenging educational experience, together with <i>evidence</i> that students consistently meet the standards of performance that the institution has established for that educational experience.
Essay 4: Educational Quality: Student Learning, Core Competencies, and Standards of Performance at Graduation	<p>With respect to the 5 WSCUC Core Competencies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written communication • Oral communication • Information literacy • Critical thinking • Quantitative reasoning, <p>we must</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe how the undergraduate curriculum addresses each competency • Explain our learning outcomes in relation to those core competencies, • Demonstrate, through <i>evidence</i> of student performance, the extent to which those outcomes are achieved <i>“at or near” graduation.</i> <p>At the graduate level, we must</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define the generic intellectual competencies that are foundational to each field. • Provide <i>evidence</i> that we assess student achievement of those competencies, including set standards of performance, interpret results, and act on findings.
Essay 5: Student Success: Student Learning, Retention, and Graduation	<p>Describe (with supporting <i>evidence</i>) how we define and use data/evidence to understand and promote student success at UC Merced in all its dimensions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • retention and degree completion rates • student learning and • personal development <p>The work of Student Affairs and academic support programs is important to this essay.</p>
Essay 6: Quality Assurance and Improvement: Program Review; Assessment; Use of Data and Evidence	<p>Describe and discuss (with evidence) how the three basic tools of quality improvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • program review, • assessment of student learning, and • data collection and analysis <p>inform decision making at UC Merced.</p>
Essay 7: Sustainability: Financial Viability; Preparing for the Changing Higher Education Environment	Describe UC Merced’s current status as a viable, sustainable organization and, separately, evaluate how it is poised to address fundamental changes facing higher education in the decade to come. In other words, what is UC Merced’s vision of a 21st century education, and what role will UC Merced play?
Essay 8: Conclusion: Reflection and Plans for Improvement	Assess the impact of the self-study, reflect on what we have learned in the course of the self-study (as an institution), and discuss what we plan to do next.

NOTE: Assessment of student learning and/or student success is central to essays 3, 4, 5 and 6. Data and evidence - informed planning and decision making are central to essays 5 and 6 in particular.

Three strengths and six themes for improvement emerged from the campus' [Review under the WSCUC Standards](#). It is important to note that these findings are based on a “snapshot” of the campus made over the course of the 2015 spring semester. As such, they do not reflect changes to the campus' condition since May 2015, but rather constitute a starting point for discussion.

Three Strengths

1. *Faculty Commitment to Student Learning Outcomes:* Student learning outcomes and standards of performance are established and assessed by faculty at the undergraduate and graduate level. They are also well integrated into program review. (CFR 2.3, 2.4, 2.7)
2. *Leadership and Commitment to UC Merced:* UC Merced employees faculty, staff, and administrative leadership with substantial, continuing commitment to the institution; the institution's leadership, at all levels, is characterized by integrity, high performance, appropriate responsibility, and accountability; the faculty exercise effective leadership to ensure UC Merced's academic quality and educational purposes and character are sustained. (CFR 3.1, 3.5, 3.8, 3.10)
3. *Commitment to Quality Assurance and Improvement:* The processes and leadership (faculty, staff, and administrative) to perform annual assessment and periodic program review are in place and our efforts in these areas help to ensure on-going quality review of academic programs, student services, and administrative operations. (CFR 4.1, 4.3, 4.4)

Six Themes for Improvement (summarized in [Synthesis: Review Under the WSCUC Standards](#))

1. Defining the meaning of the undergraduate degree and General Education reform
2. Inclusive institutional planning
3. Data/evidence-informed planning and decision making, including two subcomponents:
 - a. Transparent practice of data/evidence informed planning and decision-making
 - b. Data to advance graduate education goals
4. Campus strategic plan for data provisioning/reporting
5. Strategic, goal-aligned, communication, including two subcomponents:
 - a. Undergraduate and graduate advising
 - b. Institutional communication strategies
6. I.T.

For each theme, Steering Committee members identified potential gaps in institutional infrastructure or actions that could impact UC Merced's ability to address the theme successfully and/or to respond to prior Commission recommendations.¹ [A total of 25 gaps were identified across the six themes](#). Gaps were not necessarily exclusive to a theme or each other:

Themes for Improvement	Potential Gaps
1. Defining the meaning of the undergraduate degree & GE reform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GE's relationship to SAFI and 2020 planning. • Campus definition of student success
2. Inclusive institutional planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrative planning – SAFI, workforce, space, enrollment, UG and grad education, etc. • Formalizing connections between SAFI hiring and UG and grad educational needs, including GE. • Aligning SAFI planning to enrollment growth at UG and grad levels. • Detailed strategic plans. • (Re-) Define planning workflow to address shared governance

¹ Gaps were identified by considering each theme in relation to (i) institutional actions in progress and (ii) recommendations stemming from prior WSCUC reviews.

Themes for Improvement	Potential Gaps
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distribution of resources in support of integrative academic planning • Organization of lecturing faculty • Integration of student affairs co-curricular planning with academic planning • Connecting cross-divisional functions and campus planning, i.e. academic advising
3. Data/evidence-informed planning and decision making.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definitions and clear goals for campus priorities (e.g. student success) • Assessment of student support services outside of Student Affairs • Program planning (assessment) that integrates student learning and success outcomes • Linking program/unit level planning to institutional priorities/goals • Promoting continuity in program/unit planning as leadership changes • A more complete description of the use of faculty impact software—Academic Analytics—for assessing areas of faculty strength on campus and in future hiring decisions
4. Campus strategic plan for data provisioning/ reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved communication regarding initiatives
5. Strategic, goal-aligned, communication.	<p><i>Student advising for success</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutionally aligned, coordinated undergraduate advising • Accessible <i>Policies and Procedures</i> for graduate students • Educating graduate students about annual review purpose and process <p><i>Institutional communication</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrative planning – SAFI, workforce, space, enrollment, UG and grad education, etc. • Clarifying campus communication channels
6. I.T.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadening representation, including faculty and students, on the IT Advisory Committee • Continued progress on NextGen Network.

Through discussion of these gaps, the Steering Committee identified two overarching gaps to be addressed. The need for

1. A campus-level Strategic Academic Plan
2. A strategic planning *process* for the campus

These two gaps are related to the six themes and related gaps as follows.

Themes for Improvement	Strategic Academic Plan	Strategic Planning Process
1. Defining the meaning of the undergraduate degree and GE reform	x	
2. Inclusive institutional planning	x	x
3. Data/evidence-informed planning and decision making.	x	
4. Campus strategic plan for data provisioning	x	x
5. Strategic, goal-aligned, communication.	x	x
6. I.T.	x	

Recommended Action

The Steering Committee recommends the campus evaluate the Steering Committee’s findings and, as appropriate, act to address both the two overarching gaps together with the six themes and associated gaps. In addition to addressing key needs at UC Merced, progress in these areas will contribute to a successful re-affirmation review as the themes and gaps are clearly related directly to the essay topics outlined in the second table of this document.