

REPORT OF THE WASC VISITING TEAM
SEEKING ACCREDITATION VISIT 1 REPORT

To: Northcentral University

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The team evaluated the institution under the WSCUC Standards of Accreditation and prepared this report containing its collective judgment for consideration and action by the institution and by the WASC Senior College and University Commission. The formal action concerning the institution's status is taken by the Commission and is described in a letter from the Commission to the institution. If the institution is granted candidacy or initial accreditation by the Commission, this report and the Commission action letter will be made available to the public by publication on the WSCUC website.

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SECTION I – OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

A. Description of Institution and Visit

Northcentral University (“NCU”) was founded in 1996 in Prescott, Arizona, as a graduate online education institution serving working professionals. Consistent with its mission, Northcentral University provides frequent and substantive interaction between students and faculty through a one-to-one tutorial model designed to promote student engagement, student satisfaction, and academic success. To accomplish these outcomes, faculty share their knowledge and professional experience with students and provide personalized mentorship.

The one-to-one model is intended to serve as the foundation for the entire student experience at NCU. Northcentral University’s proprietary learning management system (LMS) was specifically designed to support this model. Because students work individually with faculty members to complete courses, the institution does not adhere to a traditional academic calendar. Students may begin at any time during a year. Student and financial services are designed in the same way. For example, Academic Advisors work individually to help each student create a path to graduation. The team observed that NCU’s distinctive and distributed model is a significant factor in promoting a culture of collegiality, transparency, and continuous reflection.

Northcentral University, Inc. is currently incorporated in Arizona as a C-corporation. Northcentral University, Inc. is wholly owned by a Delaware entity, NCU Holdings, LLC, which has no other operating subsidiaries. NCU enrolls approximately 10,000 students, and employs more than 900 individuals, including approximately 130 full-time faculty members (referred to as “Core” faculty), approximately 400 adjunct faculty members, and in excess of 400 other team members. NCU’s headquarters are currently located in Prescott Valley, AZ with an administrative center located in Scottsdale, AZ. In June 2014, NCU opened the Center for Academic Innovation, located at 2488 Historic Decatur Rd., Suite 100, San Diego, CA 92106 in anticipation of seeking WSCUC accreditation. In anticipation of the San Diego location becoming its operational headquarters, NCU has

also obtained approval from California's Bureau of Private Postsecondary Education (BPPE).

NCU is authorized to operate and to offer and confer degrees at the bachelor, master, and doctoral levels by the Arizona State Board for Private Postsecondary Education (AZPPSE). The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (HLC) has continuously accredited Northcentral University since 2003. Multiple programmatic accreditors also accredit Northcentral University. The Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP) accredits all degree programs within the School of Business and Technology Management. The Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE) accredits the Master of Arts in Marriage and Family Therapy degree program. In addition, COAMFTE recently conducted a site visit to review the PhD program in Marriage and Family Therapy, and NCU is awaiting the result of the visit; an accreditation decision is anticipated by May 2015. The Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) accredits eight specializations focusing on Pre-K through 12 education within NCU's Master of Education degree program. Finally, NCU has obtained the necessary approvals to enroll students residing in all 50 states.

On April 14, 2014, a panel of the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) Eligibility Review Committee (ERC) conducted its evaluation of the application for Eligibility as submitted by NCU for the purpose of obtaining WSCUC accreditation for the institution. NCU was granted Eligibility in May 2014, with four years to achieve Candidacy.

The team's Seeking Accreditation Visit to NCU (March 4-6th) included a site visit to the new campus in San Diego, California as well as to the current operational headquarters in Scottsdale, Arizona. As all of the instruction and programs are delivered online, the team reviewed sample courses, forums, the Commons, faculty resources, and other information available through NCU's learning management system (LMS). The team also met in-person or by teleconference with a variety of university stakeholders.

B. The Institution's Seeking Accreditation Visit 1 Report: Alignment with the Proposal and Quality and Rigor of the Review and Report

NCU's self-study report was well organized and clearly articulated the information and evidence required by the visiting team. In the team's opinion, the institutional report presented an accurate portrayal of the university's operation and operating condition. The voices of various key constituencies were considered in drafting the report. The narrative was reflective and honest, pointing out the areas of strength and progress the institution has made but also indicating areas they recognize as needing improvement. Evidence provided was thorough and appropriate.

During the visit, the team requested additional information with regard to disaggregated retention and graduation data and updated financial information. The requested information was made available to the team immediately upon request. It was clear that NCU embarked on a process of rigorous inquiry with searching questions and appropriate methodology. Evidence provided supported the claims made by the institution along with confirmatory conversations with the faculty, deans, students, and other key stakeholders.

C. Response to Issues Raised in the Eligibility Review Committee Letter

1. Achieve approval by BPPE by the time of Initial Accreditation.

Approval from BPPE was granted on March 30, 2015, covering all degrees offered by the university.

2. Follow through on commitment to establish administrative presence in California before the first visit for Initial Accreditation takes place.

In June 2014, NCU opened the Center for Academic Innovation (CAI) in San Diego, CA. The provost and vice president of Academic Affairs have relocated to this location and other staff members have been added to support the administration in San Diego. The visiting team held the first part of the visit in San Diego and agreed that the facilities were safe, functional, and well appointed.

3. Consider adding more gender and ethnic diversity as Board openings occur.

The president has appointed a standing Diversity Committee with the charge of developing a robust plan to address diversity at all levels of the university, including Board membership, administration, faculty, and students (see Standard 1). Also, a thirteenth trustee was appointed to the Board of Trustees to increase the Board's gender and ethnic diversity.

4. Create a staffing plan taking into account further enrollment increases.

NCU provided evidence that it pursues strategic, data-informed, modest, and staged enrollment growth. Through prior strategic planning efforts, the university has developed a ratio-based headcount for key positions that are related to overall university enrollment (faculty, advisors, etc.). As evaluated in Standard 3, NCU has demonstrated to the satisfaction of the team that it has a qualified faculty and staff that is sufficient in size to support achievement of the university's mission. Additionally, NCU has in place processes to add additional faculty and staff members as enrollment increases.

5. Continue efforts to find appropriate ways to calculate retention and graduation rates for the university's non-traditional enrollment.

The team's evaluation of NCU's retention and graduation rates is presented in Standards 1 and 2.

6. Increase the rigor of the curriculum between the master's and doctoral programs.

The team's evaluation of the rigor of curriculum and learning outcomes for master's and doctoral programs is presented in Standard 2.

7. Continue to find ways to foster research among faculty and students as a doctoral granting institution.

The narrative for Standard 2 includes the team's evaluation of the means by which NCU accomplishes its incumbent responsibility as a doctoral granting institution to foster scholarly research.

8. Continue progress on developing faculty governance in a distributed model.

NCU's Board of Trustees approved, and the university has implemented, a governance model intended to strengthen the voice of the faculty through the creation of a Faculty Senate. The senate is composed of elected faculty representatives from each of the five schools and includes members from the corps of adjunct instructors. While the charter of the senate is being finalized and some other specifics are still in progress, the team observed that the university has demonstrated a significant commitment to increasing the levels of faculty involvement in determining the future direction of the university. The Faculty Senate and faculty governance at NCU is further discussed in the sections covering Standards 2 and 3.

SECTION II – EVALUATION OF INSTITUTIONAL COMPLIANCE WITH WSCUC'S STANDARDS

Standard 1: Defining Institutional Purposes and Ensuring Educational Objectives

Northcentral University operates from a set of clearly articulated statements of mission, purposes, and value that are formally approved by the Board of Trustees and that have been broadly disseminated to the university community. Beginning with a fully engaged Board of Trustees, the team found strong evidence of a shared understanding of and affiliation with the mission, purposes, and values across stakeholder groups and that these do, in fact, guide the conduct of institution at the level of strategy as well as in day-to-day operations. (CFR 1.1)

In meetings with the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), a body that includes the president's direct reports as well as the academic deans and the chair of the Faculty Senate, a strong sense of cohesion

around mission, vision and strategy was in evidence. In meetings with the Faculty Senate, team members found a belief that there was shared purpose with the administration and, moreover, that the faculty's voice was not only valued but had an impact in both strategic and operational decisions. This same sense of alignment was found almost uniformly across the institution, including in open calls with the faculty of the institution. (CFR 1.1, 3.7, 3.10)

The university's self-study outlines the institutional focus on setting measurable and objective indicators of student learning and student achievement. In reviewing both the documentary evidence provided and in confirmatory meetings with various academic and administrative groups, the team found that the university has established learning outcomes and objectives at the institutional, programmatic, and course levels. These objectives continue to evolve in sophistication through ongoing dialogue within and across the faculty and through the academic program reviews. NCU has begun the process of conducting the WASC model for Comprehensive Program Reviews even though the institution is not yet accredited by WSCUC. The School of Education is the first to have implemented this review process. Both the Dean of the school and faculty members who participated in discussions reported that it provided valuable data, dialogue, and insights. The School shared specific examples of how this review of learning outcomes data, combined with external review from qualified academicians, has led to program and process changes that will, in turn, be measured as part of the assessment cycle. Additionally, the ready availability of detailed information to the visiting team, as well as a willingness to respond to requests for additional data and explanations demonstrated openness and transparency on the part of the university's administrative and academic leadership. (CFR 1.2, 1.6, 1.8, 2.7)

At the highest level of the organization, NCU has publicly stated its commitment to academic freedom via its Board of Trustees resolution supporting American Association of University Professors' "1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure with 1970 Interpretive Comments." Pragmatically, they guarantee this through Element 2.10 of the NCU Faculty Handbook regarding academic freedom. In addition, each of the deans supports the independence of scholarly research, and openness to input regarding academically related discussions within the school. The university's provost

is responsible to monitor perceived infringements of academic freedom and, where necessary, to take action. Discussions with the Board of Trustees, executive leadership, deans and faculty verified the practice of these policies and processes. (CFR 1.3)

Diversity is one of the five core values of NCU. The Board of Trustees has adopted the WSCUC statement on diversity. NCU has a university-wide committee on diversity with representation from faculty and staff charged with developing a set of strategies to ensure ongoing fulfillment of diversity commitments. The university and each of the schools have engaged constituent participatory processes to incorporate diversity into their respective missions. Academic programs, through faculty initiatives, have developed program specializations that support increasing diversity. There are particularly strong efforts within the School of Marriage and Family Sciences to increase the diversity of its programs. NCU has established ongoing diversity training processes for faculty and staff. Job postings are widely distributed and include publications targeting diverse cultural and ethnic groups. While diversity among faculty, staff, and students seems reasonable as they are similar in proportion to the US population, the university is continuing to increase diversity through a variety of initiatives. (CFR 1.4)

NCU is a private, corporate-owned for-profit enterprise without governmental or religious affiliations. A review of the self-study, followed by discussions with all university stakeholders, confirmed that NCU is an academic institution that operates with appropriate independence and autonomy. The university's mission statement reflects its primary role as an educational institution. As seen through review of meeting minutes and discussion with various institutional representatives, the engagement of the Board of Trustees reflects its commitment to NCU's educational mission and to institutional autonomy. (CFR 1.5)

NCU demonstrates integrity and transparency with respect to public representation of its programs, services, and costs. The institution conveys its academic goals, programs, services, and costs to students and to the larger public through its website and in the publicly available catalog. Credit and credit hour definitions are clear and published widely. The potential for timely completion of their programs is conveyed from first point of contact for inquirers with the enrollment services unit via well-

scripted dialogues, learning plans, and completion guidelines for students to relevant support information covering finances, policies and procedures, program descriptions, course descriptions, and related academic elements. (CFR 1.6) A review of documentary evidence demonstrates that NCU has in place appropriate policies and procedures, and follows sound business practices. Student support and complaint policies, processes, and procedures are well defined and communicated. The university gives timely and fair responses to complaints and grievances. NCU tracks, resolves, and reports student complaints quarterly. Records of student complaints are maintained for six years. Additionally, NCU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversees human subject protocols in research. Detailed information about the IRB process is documented in the Dissertation Resource Manual. (CFR 1.7)

NCU's handbooks for staff, faculty, and students as well as the university's policy and process handbooks are clear, detailed, and reflect good practice. There is a regular evaluation of processes. Team discussions with faculty, staff, and the Board underscored the institution's clear understanding of policies and practices with an appreciation of how these practices have enhanced the operations of the university. Discussions with students confirmed the integrity and utility of the information, policies and processes, while highlighting the need for NCU to continue its sensitivity to support students through institutional and policy changes to prevent any dislocation.

The visiting team noted the institution's level of commitment to the integrity and intent of the accreditation process. High levels of transparency were exhibited in all communication to the team by the administrative leadership, faculty members, and staff. The staff was responsive to requests for additional information and/or clarification before and during the site visit. Fulfillment of the CFR was further evidenced by NCU's approach to the compliance checklist, the implementation of required policies, and relevant training provided to staff and faculty. (CFR 1.8)

Standard 2: Achieving Educational Objectives Through Core Functions

Responsibility for NCU's fourteen fully online degree programs is situated within the four Schools: Business and Technology Management, Education, Psychology, and Marriage and Family

Sciences. NCU offers three undergraduate (bachelor) degree-completion programs. There are also four masters degree programs, six doctoral degree programs, and one education specialist degree. Post-baccalaureate and post-masters certificate programs are also available. The Graduate School is the fifth school and has primary responsibility for oversight and quality of the graduate research processes. The Graduate School dean supervises full-time faculty dissertation mentors and special advisors who address the special needs of dissertation candidates who matriculate into the Graduate School after passing the comprehensive exam. (CFR 2.1, 2.2b)

Admission to NCU programs is open year-round to qualified applicants, who may begin class virtually any week of the year. The flexibility of start date and the process and requirements for admission to the university address the needs of the working professional population that NCU wishes to serve. There is also a high level of compatibility between the requirement of working adult students and NCU's one-to-one teaching/mentoring model. Most courses are offered in an eight-week format; dissertation courses, however, are 12 weeks in length.

NCU's primary focus is graduate education. Summary data forms (8/14/14) reported that 7,548 students were enrolled in doctoral programs, approximately 70% of total students. "Northcentral University educates professionals throughout the world and provides an accessible opportunity to earn a US regionally accredited degree" (*NCU: On the Move 2015-2018 Strategic Plan*). The average age of enrolled students is 43 years and 97% of students are employed or unemployed by choice. (CFR 1.1)

NCU degrees adhere to recognized disciplinary and professional standards. "All baccalaureate degrees require the completion of 120 semester hours, with completion of 30 hours needed in the major field. Master's degrees require completion of at least 30-36 hours. Professional/applied doctorates (DBA, EdD) require completion of 54 semester hours beyond the Master's, and PhDs require completion of at least 60 hours beyond the Master's degree" (NCU Seeking Accreditation Institutional Report or "IR", page 22). (CFR 2.1)

Complete information regarding admission requirements, international transcripts, transfer credit, and financial aid as well as detailed degree plans, outcomes, time limits for completion of graduate

programs, and criteria for conferral of degree is available on the web site (www.ncu.edu) and in the NCU *Catalog*. Admission to NCU master's programs requires a conferred bachelor's (or higher) degree from an accredited institution. To qualify for admission to a doctoral program, applicants must hold a conferred master's degree from an accredited institution. Individual graduate programs require a prior degree in specified disciplines or specific course preparation; some programs have additional requirements and an "evaluation track" for an applicant who does not hold a master's or bachelor's degree in a specified discipline. (CFR 2.2b)

NCU submitted a completed federal credit hour policy checklist and evidence of compliance with federal policies on determining a credit hour and length of courses. The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association has accredited NCU since 2003. Individual degree programs also meet standards established by professional accreditation organizations: Education programs are accredited by Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC), Marriage and Family Therapy programs by the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE); and Business programs by the Accreditation Council on Business Schools and Programs. (CFR 2.1, 2.2)

NCU offers three degree-completion programs: Bachelor of Business Administration, Bachelor of Education (articulated for transfer with Rio Salado College) and Bachelor of Arts Psychology. Enrollment in baccalaureate programs is relatively small. As reported in NCU's Letter of Intent (September 2014), 250 individuals (out of 10,678 total headcount) were enrolled in undergraduate programs in fall 2013. Undergraduate admissions criteria are listed on the public web site and in the NCU *Catalog*: high school graduation and "academic transcript of a student who has successfully completed at least 60 semester transfer credits from a regionally or nationally accredited academic institution with a cumulative 2.0 grade point average on a 4.0 scale, and has met all general education requirements needed for a bachelor's degree before entering Northcentral University" (NCU *Catalog*, page 7). Students seeking a baccalaureate must satisfactorily complete a minimum of 36 semester credit hours in general education: English Composition (6 units), college-level Mathematics (3), Humanities (6), Natural Sciences (6), Social/Political Sciences (6), General Education Electives (9). The transfer of

courses completed at approved postsecondary colleges and schools may satisfy general education requirements. As of June 2012, general education courses must be completed prior to enrolling at NCU. (CFR 2.1, 2.2, 2.2a)

Graduate programs are typically structured to include foundation course(s), core courses, specialization courses, internships (where appropriate or mandated by professional accreditors) and capstone for master's, or for doctoral programs a comprehensive examination and sequence of courses leading to completion of a dissertation (NCU *Catalog*, program web pages, interviews with the NCU Curriculum Committee). Master's and doctoral programs are distinguished by the relative levels of complexity of course content and by the taxonomic levels of objectives and learning outcomes. NCU offers DBA and PhD terminal degrees through the School of Business and Technology Management (SBTM) and PhD degrees through the School of Education and School of Marriage and Family Science. SBTM terminal degrees are distinguished as follows: "The Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program is a research-based degree, but unlike the PhD, the DBA program is intended to engage the student in the application of theoretical knowledge to the advancement of practice in the field (solving complex problems)" (Archibald, 2010; Corley & Giola 2011; Huba, Shubb & Shelley, 2006). The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) program is a research-based program designed to prepare leaders for positions in the private and public sectors by enhancing knowledge and competencies appropriate to executive leadership roles in business, administration, and technology management" (NCU *Catalog*, pages 137, 151). (CFR 2.1, 2.2b)

Specializations in master's and doctoral programs provide relevant advanced study for mid-career professionals. Specializations consist of 15 semester units of in-depth study, research, and writing. Degree plans for the MA or PhD Psychology, for example, offer concentrations in gender diversity, general psychology, health psychology, or industrial organizational psychology. (CFR 2.2)

All NCU faculty members, whether core (full-time) or adjunct, possess doctoral degrees from accredited institutions and are required to demonstrate currency in subject matter they are assigned to teach. NCU's Letter of Intent states that in 2013 NCU had 130 full-time or core faculty, 389 adjuncts,

and a student-faculty ratio of 22:1. Qualifications for faculty hiring, including currency in discipline or subject taught, are stated in the NCU Faculty Handbook. NCU reports that the “Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Guidance on Determining Qualified Faculty in recruiting, hiring, and developing faculty” was consistently followed (IR, page 22). NCU provided an internal audit of School of Business and Technology Management (SBTM) faculty qualifications dated December 2014, which was prepared for ACBSP reporting. The audit indicates that SBTM maintains standards for academic and professional preparation in hiring faculty, assigning courses and mentoring dissertations. (CFR 2.1, 2.2b, 2.8, 2.9, 3.1)

New full and part-time faculty also must successfully complete NCU’s comprehensive training in order to become effective in utilizing NCU’s “feedback, feed-up, feed-forward” pedagogy. Training modules, provided in NCU’s ancillary materials, reflect current research and best practices for improving writing and critical thinking. Teaching, mentoring and assessment are highly valued faculty roles. (CFR 2.1, 2.4, 2.8, 3.3)

A WSCUC ERC recommendation to Northcentral was to “increase the rigor of curriculum between master’s and doctoral programs.” NCU’s Institutional Assessment Handbook references Bloom’s taxonomy and verbs used to distinguish levels and demonstrations of cognitive achievement. Program information for each degree, published in the NCU *Catalog* and on the web site, includes program level outcomes (PLO). NCU’s PLOs are distinguished by degree level (master’s, doctoral and PhD), Bloom’s advanced cognitive skills, and type of assignment. The following exemplifies differentiation between MBA and doctor of business administration (DBA) PLOs. Selected MBA PLOs measure one’s ability to “evaluate” key components of business organizations and “effectively communicate ideas and arguments associated with business issues” (NCU *Catalog*, page 117). In contrast, DBA PLOs measure the ability to “interpret and evaluate conclusions derived from research in business” and “formulate research dissertations that contribute scholarly solutions to business issues, problems, and challenges within the global society” (NCU *Catalog*, page 138). (CFR 2.2b, 2.4)

A comprehensive NCU Institutional Assessment Handbook maps a “hierarchical connection between course, program and institutional learning outcomes.” NCU Institutional Learning Outcomes

reflect AAC & U recommendations. “The selection of the course assignment to be assessed and the specific ILO rubric to be used are determined by each school’s faculty and staff. Each school’s faculty and staff will match the learning outcome alignment of the assignment to one of [six] Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILOs), listed below:

1. Written Communications
2. Oral Communication
3. Quantitative Reasoning
4. Critical Thinking
5. Information Literacy
6. Research Skill; Inquiry and Analysis (graduate students)”
(NCU Institutional Assessment Handbook, page 8).

NCU capstone courses and/or culminating work are used to assess undergraduates’ competencies. Taskstream has been adopted as the assessment platform for storing evidence of student learning and program effectiveness. (CFR 2.2a, 2.3, 2.4)

NCU employs a “centralized” curriculum model. In this model, the locus of control for the curriculum moves from the individual faculty member to the “Faculty” of the School with responsibility for the specific program or course. This helps ensure consistent levels of quality in course design, course content, learning outcomes, and outcomes assessment. It also allows online programs to be scaled economically to keep instructional costs low and contributes to keeping tuition at manageable levels. As described in NCU’s Course Development Guidelines handbook, curricular development is a team effort involving designers, subject matter experts and faculty (page 8). Northcentral University’s course development process is designed to produce high-quality courses that give students opportunities to learn, practice, generalize, and apply their knowledge. Courses are designed to help students achieve course learning objectives that, in turn, are mapped to program and institutional learning outcomes. Each course is developed by a course development team, which includes a faculty subject-matter expert (SME), and is reviewed by relevant individuals to provide quality assurance (see p. 27 of the Course Development Guidelines for a flow chart). Faculty members participate in the design, approval and review of all academic programs. The Academic Affairs Committee has two subcommittees: Assessment and Curriculum. Faculty representation is required by policy on each committee. (CFR 2.3, 2.4)

NCU's Institutional Assessment Handbook provides a clear roadmap for assessing student learning at course, program, and institutional levels. Expectations for student learning are reflected in NCU's course learning outcomes, which map in turn to the program and institutional learning outcomes. Institutional learning outcomes are consistent with WASC core competencies. (CFR 2.6, 4.3, 4.4)

NCU's Course Development Guidelines provide course development teams with guidance to ensure that course content, including level of rigor, readings, and assignments, matches the degree level of the course (see p. 5, 28-29). For example, doctoral-level courses require reading primary sources and peer-reviewed journal articles rather than textbooks. Assignments must demonstrate both theoretical and conceptual mastery of the material. The course syllabi reviewed by the visiting team contained levels of rigor appropriate for the degree level of the course. Changes to approved master course syllabus must be reviewed and approved by a faculty member from the department. This assures alignment and consistency with course, program, and institutional learning outcomes as well as accreditation and professional licensure requirements. The Schools utilize Program Advisory Councils (PAC) that support content currency and applied research. As stakeholders, PACs are informed of curriculum changes and outcomes. (CFR 2.1, 2.4, 2.5, 4.4)

A large sample of course syllabi, including instructor evaluation and comments on student written assignments, were provided to team members for review. Course learning outcomes were clearly articulated and were well defined for the level and content of the course and linked to assignments, with clearly stated standards for performance. Signature assignments for assessment are identified. These are common assignments that are embedded in all instances of a course offering and ensure that key learning outcomes can be consistently measured. Graduate courses require further integration of research from primary and secondary sources and incorporation of professional practice and ethical standards from respective disciplines. All syllabi refer students to support services such as Academic Success Center, and the university library, and include academic integrity policy, APA guidelines and other relevant policies. (CFR 2.2b, 2.3, 2.4)

The team found that insuring the quality and integrity of a student's formal learning experience in and out of the classroom is a responsibility that appears to be shared across the NCU community. Examples of NCU's library and technology staff working with faculty to advance teaching and learning objectives are cited in the self-study. NCU technology staff, for example, developed a video conferencing platform that enables Marriage and Family Therapy faculty to guide and supervise students enrolled in clinical internship (or practicum) courses that involve out-of-class clinical settings. A sample video of a class session employing this technology was provided. The instructor, the clinical supervisor and other students are able to observe and comment on individual student presentations on their clinical practice. Thus, MFT graduate students are able to exchange experiences and receive timely guidance and feedback from faculty members that allows them to improve their counseling and therapy methods. (CFR 2.3, 2.4, 2.8)

Direct and indirect assessment methods are used to evaluate student learning. Faculty members assess student learning by applying rubrics to determine whether the course learning outcomes have been achieved. In addition, students submit "signature" assignments to their program through Taskstream. Trained faculty members use agreed-upon evaluation rubrics from which data are then compiled and analyzed in order to assess the degree to which students are demonstrating mastery of program learning outcomes score these assignments. This program-level assessment occurs independently of the teaching faculty member's assessment of the student's work for the purposes of the course. In addition, institutional learning outcomes are assessed through a variety of measures that include but are not limited to surveys of students, faculty, alumni and employers, as well as retention and graduation rates. (CFR 2.6, 2.7, 4.3, 4.4)

Every program at NCU conducts an annual academic program review (NCU's Institutional Assessment Handbook, pages 12-14). Annual program reviews are tactical tools used to make immediate program improvements and assess short-term goals. In addition, comprehensive five-year program reviews occur on a staggered schedule. Five-year program reviews are designed to generate data that allow the faculty and PACs to assess longer-term program success and, based on those data, to implement

changes in outcomes, design, content, or pedagogy whose efficacy can in turn be evaluated in annual or comprehensive program reviews. The university also uses these reviews to inform the strategic planning process. The master's in education program is the most recent program to complete a five-year review; the team was provided with a copy of this program review, which was thorough and thoughtful. (CFR 2.6, 2.7, 4.3, 4.4)

Program reviews include analyses of student achievement of program learning outcomes through performance in courses and on key assignments; comprehensive exam performance; dissertation quality; dissertation time to completion; retention rates; graduation rates and time to graduation; faculty qualifications, professional development, and workloads; course evaluations, student satisfaction surveys, and alumni surveys; licensure exam scores and licensure rates; and program accreditation, if relevant. The team noted that almost half of NCU's programs are accredited by specialized or programmatic accreditors. This provides an additional level of quality and compliance review. Another external method of program assessment occurs through external evaluation of dissertation quality. (CFR 2.6, 2.7, 4.3, 4.4)

Linkages between the university's graduate research mission and the community's engagement in research and innovative activity became apparent during the visit. The Faculty Research Center supports innovation in instruction, assessment and collaboration. Faculty comments during a call-in session cited "superb" collaboration among faculty to ensure student success in the dissertation process and foster professional development by encouraging students to present research at conferences. Technology applications are viewed as one way to promote NCU's graduate culture. IT staff worked with the faculty to create the NCU Commons, a web-based platform that promotes student-faculty and out-of-class communications. Exchanges about methodology, scholarship, practical applications as well as requests for advice are evident. This platform is flexible and can lead to further opportunities for student-faculty research and creative activity. (CFR 2.8)

NCU library's 2013 annual report was included as evidence of alignment of library resources with a university-wide culture of research and scholarship. The portion of the Institutional Review pertaining to the library and academic resources also exemplifies how NCU directors use data from user

surveys and other sources to evaluate a unit's effectiveness. Library holdings and reference services are ample and benchmarked against other university libraries. The library director and staff are integrated into processes for achieving educational effectiveness, such as informational literacy and research competency. "The Instructional Design Librarian was tasked with fostering collaboration between the aforementioned departments and engaging in projects which helped to integrate the Library resources and services as well as information literacy and research skills into the curriculum" (NCU Library 2013 report, page 17). Integration of library resources and support is evident in the syllabi. The library supports students with research projects in several ways including individual research consultations. NCU is expanding opportunities for faculty and student research through international partnerships. A recent faculty-led travel study program to Cuba, made possible through NCU's partnership with The University of Habana, has opened avenues for NCU faculty and student research. (CFR 2.8, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3)

NCU does not follow a tenure model for its faculty. Annual faculty performance evaluations include a self-evaluation component and a formal process by which the faculty member is rated in four areas: teaching effectiveness, production of scholarship, professional activity and campus service. The NCU Faculty Handbook (article 4.1) states "Northcentral recognizes the importance of service and scholarship (both to the institution and the academic community) as complements to effective teaching and the development of students as scholar-practitioners. Faculty members are expected to participate in service and scholarship activities that are aligned with the Northcentral Mission and demonstrate service to the institution, profession, or community. These activities are coordinated with their respective school Deans." A summary of faculty publications and professional and campus service was referenced in the narrative. (CFR 2.9, 3.2)

The provost's office sponsors programs to acknowledge faculty who are pursuing research, scholarship, professional participation and creative activity. A competitive faculty research program was expanded to two faculty awards (two times per year) with .5 FTE release time from teaching in order to pursue approved research proposals. Honoraria are awarded to faculty completing research milestones. Stipends are available for presentations at conferences. An NCU online journal was launched and

publishes faculty research and scholarship on teaching and learning. NCU trustees indicated that in order to maintain the distinctiveness of the institution, the institution must invest in the faculty. (CFR 2.9, 3.3)

Consistent with NCU's culture of assessment and continuous improvement, the institution regularly identifies the characteristics of its students, including their preparation, needs, and experiences. In addition, NCU regularly assesses student learning, achievement, satisfaction, and campus climate. When students leave their program, withdrawal reasons are assessed. Retention, time to completion, and graduation rates are regularly calculated. Data are disaggregated by school, program, degree level, gender, race, and ethnicity. The data from these assessments are used to design, implement, and evaluate changes that improve student achievement. (CFR 2.10, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4)

Providing opportunity for higher education to individuals whose access may be limited or otherwise restricted is core to NCU's mission. Consequently, the institution's retention and graduation rates are in some cases lower than national averages. For example, in NCU's 2014-2015 retention report, one-year retention rates for master's and doctoral programs range from 49% to 61% each year. Six-year graduation rates for masters programs range from 69% to 84%. Eight-year graduation rates for doctoral programs are just under 40%. Although these rates may be expected given the institution's mission to provide broader access, the NCU leadership has demonstrated a commitment to take steps to further improve student retention, persistence, and timely degree completion through a number of mechanisms. A retention committee was established early in 2014 to analyze retention data and make improvements to increase student retention and persistence. In addition, the university recognized the need to provide more targeted student services and therefore started using an early warning system to identify at-risk students. NCU also uses a system called "ServiceDeskPlus," that tracks student questions and responses to those questions. Because of this system, after learning that some students in the Marriage and Family Sciences programs were leaving due to difficulty finding clinical practicum placements, the school hired a faculty member who helps students find clinical field placements. (CFR 2.10, 2.11, 2.13)

NCU offers a variety of co-curricular activities appropriate for working professionals (its target student population) and that are designed to support the professional and personal development of

students. For example, the NCU Commons (an internal digital platform) provides online forums for students and faculty to share ideas and information, collaborate, and connect with others for personal and professional growth. NCU's co-curricular activities are consistent with the university's goals and integrated with academic programs. For example, each school has its own student advisory board or council that provides opportunities for students to be more closely involved with their academic programs. Other co-curricular activities at NCU include dissertation student support activities and workshops, honor societies, study abroad opportunities, and alumni services. Students may also publish and present at conferences with faculty. Students and alumni write articles for the institution's publication, *Higher Degrees*. In the framework of WASC's Rubric for Assessing Educational Effectiveness, NCU's co-curricular activities are "developed" because they are usually informed by good learning practices and reviewed and improved regularly by faculty and other campus educators. In addition, NCU engages in some assessment of co-curricular activities, and uses outcomes to make improvements. (CFR 2.11, 4.3)

Team members reviewed the university's website and *Catalog* and determined that it contains complete and accurate information about admissions, academic degree requirements, and educational costs. Information about policies and procedures is also found other locations, including the university's internal digital platform. In addition, new students are provided with complete information via email and have access to tutorial videos that explain various aspects of the university (e.g., Courseroom). Changes to policies and procedures are generally implemented annually and are reflected in an updated Policies and Procedures Manual. Students receive notification of changes through email and the institution's student and faculty web portals. NCU's Academic Advising Excellence Handbook emphasizes thorough advising for students about degree requirements and creating a learning plan/schedule. NCU does not have set terms or semesters; therefore, each student's own learning plan becomes a schedule of courses for the student. A student's degree requirements generally remain the same as when the student entered the program. (CFR 2.12)

Although the institution ensures that students receive relevant information about their academic programs and requirements, some students complained to the team about policies and procedures being changed in the midst of their program and feeling confused by such changes. A relatively small proportion of the responses received from students described difficulties understanding program changes (specifically, 4 of the 15 student callers and 6 of the 37 written student comments). Because NCU has placed a continued focus on increased levels of academic rigor, some students have suggested that changing expectations sometimes are not adequately communicated. The team recommends that the university explore more consistent and effective ways to ensure that students understand the policy and procedural changes that directly affect them. (CFR 2.12)

The team found evidence among the staff and faculty of a strong culture of student support, and NCU has designed support services specifically around the needs of its student population and the various means by which those students are able to engage with the university. Following matriculation, students navigate the various aspects of the NCU experience with the assistance of an academic advisors; each advisor is assigned to work with a specific group of students across the student lifecycle. Advisors assist their assigned students in developing individualized learning plans and schedules that outline their customized paths to graduation. Students receive tutoring and assistance with scholarly writing through the Academic Success Center. Students with disabilities receive accommodations and other forms of assistance through the Disability Services Office. The Financial Aid team provides financial aid counseling. NCU librarians assist students with literature searches and other library-related services. Student support services are appropriate for the degrees offered. For example, a variety of dissertation related services (e.g., statistics assistance, templates for dissertation formatting) are offered for doctoral students through the Dissertation Center. (CFR 2.13)

NCU assesses the quality and effectiveness of student support services in a variety of ways. For example, the annual student satisfaction and campus climate survey includes items related to student support services. In addition, individual teams assess the quality and effectiveness of their own services through relevant surveys, such as the annual library services survey, and reviewing calls between

academic advisors and students. Teams and programs use needs assessments and other assessment outcomes to improve the quality of services offered to students. (CFR 2.13, 4.3)

NCU provides transparent information about undergraduate transfer credit policies in its catalog (pages 15-20). The policy is designed to support the university's undergraduate degree-completion programs by minimizing the loss of credits earned at other institutions. These programs rely on the expectation that students will complete their general education requirements at other institutions and through alternative means such as assessment of prior learning. Articulation agreements are also an important means the university uses to facilitate the transfer process for undergraduates. Credits may also transfer into master's and doctoral programs, although the number of eligible credits is limited in a manner consistent with graduate credit transfer policies at other institutions. (CFR 2.14)

Standard 3: Developing and Applying Resources and Organizational Structures to Ensure Quality and Sustainability

The visiting team's review of NCU's self-study and other supporting materials, as well as the evaluative visit to the institution, revealed that the institution employs a sufficient number of full-time faculty members with appropriate academic qualifications and experience to oversee the structure of academic programs, the instruction of students, and the provision of quality. The university maintains that the one-to-one instructional model allows faculty members to engage with individual students at levels that are difficult to achieve and maintain in traditional academic settings.

In order to strengthen its faculty, the Board of trustees approved a significant investment of resources to significantly increase the number of full-time faculty members to 130 as reported in the self-study. The reliance on adjunct faculty members has decreased markedly for the core courses and dissertation advising, although it should be noted that the university's process for selecting, on-boarding, training and evaluating adjunct faculty members is unusually robust. Adjunct faculty members are represented in the Faculty Senate, Adjunct Councils (ensuring the unique voice of adjuncts is included), the Academic Affairs Committee and its subcommittees for Assessment and Curriculum. The faculty

indicated that they have a voice in the institution's strategic direction to the degree that they choose to make their voices heard. (CFR 3.1, 3.2, 3.10)

Additionally, the structure of the faculty has been changed to better ensure student success in the doctoral programs. One important aspect of the increase in the ranks of the full-time faculty was to assign a number of faculty with the strongest research backgrounds to the Graduate School who have specific responsibility for the direction of students in the dissertation or applied research phases of their programs. These changes were made in response to data indicating a need to increase the level of guidance that candidates received in making appropriate process through the research tasks. NCU also made the decision to dedicate a select group of the full-time faculty members who are assigned to teach the critical first two courses of the curriculum. This was arrived at following a review of data as an intervention to improve student retention and success. (CFR 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5)

Faculty and staff policies and processes in the NCU Team Member Handbook and NCU Faculty Handbook are consistently applied and faculty members are evaluated according to regular schedules. Training and development of the faculty and staff is planned, implemented, and evaluated. The Faculty Resource Center owns onboarding and training of new faculty especially in the areas of using NCU's LMS and in effectively using the feedback in the one-to-one teaching model. In the four disciplinary Schools, faculty evaluation includes peer feedback through the Quantifying Teacher Quality (QTQ) process (as outlined in the Faculty Handbook) and ongoing feedback from the Associate Director of Faculty Support and Development, the Assistant Dean, and the Dean of each School. Currently, Graduate School faculty members are evaluated annually pursuant to the NCU Team Member Handbook. (CFR 3.2)

Faculty development activities are shared between the Faculty Resource Center (FRC) and the Schools. The FRC provides training to faculty to teach effectively within the NCU pedagogical approach. Associate Directors of Faculty Support and Development within each School conduct one-to-one coaching sessions with individual faculty on both a regular basis and an as-needed basis. Incorporating faculty input, the FRC also offers an ongoing, monthly webinar series on topics of interest to faculty. The

Graduate School provides separate faculty development for its faculty who serve as Dissertation Chairs and for faculty who wish to serve as Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) on dissertation committees. Though each School maintains its own standards for professional development activities ranging from participating in conferences to publishing research or obtaining advanced degrees and certifications, Northcentral tracks these activities on a university-wide basis. As detailed in Standard 2, NCU encourages faculty scholarship and provides opportunities for faculty members to participate in developmental activities that encourage disciplinary currency and instructional skills. Finally, the entire faculty comes together twice yearly in NCU's annual faculty symposia. The professional development budget for faculty and team members for 2015 is \$363,980. (CFR 2.8, 3.3)

NCU has exhibited a history of financial stability, profitability, and growth. The university has operated without a deficit for the past three years. The university has grown its revenue, earnings, cash, and capital investments consistently since 2008. While the institution has had unqualified financial audits, sufficient resources, and commitment from owners to ensure long-term sustainability, NCU Board and leadership team are focused on continuing to grow and enhance sustainability by adding new programs, improving retention, and diversifying revenue sources as competition in online graduate education has significantly increased and enrollment is leveling. (CFR 3.4)

NCU demonstrated excellence in budgeting and enrollment management with a dedication to and expertise in integrating resource planning and allocation with strategic planning. NCU's CFO and finance team are focused on ensuring the proper allocation of resources based on the mission and strategic goals of the institution. One example of this is that NCU made a change from an incremental budgeting approach to a zero based budgeting model which the finance team successfully implemented in the last budget cycle to better understand priorities of each functional unit and allocate resources optimally. University administration reviews the NCU's financial health monthly through the forecast process, annually through the budgeting process, and over multiple years as part of the long-range planning

process. As the new Strategic Plan for 2015-2018 was finalized in December 2014, NCU is working on an updated long-range financial plan to align resources with the new strategic goals. (CFR 3.4)

The IT Steering Subcommittee administers the strategy and administration of technology at NCU with representation from the board of trustees and faculty. The visiting team concluded that the institution assigns adequate resources to ensure the sufficiency of the IT function. The steering committee is tasked with making sure that resources are aligned with university objectives and that the department provides support via telephone, email, chat, videoconferencing software, and other web-based applications to help students, faculty and staff.

For all IT related support, the Help Desk provides 24/7 support to students, faculty, and team members via email, telephone, and live online desktop sharing as needed. Also, NCU's proprietary LMS, Library, and the Commons are all web-based tools available for students and faculty.

The team found that NCU makes significant investments in its information and technology resources, as they are critical for success of the university's distance learning model. According to the university's strategic plan and supporting budget documents, it will continue to develop and acquire innovative technology tools to enhance personalization of learning and support the graduate culture at NCU. Specifically, the institution is focused on IT tools and resources that will facilitate and improve its one-to-one teaching model and enhance student engagement through social networking solutions. Additional investments are being made in software like Burst to enhance data analysis and reporting across the university. NCU is also currently exploring acquisition of new student information system (SIS) and LMS to improve quality, functionality, and scalability of their educational model. The team was impressed with the degree to which IT works closely with faculty, staff and students to document and understand user requirements. This will facilitate better decisions about acquisition, development, and/or technological partnerships to adopt SIS, LMS and other technology tools for teaching and learning at NCU. (CFR 3.5)

Northcentral University has a clear and logical organizational structure that follows a traditional, functional model. The university is led by a President/CEO who brings strong professional credentials

and leadership experience to the position. The CFO brings an appropriate level of academic training along with professional experience in higher education and certification appropriate to the position and the institution. The university's provost has the appropriate level of academic training and experience and enjoys the support of the faculty, as does the Vice President for Academic Affairs, who brings both academic and legal/regulatory experience. Other members of the President's Cabinet and the Senior Leadership Team are all full time staff and are sufficiently qualified to carry out the mission of the institution. (CFR 3.1, 3.8)

The team found evidence that decision-making structures and processes are clearly understood across the organization. There is a high level of commitment within the leadership team and on the part of the governing board to the vision, mission and values of the university. This includes a clear mandate and the necessary human and financial resources from the owners to sustain institutional strength in ways that bring about student learning and achievement. NCU's Senior Leadership Team is the decision making body while the Faculty Senate, Deans, and the President's Cabinet serve as informational and collaborative bodies making recommendations for policy changes, program changes, and monitoring progress of the institution. The faculty, through the academic administration and the Faculty Senate, are clearly responsible for academic decisions and policies. The team observed a collaborative spirit among the institutional leaders both on the administrative and academic sides. There was a sense of integrity, purpose, accountability, and a spirit of compliance at all levels with external laws and regulations. (CFR 3.6, 3.7, 3.10)

Finally, the team found the degree of engagement of members of NCU's board of trustees to be exceptional in nature. The university has organized the committee structure and operations of its governing board based on the best practices of the Association of Governing Boards. The Board meets WSCUC's standard on institutional governance. The bylaws of the board of trustees mandate that Board membership consist of a majority of independent trustees, specifically eight independent trustees and five trustees representing the corporation. The five trustees representing the investors do not participate in the discussions (and abstain from voting) regarding investors' management fees and other matters that pose

conflict of interests. The chair is drawn from among the independent members, as are chairs of the board's committees. The board of trustees reviews academic, financial, and operational performance, including reports on complaint and grievance process and response, at quarterly standing meetings. (CFR 3.9)

Discussions with the trustees underscored a collaborative and collegial engagement and decision-making process. A review of meeting minutes, as well as a discussion by all members of the visiting team with an in-person meeting with the entire Board of Trustees, presented clear evidence of the independence of the Board and commitment to the educational mission. In October 2014, a consultant that was hired by NCU to conduct a review of the Board found that the "foundation of the board is very strong. There are neither divisions, cleavages, nor resentments. Special interests are not represented. The 'best' or 'common' interest of the University takes priority." Of further note, the members of the Board representing the financial sponsor/owners of the institution expressed a belief in and commitment to the future of NCU and a commitment to providing resources to keep it viable and to realize its vision and mission. (CFR 3.6, 3.7, 3.9)

Standard 4: Creating an Organization Committed to Quality Assurance, institutional Learning, and Improvement

NCU has developed an effective institutional research capability. The university's leadership directs the gathering and collection of data from a variety of sources and uses the analysis of those data to inform strategic decision-making. The university has also made strides in using data analytic methods to model and identify students at-risk of dropping out and use those data to design appropriate contact interventions. Those efforts are still in earlier stages, although data suggest that they have been effective in improving retention. Given that success, the team recommends that the university continue to focus resources on further automation of these processes in order to have as significant impact as possible on student retention and completion (CFR 4.2).

The team also found evidence of a strong institutional commitment to continuous improvement and making evidence-based decisions. Data are gathered and analyzed to determine where improvements can be made in programs, policies, and processes. Changes are tracked over time using longitudinal or benchmarked comparisons to determine efficacy. The institution is cultivating a variety of data sources and with its learning outcomes assessment infrastructure finally producing measurable results (see below), the team believes these data will further enhance the ability to improve student learning and achievement. (CFR 4.1, 4.2)

With respect to degree program integrity and culture of assessment, scholarship and innovation, NCU has created a robust infrastructure to gather data on student learning and professional competence. NCU has a strong culture of assessment and of using data to make ongoing and continuous improvements. Throughout the institution, there is a focus on students and on making improvements that increase student learning. Leaders at all levels show clear commitment to improvement based on evidence and evaluation. Policies and procedures for gathering, analyzing, and interpreting information are well understood by faculty, staff, and administration, who were able to talk to the team about NCU's assessment activities and use of data to make improvements. In addition, policies and procedures related to assessment are clearly described in NCU's Institutional Assessment Handbook. (CFR 4.3)

As addressed in Standard 2, program reviews at NCU include analyses of student achievement of program learning outcomes through performance in courses and on key assignments; comprehensive exam performance; dissertation quality; dissertation time to completion; retention rates; graduation rates and time to graduation; faculty qualifications, professional development, and workloads; course evaluations, student satisfaction surveys, and alumni surveys; licensure exam scores and licensure rates; and program accreditation, if relevant. In addition, the faculty and Deans for each school meet twice a year with advisory committees who provide feedback on program review outcomes and input on program relevancy and improvement strategies. The results of program reviews are used to assess goal achievement and to make improvements. For example, a previous review of the master's degree in education program showed that students were not consistently achieving certain program outcomes, so

changes in the curriculum were made based on this data. The next program review showed improvements in student learning, such that students were consistently achieving program outcomes. (CFR 2.6, 2.7, 4.3, 4.4)

NCU faculty and administrators engage in regular analysis of grading and evaluation procedures to assess the rigor and effectiveness of grading policies and practices. For example, faculty assess student learning by applying rubrics to determine if the course learning outcomes have been achieved. Students also submit key assignments to their program; these assignments are assessed by other faculty (not the student's faculty instructor) using evaluation rubrics. The data are used to evaluate student achievement of program learning outcomes and to make improvements in courses and faculty grading practices. Faculty members receive regular feedback and coaching regarding the amount and quality of feedback they provide to students, as well as their adherence to grading rubrics and other aspects of teaching (e.g., timely responses to students). In addition, on a cyclical schedule, the curriculum committee reviews data regarding the effectiveness and rigor of every course. (CFR 2.6, 2.7, 3.3, 4.3, 4.4)

NCU includes a broad range of appropriate stakeholders in regular assessment and alignment of educational programs, and it is clear that the institution has developed a strong culture of evidence-based assessment in support of data-driven decision making. Appropriate policies, guidelines, and procedures are established as evidenced by NCU's Institutional Assessment Handbook and Five-Year Academic Program Review Schedule. They conform to best practices by engaging in sequential and cumulative review processes that include annual department reviews with quarterly updates, annual academic program reviews, alumni surveys, employer surveys, and, more recently, NCU has begun a five-year academic program review process that incorporates external reviewers. The School of Education's program review efforts for the Master of Arts in Education and its documentation of the process and outcomes were exemplary. The team was pleased to read reports that included alumni survey results, employer survey results and annual academic program review results that were used to inform decisions and to drive innovative solutions. Equally important was the finding through discussions with multiple stakeholders of the extent to which the institution "closes the loop" in an effort to improve quality and

alignment of its educational programs. Specific examples included ongoing assessments, adjustments, and improvements in curriculum, in the “one-to-one” pedagogy, and in the term length. In every case, faculty and staff described a clear focus on improving academic quality and student success. (CFR 4.3, 4.4, 4.5)

NCU regularly engages its constituencies, including the governing board, faculty, staff, and others, in data-driven institutional reflection, decision making, and planning processes. In December 2014, NCU completed a new strategic plan, developed as a bottom-up process employing multiple stakeholder groups that “rolled up” data from annual departmental reviews and program reviews to clearly define its current position. Constituent groups also conducted strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat analyses to assess strategic position, identify priorities, and ensure appropriate alignment and necessary capacity. After multiple development cycles, the Board of Trustees approved the plan. Per Board policy and the assessment handbook, progress on the strategic plan will be assessed as part of the ongoing review processes of the university and the Board of Trustees will receive quarterly updates. (CFR 4.5, 4.6)

SECTION III. PREPARATION FOR ACCREDITATION UNDER THE 2013 HANDBOOK OF ACCREDITATION

Based on this evaluation, team members agree that NCU is exemplary in taking a long view of the higher education environment. NCU gathers internal and external data to best understand its potential in that environment and then, within the context of its mission, reviews the institution's functions and processes to make strategic decisions and plans and take action. At all institutional levels, from the Board of Trustees to Schools and Departments, to the Senior Leadership Team and Faculty Senate, NCU regularly examines data including a Trends in Graduate Education Report, regular environmental scans, periodic SWOT analyses, and regularly reported academic and operational data to inform program development, infrastructure development, and resource allocation. The university has designed a comprehensive and inclusive process for identifying and implementing the next generation of technology for the institution. Similarly, within the commitment to increase full time faculty hiring, NCU

now has a well-developed, data-driven process for identifying the need for and then hiring new faculty. (CFR 4.7)

The team found that NCU demonstrates key qualities that are inherent in higher learning organizations and has positioned itself to be a stronger institution five years from now. The university's leadership is focused on understanding and adapting successfully to the potential impacts of demographic shifts, economic cycles, and technological advancement on mission fulfillment.

SECTION IV: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Northcentral University's (NCU) seeking accreditation self-study, supporting documents and conversation with NCU community, particularly faculty, deans and directors, provide compelling evidence that the institution is aligned and congruent with WASC's values, standards and criteria for accredited universities in its region. In the team's judgment, Northcentral University is in substantial compliance with each of the four standards and all the individual criteria for review. The team's overall assessment and consensus is that NCU models best practice in many areas of university operations and decision-making.

Commendations:

1. NCU has created a culture of collaboration that fosters a sense of mutual trust and a common vision. This supportive organizational culture is in evidence at all levels of the university. It is manifest through a tangible sense of shared purpose that begins at the level of the Board of Trustees, guides the actions of the Senior Leadership Team and Faculty Senate, and extends across the entire faculty and staff of the institution.
2. The strategic decision of the senior administration and the commitment of resources by the Board of Trustees to significantly increase the number full-time faculty assignments throughout the institution is highly commendable. This is especially relevant as the trend across higher education is to decrease the percentage of full-time faculty members. The team believes this decision will continue to improve

student learning outcomes, retention, and achievement. Additionally, the data-driven decisions to assign experienced full time faculty to students enrolled in the foundational courses at the beginning of their programs, as well as the creation of a cadre of full-time faculty dedicated solely to advising students in The Graduate School as dissertation chairs, both reflect an additional commitment to driving improvements to the academic quality and rigor at NCU and symbolize the university's commitment to further the public good.

3. The university's unique one-to-one educational model that creates a personalized learning environment is both important and significant. The university fosters innovations in process and technology that enhance the effectiveness of this distinct pedagogical method.
4. A spirit of innovation reinforces and enhances the university's mission of providing accessible graduate-level education to working professionals. The university is encouraged to continue in its vision to use emerging technologies that further enrich and deepen student-to-faculty and student-to-student engagement and that continually advance the development of the graduate culture.
5. The University's "Teaching through Feedback" model represents a best practice in instruction and student engagement. This innovation is an important and effective means through which faculty members engage with their students in a substantive manner under the one-to-one model. The team encourages the university to continue development and research on this topic so that other institutions may benefit from the learning.
6. NCU fosters a culture of assessment and evidence-based decision-making that is apparent through many efforts throughout the institution. The team noted significant examples of data-driven decisions that were evaluated through a continuous improvement cycle. Efforts to further develop the impressive learning outcomes assessment infrastructure and IR&E processes will continue to produce valuable data for further improvement.
7. The team recognizes NCU's commitment to providing effective student services and support services that align with the mission of the institution and adequately serve the needs of its students.

8. NCU has created a clear academic governance structure that gives the faculty a significant voice in the institution through its elected faculty senate. Adjunct faculty members have significant opportunities to contribute to the life of the institution that are not commonly available elsewhere. The councils in which the deans of the schools interact to further the academic mission are both effective and unusually collaborative. The annual symposium of all the faculty of the university is particularly impressive and substantiates the commitment to faculty development and collaboration.
9. NCU's Board of Trustees demonstrates uncommon levels of engagement and a sophisticated grasp of the interplay of education and technology. There is a clear commitment to taking the "long view" in focusing on the potential of the university to provide quality access to professional graduate education in ways that advance the public good and that go beyond the primary pursuit of financial gain. The collaborative partnership between the financial sponsors of the university, its independent trustees, and the executive leadership team is exemplary and should serve as a model for other institutions.

Recommendations:

1. NCU's commitment to diversity is evidenced by its services to students with disabilities and to veterans. Of particular note are the successful efforts in the School of Marriage and Family Sciences to increase diversity within its programs. In light of this commitment, the team recommends that NCU continue to build upon the promising work of the standing Diversity Committee to enhance the inclusion of diversity-related content in the curriculum and to further increase the diversity of staff and faculty.
2. The team recognizes NCU's commitment to early adoption of WASC's comprehensive program review process. The School of Education's program review efforts for the Master of Arts in Education and its documentation of the process and outcomes were exemplary. The team recommends that NCU leverage best practice from this initial experience to enrich the process as it is now implemented across all the schools in the institution. This will be especially critical for the schools that have undergone significant changes in the recent past.

3. The team recognizes the excellent processes in place to identify, plan, and pursue technology improvements and innovation across the institution, especially in actively consulting and involving end users in the decision making processes. The team recommends that NCU continue its focus on pursuing next generation technological tools that will further enrich the one to one learning model and the graduate culture at NCU.
4. The team recognizes NCU's efforts in leveraging data analytics and optimizing information tools to increase effectiveness. The team recommends that the institution continue to look for ways to more quickly automate data analytics system in order to better identify students at risk and allow for earlier interventions that will further contribute to retention and completion.
5. As the institution is driving greater innovation and change to improve learning and programs, the team appreciates NCU's commitment to student success and providing tools for students to persist and complete their programs. As the institution continues to grow and make program, policy, and system changes, the team recommends that NCU continue its practice of engaging students and mitigate any potential negative impact of such changes on students.

APPENDICES

1 - CREDIT HOUR AND PROGRAM LENGTH REVIEW CHECKLIST

Material Reviewed	Questions/Comments (Please enter findings and recommendations in the Comments sections as appropriate.)
Policy on credit hour	<p>Is this policy easily accessible? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO</p> <p>Where is the policy located? NCU policy regarding credit hours can be found in the NCU Catalog (section 5-Academic Policies, Semester Credit Hours) and in the Policy and Procedure Manual (211-6 Semester Credit). Operationally, this policy is supported within the course development and revision process by including instructions on how to estimate hours in the Course Development Guidelines (CDG); see p. 14 regarding "Course and Assignment Load". As a supplement to the CDG, a job aid (Calculating Estimated Student Contact Hours) has been developed that includes the metrics that are currently used to estimate student effort.</p> <p>Comments:</p>
Process(es)/ periodic review of credit hour	<p>Does the institution have a procedure for periodic review of credit hour assignments to ensure that they are accurate and reliable (for example, through program review, new course approval process, periodic audits)? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO</p> <p>Does the institution adhere to this procedure? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During the design phase for new courses, the design team estimates hours. • Estimating student contact hours is also part of the course revision process. • At the completion of a new course or a revision to an existing course, all courses are reviewed and approved by the school dean or designee. During this approval process, the final course checklist includes the estimate of hours and is available for review by the school dean or designee. <p>Comments:</p>
Schedule of on-ground courses showing when they meet	<p>Does this schedule show that on-ground courses meet for the prescribed number of hours? <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A NCU does not offer "on-ground" courses.</p> <p>Comments:</p>
Sample syllabi or equivalent for online and hybrid courses <i>Please review at least 1 - 2 from each degree level.</i>	<p>How many syllabi were reviewed?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 • See attached syllabi, linked below <p>What kind of courses (online or hybrid or both)? online</p> <p>What degree level(s)? BA (2), MA (2), PhD (2)</p> <p>What discipline(s)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business (BUS3003) • Education (CT5003; EDR 7103; EDR 7100) • Psychology (PSY2000; PSY5102) <p>Does this material show that students are doing the equivalent amount of work to the prescribed hours to warrant the credit awarded? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO</p> <p>Comments:</p>
Sample syllabi or equivalent for other kinds of courses that do not meet for the prescribed hours (e.g., internships, labs, clinical, independent study, accelerated) <i>Please review at least 1 -</i>	<p>How many syllabi were reviewed?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 • See attached syllabi, linked below <p>What kinds of courses? Practicum</p> <p>What degree level(s)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MA (MFT 6951) • PhD (PSY 8901) <p>What discipline(s)?</p>

<p>2 from each degree level.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marriage and Family Therapy • Psychology <p>Does this material show that students are doing the equivalent amount of work to the prescribed hours to warrant the credit awarded? <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO</p> <p>Comments:</p>
<p>Sample program information (catalog, website, or other program materials)</p>	<p>How many programs were reviewed?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 of 14 • All programs are described in the <u>NCU Catalog</u>. <p>What kinds of programs were reviewed?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All programs offered at NCU <p>What degree level(s)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bachelors • Masters • Doctoral <p>What discipline(s)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business • Education • Marriage and Family Therapy • Psychology <p>Does this material show that the programs offered at the institution are of a generally acceptable length? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All Bachelors programs are 120 credits, all Masters are 30 credits or above, Doctoral are 54-69 credits, depending on degree programs. • SBTM <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ BBA: 120 credit hours ○ MBA: 30 credit hours ○ DBA: 54 credit hours ○ PhD: 60 credit hours • SoE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ BEd: 120 credit hours ○ MEd: 30 credit hours ○ EdS: 33 credit hours ○ EdD: 54 credit hours ○ PhD: 60 credit hours • SMFS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ MA: 45 credit hours ○ PhD: 69 credit hours • SoP <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ BA: 120 credit hours ○ MA: 36 credit hours ○ PhD: 60 credit hours <p>Comments:</p>

2 - MARKETING AND RECRUITMENT REVIEW CHECKLIST

Under federal regulation*, WSCUC is required to demonstrate that it monitors the institution's recruiting and admissions practices.

Material Reviewed	Questions and Comments: Please enter findings and recommendations in the comment section of this table as appropriate.	Verified Yes/No
**Federal regulations	<p>Does the institution follow federal regulations on recruiting students?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NCU follows requirements outlined in Section 487 (a)(20) of the Higher Education Act in addition to requirements of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) including the Telephone Consumer Protection Act (TCPA). NCU also utilizes the services of a compliance-monitoring partner that reviews all 3rd party advertiser websites and call center calls. Internally, NCU employs a team of Quality Assurance Specialists and our Learning and Development team train the enrollment advisors on adherence to compliance regulations. 	Yes
	Comments:	
Degree completion and cost	<p>Does the institution provide accurate information about the typical length of time to degree?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NCU posts the required <u>Program Disclosures</u> on the public website that note typical program completion time (historically) and the time to completion for new students who follow a schedule designed by the dean. 	Yes
	<p>Does the institution provide accurate information about the overall cost of the degree?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall cost of each program (based on current tuition rate) is shown in the NCU Catalog and the <u>tuition page of our public website</u>. 	Yes
	Comments:	
Careers and employment	<p>Does the institution provide accurate information about the kinds of jobs for which its graduates are qualified, as applicable?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The NCU <u>Program Disclosures</u> include the required list of jobs related to each program. 	Yes
	<p>Does the institution provide accurate information about the employment of its graduates, as applicable?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> See employment rates as noted in the report of the most recent alumni survey found in the <u>Updates section</u> of the fall issue of Higher Degrees (the quarterly magazine for students and alumni of NCU, available on the public website). 	Yes
	Comments:	

*§602.16(a)(1)(vii)

**Section 487 (a)(20) of the Higher Education Act (HEA) prohibits Title IV eligible institutions from providing incentive compensation to employees or third party entities for their success in securing student enrollments. Incentive compensation includes commissions, bonus payments, merit salary adjustments, and promotion decisions based solely on success in enrolling students. These regulations do not apply to the recruitment of international students residing in foreign countries who are not eligible to receive Federal financial aid.

3 - STUDENT COMPLAINTS REVIEW CHECKLIST

Under federal regulation*, WSCUC is required to demonstrate that it monitors the institution's student complaints policies, procedures, and records.

Material Reviewed	Questions/Comments (Please enter findings and recommendations in the comment section of this column as appropriate.)	Verified Yes/No
Policy on student complaints	Does the institution have a policy or formal procedure for student complaints?	Yes
	Is the policy or procedure easily accessible? Where? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formal procedures for student complaints are accessible in Section 8 of the NCU Catalog, which is publically available. Specifically, please see "Appealing a Final Grade" and "Student Grievances". 	Yes
	Comments:	
Process(es)/ procedure	Does the institution have a procedure for addressing student complaints? Please describe briefly: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The policy and procedure for addressing student complaints is outlined in the NCU Policy and Procedure Manual, section <u>208-17 Student Grievances</u> Procedures are also spelled out "Appealing a Final Grade" and "Student Grievances" sections of the NCU Catalog. 	Yes
	Does the institution adhere to this procedure?	Yes
	Comments:	
Records	Does the institution maintain records of student complaints? Where? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formal complaints are housed by Legal Affairs 	Yes
	Does the institution have an effective way of tracking and monitoring student complaints over time? Please describe briefly: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student complaints are tracked monthly and <u>published quarterly</u> to the Board of Trustees. 	Yes
	Comments:	

*§602-16(1)(1)(ix)

See also WASC Senior College and University Commission's Complaints and Third Party Comment Policy.

4 – TRANSFER CREDIT REVIEW CHECKLIST

Under federal regulations*, WSCUC is required to demonstrate that it monitors the institution’s recruiting and admissions practices accordingly.

Material Reviewed	Questions/Comments (Please enter findings and recommendations in the comment section of this column as appropriate.)	Verified Yes/No
Transfer Credit Policy(s)	Does the institution have a policy or formal procedure for receiving transfer credit?	Yes
	Is the policy publically available? If so, where? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See the <u>NCU Catalog</u> section 2 (available on the NCU public website): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <u>Transfer of Credit</u> ○ <u>Transfer of Credit - Military</u> 	Yes
	Does the policy(s) include a statement of the criteria established by the institution regarding the transfer of credit earned at another institution of higher education? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See the <u>NCU Catalog</u> section 2: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <u>Transfer of Credit</u> ○ <u>Transfer of Credit - Military</u> 	Yes
	Comments:	

*§602.24(e): Transfer of credit policies. The accrediting agency must confirm, as part of its review for renewal of accreditation, that the institution has transfer of credit policies that--

- (1) Are publicly disclosed in accordance with 668.43(a)(11); and
- (2) Include a statement of the criteria established by the institution regarding the transfer of credit earned at another institution of higher education.

See also WASC Senior College and University Commission’s Transfer of Credit Policy.