

**REPORT OF THE WASC VISITING TEAM
CAPACITY AND PREPARATORY REVIEW**

To

Mills College

March 6-8, 2009

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

Reaffirmation of Accreditation

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The evaluation team in conducting its review was able to evaluate the institution under the WASC Commission Standards and the Core Commitment for Institutional Capacity and therefore submits this Report to the Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges for action and to the institution for consideration.

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I. OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

A. Description of Institution and Visit

Mills College (Mills) was chartered in 1885 as the first women's college west of the Rockies, but its institutional roots are traced to 1852, when the Young Ladies Seminary opened in Benicia. The College's name is traced to 1865, when Christian missionaries Cyrus and Susan Mills purchased the Seminary. Six years later the fledgling institution moved to its present location in the foothills of Oakland. Mills College has no off-campus sites. The graduate division was begun in 1920 and its first master's degrees were awarded a year later. Notwithstanding the historical identity of Mills College as a liberal arts college for women, today over a third of its enrollment is in graduate programs for both women and men. Mills is classified as a Carnegie "Masters, medium" institution.

During its time on campus, the team was treated to excellent hospitality by the Mills College administration, trustees, faculty, and staff. This hospitality included excellent hotel, meal, facility, transportation accommodations, and also included a most productive lunch meeting with the College trustees. For all of this the team extends its sincere thanks to the president, the accreditation liaison officer, and to the entire staff of Mills College.

B. The Capacity and Preparatory Review Report: Alignment with the Proposal and Quality and Rigor of the Review and Report

The Capacity and Preparatory Review Report (CPR) was prepared in a manner consistent with representations made in the Institutional Proposal to WASC. The approach proposed was to assemble four subcommittees of the WASC Steering Committee, each focused on one Standard. The resulting products of the subcommittees' work were four reflective essays based on the four WASC Standards.

The CPR Report from Mills covered all of the Standards, was well written, well organized and presented clearly. Substantial evidence was gathered by the College to demonstrate its institutional capacity, and most of that evidence was sent to the team with the CPR Report. The sum of evidence presented in the report was extensive, including important data which served as the basis for the reflective essays. At the same time, the team would have appreciated additional analysis and interpretation of the data in the reflective essays. Taken alone, the essays left much important information to be discovered by the team from the accompanying documents.

Based on the institution's reading of the WASC action letters from 1999 and 2004, Mills focused on several key themes: planning, financial viability and resource development, enrollment management, educational effectiveness, and strategic planning. Faculty members were included in preparing the CPR Report, but their voice appears to have been partially muted, particularly with respect to institutional decision making. There is evidence that the institution's administration and selected faculty were extensively engaged in reviewing the evidence. The team's specific observations regarding the extent to which the self-study produced greater understanding of key aspects of institutional capacity are included in the "Commentary on Standards" section of this report. Data exhibits made available to the team were consistent with WASC expectations. On the whole, the team relied heavily on four sources in making observations for this report: 1) the reflective essays, which constituted the primary self-study document; 2) the Analytical Data Portfolio, which accompanied the self-study report; 3) Exhibits Presented by Mills College to Demonstrate Capacity (Binder II); and 4) team interviews conducted on campus.

C. Response to Previous Commission Issues

In its action letter of July 6, 1999, the Commission recommended that:

- the institution sustain and build on its efforts to develop a "culture of evidence" based on assessment activities, with particular reference to the General Education program.

- the College evaluate its General Education program and as it does so seize the opportunity to evaluate its Library and Information Literacy requirements for students with particular reference to involving students in research activities.
- the assessment of student learning be more effectively embedded throughout the institution to the end that Mills expand its efforts in assessing student learning and focus its energy on the use of data to improve teaching effectiveness and student learning.
- an infrastructure be built to permit the examination of existing learning goals; to provide College-wide coordination of its assessment activities; and focus, perhaps through a set of faculty development initiatives, even greater attention on bridging student learning and instructional and program effectiveness.
- the College develop an integrated campus planning process that will lead to integrating technology into both academic programs and administrative services; set priorities; assign resources appropriately; incorporate assessment measures; and assure widespread campus involvement through well-defined, well-understood procedures for institutional planning.
- the College examine how institutional planning, financial planning, and assessment can be better integrated.
- the College deal effectively with its declining undergraduate enrollment, high attrition rate of students at the end of their first year of enrollment, and troublesome graduation rate, including establishing benchmarks as to the level of attrition that is appropriate for the College.
- the College continue to be cognizant of the balance between its undergraduate and graduate student enrollments as it makes progress in addressing the issue of attracting and retaining students until graduation.

- that careful oversight and analysis continue so as to improve admissions staffing, publications and data systems with an eye on developing strategies to improve student retention toward graduation.
- the continuing monitoring of procedures governing budgeting, investment activities, and enrollment trends in the expectation of securing a larger percentage of resources from sources other than tuition, developing reserves, and enlarging College endowment.

The principal reason for the Fifth-Year Special Visit Report (2004) was to follow-up on progress in implementing the new Ed.D. program. Upon examining the evidence, that concern was quickly answered in a satisfactory manner and attention was directed to other issues identified in 1999, most notably budgeting, investment activities, and use of quasi-endowment funds. Following receipt of the Fifth-Year Special Visit Report submitted by the visitation team, and after considering the College's own report in preparation for the 2004 visit, a letter from the institution proposing corrections of errors of fact that were found in the team report, and a letter from the institution's president responding to the Special Visit report, the Commission acted to schedule the present visit. Prominent in the Commission's action letter of November 12, 2004 was an appraisal of areas where progress had been made on earlier recommendations and areas where progress was still needed. Given the new WASC Standards, emphasis was placed on the need to define and assess actual student learning to demonstrate Mills College's commitment to and performance with respect to educational effectiveness under the new *2001 Handbook*.

On the whole, the team observed that while preparing for its 2009 visit, Mills College paid close attention to the key WASC concerns raised and recommendations arising from the 1999 and 2004 visits. As assessed by the institution, these involved primarily issues related to planning, financial viability and resource development, enrollment management, educational effectiveness, and strategic planning.

The team's current assessment of the institution's response to issues identified in the 1999 and 2004 reports is embedded within the team's analysis found in Section II below. Mills College's CPR Report focused on three themes, i.e., retention, assessment, and graduate education, all of which were addressed within the four Standards based reflective essays. The current team was able to affirm that some issues noted in earlier WASC reports were not observed to be major issues today. For example, concerns about declining enrollment, the success of the Ed.D. program, the balance between undergraduate and graduate enrollment, and the use of quasi endowment for operations have been dealt with effectively. Other issues relating to the assessment of student learning and integrating various aspects of campus planning remain and are addressed in this report.

II. EVALUATION OF INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY UNDER THE STANDARDS

Standard One: Defining Institutional Purposes and Ensuring Educational Objectives

In the last ten years, Mills College has increased its graduate population by 75 percent, added multiple new graduate programs, and changed Carnegie classifications from liberal arts college to "Masters, medium." The undergraduate population has also increased by one third in the last decade, to 973 undergraduate students enrolled in 2008-09. Despite these significant changes, the institution has a strong and unified sense of mission. Faculty, staff, and students can articulate how the new programs build on Mills' historical mission and academic strengths, and are solidly behind the vision. The benefits of an expanded graduate program for undergraduates (especially the new 4 + 1 master's programs) and the benefits of a liberal arts-inflected education for graduate students are widely agreed upon (CFRs 1.1, 1.2).

Another change has been the increasing diversity of the student population at Mills. Along with the expansion of the graduate and undergraduate populations in numerical terms, these populations are more diverse in ethnicity/race, socioeconomic status, and nationality. Increasing numbers of transfer students and "resumers" (students over the age of 23) have also changed the flavor of the student body. Not only have Mills' recruiting and marketing practices attracted a more diverse population, but they have increased the total number of applicants and the overall academic qualifications of the applicants. Surveys of faculty and students show, and interviews during the visit confirmed, that a commitment to accessibility is infused throughout the institution.

Staff and faculty diversity show a similar commitment. In 2008, 37% of full-time staff (23% in 2003) and 25% of part-time staff were persons of color. The faculty, according to data exhibit 4.1 show similar percentages (In 2008, 26% of full time faculty and 22% of part time were faculty of color). The current strategic plan also includes "Educational Access and Diversity" as one of three components of its guiding vision (CFR 1.5).

Mills has taken some steps to provide support for this more diverse student population and its varying needs. Admissions are need blind, and while not all need is met, the financial aid budget supported directly by the college has more than doubled in the past five years. Nonetheless, a frequently cited reason for students not returning to Mills to complete their degree is financial difficulty. Mills has added co-curricular programs to increase students' sense of community-belonging and support. The Summer Academic Workshop (SAW) provides a month-long summer orientation to students of color and first-generation college students, and has been correlated with significantly higher retention rates for this group (approximately 20 percent higher first-year persistence than the overall population). All first-year students now have access to Living and Learning Communities

(LLCs). Mills has increased tutoring support for its undergraduates and provides some special spaces and support for "resumers" and transfers. While retention remains a concern, the academic and student affairs staff, as well as the faculty, are clearly committed to working to improve it and some specific plans are in place. Challenges remain, however. Advising students who have more complex personal lives than traditional-aged undergraduates, who are the first in their families to attend college, or who have other issues, demands more time-intensive support. This is a drain on faculty advisors, who may not feel adequately prepared for the work, and on the professional counseling and support staff (CFR 1.5).

In dealing with the challenges of adding graduate programs, expanding access to a more diverse student population, and moving toward a more data-driven assessment culture for its educational practices, Mills has experienced a period of intense change. Strong presidential leadership during this period has been effective in moving the institution forward quickly. The decision-making style useful in these circumstances, however, has also caused some tensions between the upper-level college administration and faculty, staff, and students, who have sometimes felt insufficiently consulted and informed about decisions affecting their academic or professional lives. Turnover in the critical positions of provost (six in ten years), dean of students (five in five years), and institutional assessment officer, among others, has likely reinforced an apparent disconnect between the higher administration staff and the rest of the college. With a strong team of college officers currently in place and signs that the institution recognizes the strains, Mills is developing more formal and transparent processes and it may be that discord in this area will diminish. The team recommends that the administration continue to engage in more open communication with the campus community to build on the ample foundation of shared mission and values (CFR 1.3).

Mills College states its commitments to academic freedom and diversity and non-discrimination clearly and broadly through its faculty and student handbooks, catalogs, and website. Policies and procedures regarding academics, student conduct, and grievances, are also readily available. In interviews with college officers, a frequent theme was moving the institution toward more formalized and professional processes regarding such areas as administrative appointments (for instance for academic division deans, where unclear terms of appointments and evaluation led to controversy in recent years), student registration, and employee grievance procedures. This laudable trend of systematizing and clarifying policies and procedures will help take Mills from a less formal structure that may have been appropriate for a small institution in an earlier era to one appropriate to a more complex institution and age (CFRs 1.4, 1.5, 1.7).

Standard Two: Achieving Educational Effectiveness through Core Functions

Teaching and Learning

Mills College has a long history of providing excellent undergraduate education to women. More recently, it has expanded its graduate programs in education and business to respond to social and economic trends. Mills is evidently capable of maintaining and developing these programs, given the human and fiscal resources at its disposal (CFR 2.1). Mills' student-faculty ratio of 11:1 and the base teaching load of five semester courses per year mean that faculty members are able to devote ample time for close interaction with students, as well as devote time to maintaining currency in their field and perform service in department and college committee work. Eighty-seven percent of the full-time faculty and

56 percent of the part-time faculty have terminal degrees in their teaching areas (CFRs 2.1, 2.8, 2.9).

Mills has been implementing a comprehensive assessment program (https://intranet.mills.edu/institutional_research/mills_college_assessment_plan.pdf) and has developed a new program review process that embeds assessment and connects it with strategic planning and resource allocation (https://intranet.mills.edu/provost/program_review_document.pdf). In particular, and as a part of the implementation of the assessment program, 80 percent of the academic programs have specified learning outcomes and have mapped them to their courses (CFRs 2.2, 2.3, 2.4). The learning outcomes so specified are not limited to the major field of study, but include mission-based general learning outcomes of the College (CFR 2.2a).

Mills' graduate programs are adequately staffed with qualified faculty members, most of whom also teach in the undergraduate program (CFR 2.2b). The programs' content and admission requirements are appropriate and consistent for their disciplines. The Mills Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) represents an impressive deployment of resources and expertise that has been made available to departments and programs. MAAP's intranet Web site includes a number of monographs that make assessment best practices available to Mills faculty, as well as templates and procedures to follow in implementing the College's assessment plan. There is clear administrative commitment to assessment, program review, and linking resource allocation to identified goals and objectives that emerge from the assessment of the extent to which student learning outcomes are being achieved in Mills' programs. Resources are also being devoted to faculty training and attendance to conferences, although it was not clear from the available evidence the precise extent of that support (CFR 2.7).

Overall, the content of the academic programs at Mills is consistent with the mission and values of the institution, and is designed to provide students with the benefits of a liberal arts education at the undergraduate level, and a solid professional base at the graduate level. The faculty is well-qualified to design and deliver the curriculum. The faculty has articulated learning outcomes at the institutional and program level (see Table 7.1), and Mills has designed, staffed, and resourced assessment and program review programs that have the capacity to effectively tie the results of assessment to continuous program improvement. Of particular note is the work in reforming the General Education program and the completed loop of assessment and revision of English 001, a key general education course (CFRs 2.1, 2.4, 2.5)

Despite these efforts to articulate important learning outcomes, the team was not always clear to which set of institutional outcomes Mills holds itself accountable and which might be considered aspirational. For instance, Mills has identified student learning outcomes, (again, see those identified in Table 7.1), but has not linked them explicitly to the institution level outcomes listed under College Mission on each page of the table.

Mills clearly has developed substantial momentum in defining learning outcomes, and has made significant progress in developing assessment strategies in the last few years. However, the institution is still at a relatively early stage of implementing these processes and, in particular, in making assessment an integral part of the culture of the institution and its faculty. As shown in Data Exhibit 7.1, all departments and programs have developed learning outcomes, but relatively few have gone beyond that first step to define measurable criteria or specify types of evidence. On the other hand, Exhibit 7.1 creates a solid framework for assessment progress. This is another indicator of the priority and considerable support being assigned to assessment by the College administration (CFR 2.2)

Mills is to be commended for its serious commitment to assessment evidenced in recent years. In preparation for the Educational Effectiveness review, it is recommended that the institution sustain and where possible increase its efforts to develop a robust assessment system. The team also recommends that Mills keep to its intended outcome of completion of one cycle of assessment and program review for all its programs

A key factor in determining the speed and sustainability of assessment practices, a focus on student learning, and a dynamic of continuous improvement is the acceptance and support of the faculty for what amounts to a cultural change from the traditional outlook of academia. This process is clearly underway at Mills, but it is by no means complete. Based on interactions with faculty during the site visit, there are clearly substantial numbers of faculty who are not enthusiastic about the changes, and in some cases, resistant to them. There is a perception that assessment represents additional work of dubious value for which there is no time in their busy schedule. This perception indicates the need for additional faculty exposure to the ways in which current best practices in curriculum design embed assessment into the process so that curriculum development is improved through the use of learning outcomes, and collection of assessment data is carried out within the process of course delivery with little or no additional effort (CFR 4.7)

This report noted above the dissatisfaction of Mills faculty with their perceived limited involvement in decision-making and governance, especially in regard to decisions related to the appointment (and dismissal) of key staff and faculty administrative positions. This may be simply an expression of “change fatigue,” as the leadership at Mills brings about rapid change to adapt its dynamic competitive environment. But it is possible that the diffusion and acceptance of the learning-outcomes framework and faculty engagement in

developing meaningful ways to assess program effectiveness and student learning, core faculty functions, will bring about greater satisfaction among the faculty.

Scholarship and Creative Activity

Mills faculty is productive in scholarship and creative activity, and their teaching load of five semester courses per year is designed to allow time for such activity (CFR 2.8). The most recent strategic plan includes resource allocation to support scholarship as well (https://intranet.mills.edu/campus/strategic_planning/FacStaffBudget0607.xls). It was reported in conversations with faculty, however, that the support budget has remained flat for several years. As pointed out in the reflective essay in the institution's CPR report, the 2008 HERI faculty survey shows only 40% of faculty respondents satisfied with the level of support for scholarship, and the essay recognizes that the level of support should be increased (CFR 3.4)

Funds for faculty to develop courses are available but come out of the same limited support pool as monies for conference travel and other scholarly needs. The faculty committee that administers these funds has recently partnered with the diversity committee to set priorities for curriculum development areas in accordance with institutional priorities and current trends in teaching and learning (e.g., universal course design). Additional support for faculty pedagogical development comes in the form of workshops, reading groups, and individual consultation with the associate provost and director of institutional research. Comprehensive orientations for part-time faculty have also been instituted (CFR 3.4).

The linkage of research and scholarship with the teaching mission was not explicitly addressed in the reflective essay. Undoubtedly, faculty scholarship provides spillover benefits to the teaching mission by helping to maintain faculty currency in the discipline and by enriching coverage of standard course material with the relevant ongoing research work of

the faculty. However, involving students directly in research, both at the graduate and undergraduate level, is also a powerful means of enhancing the educational experience and enhancing retention (CFR 2.9, 2.10). According to the 2008 HERI survey, student research at the undergraduate level as a teaching method has decreased from 68 percent in 2004 to 44 percent in 2008. Although there is a long tradition of faculty/student collaboration in the performing arts, these partnerships are becoming less common elsewhere in the institution. It is recommended that Mills explore ways to further enhance student involvement in faculty research. The faculty may also want to consider how each of their disciplines serves as a framework for the kinds of meaningful student assessments they are planning to design. This is another way to connect disciplinary scholarship to the teaching mission (CFRs 2.4, 2.5).

Support for Student Learning and Success

The institutional research office collects and disseminates disaggregated data about student demographics, enrollments, areas of study, persistence, and other important characteristics. Mills also participates in a variety of instruments to measure student satisfaction, achievement, and campus climate (including NSSE, CIRP, and CLA) (CFR 2.10).

The current strategic plan identifies numerous objectives related to improving support for diverse student populations, including transfers and students from lower socio-economic-status backgrounds, and assigns specific strategies to offices around campus to implement these objectives. Several co-curricular initiatives designed to increase students' academic preparation and sense of community have been instituted, including the Summer Academic Workshop, Hellmann Summer Science and Math Fellows program, and Living and Learning communities. The institution has carefully assessed several of these initiatives, and based future development plans on its findings. It has added peer tutoring programs and teaching

assistant training, and has plans to expand the Center for Academic Excellence that supports these programs. The athletics programs involve a substantial proportion of undergraduates (153 registered athletes this year), and serve as centers for community-building, personal development, and community-service (CFRs 2.10, 2.11, 2.13).

Mills has recognized the need to better facilitate the entrance of transfer students, particularly into the more hierarchical science and mathematics majors, and provides “Guidelines for Junior Transfer Students Interested in Science Majors.” The 2005 Curricular Development Plan identifies several additional steps, including articulation agreements with area community colleges. The institution is also discussing developing pathways for transfers to receive master’s degrees via 2 + 2 +1 initiatives (CFR 2.14).

The undergraduate and graduate handbooks articulate academic requirements, policies, and procedures, and this information is also available on the web. The M Center serves as a unified service center for students regarding academic records, financial aid, and student accounts. There has been a concerted effort to move more routine transactions on-line and to automate some routine advising functions to reserve faculty/student interactions for more complex, less nuts-and-bolts, issues. Full-day advising workshops for faculty advisors, as well as an advising handbook, are also designed to facilitate their advising role. The process, timing, and nomenclature for communicating with students about insufficient progress during a term have been revised to effect earlier and more productive interventions. Nonetheless, there remain student complaints about receiving incomplete or conflicting information from the M Center, and some faculty complaints about support and recognition for their student advising work (CFRs 2.12, 2.13).

Mills appears to take seriously results of the 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement, which showed quite low ratings for positive relationships with administrative

personnel and offices (49 percent for first-year students, and just 29 percent for seniors) and for substantial institutional support for students' social needs (19 percent among seniors). Student support services are attempting to raise their profile among students and assess student experiences more thoroughly through qualitative interviews and surveys. It is also possible that the negative report among seniors does not take into account more recent innovations and/or is related to turnover in the Dean of Students position, which appears to have stabilized at this point (CFR 2.13).

Standard Three: Developing and Applying Resources and Organizational Structures to Ensure Stability

Mills College appears to possess the resources and organizational structures needed to maintain its stability. Its instructional staffing plan includes a sufficient number of full-time faculty with appropriate backgrounds by discipline and degree level. Indeed, its 11:1 student-faculty ratio is highly favorable. Many of the faculty have been at Mills for the long-term and have made a considerable professional and personal commitment to the institution. According to the *Mills College: Facts and Trends, 2008-2009* (p. 113), in fall semester 2008, Mills had 94 full-time and 97 part-time faculty. Of these, 26 percent of the full-time faculty were identified as being "of color," as were 23 percent of the part-time faculty. While it is to be expected that women faculty would dominate in a college for undergraduate women, it is noted that women comprise 61 percent of the full-time and 71 percent of the part-time faculty. It is also observed that 89 percent of the full-time faculty hold terminal degrees, as does 59 percent of the part-time group (CFR 3.2).

The team observed that the faculty as a whole appear committed to the institution's mission, are secure in their positions, are not desirous of leaving, are satisfied with their work-loads, and have no serious complaints concerning their compensation. Turnover of

faculty does not appear to be a problem at Mills. When the subject turns to institutional governance, the faculty perspective is changed dramatically. The institution does have an active Faculty Executive Committee and Educational Policy Subcommittee, which provide a significant faculty voice in the realm of academic offerings. Other faculty committees help to maintain a strong faculty presence in areas of curriculum and instruction. The faculty's leave taking from administration appears limited to the domain of institutional governance and campus decision making. This becomes a Standard 3.11 concern to the extent that it impacts "the role of the faculty in maintaining the institution's educational purposes and character."

An issue raised in the 2004 WASC action letter noted that considerable discussion had occurred around the "use of quasi-endowment funds (or funds functioning as endowment) to launch several College initiatives and to cover institutional expenses." The *Summary Data Form* notes that Mills experienced considerable deficits in each of the last three years, but had no cumulative deficit. In discussion with college administrators, it was noted that Mills had booked gifts and donations designated for projects and initiatives to be funded from the Unrestricted Operating Fund into the quasi-endowment fund. At the end of the year, sufficient funds were then transferred from the quasi-endowment to cover the projects and initiatives which had created a deficit in the Unrestricted Operating Fund. This practice has now been discontinued, and gifts and donations are now booked directly into the Unrestricted Operating Fund in order to pay for current fiscal year initiatives. At the discretion of the Board, any surplus remaining at year end may be transferred to the quasi-endowments or maintained as an operating reserve. This change of practice has clarified for both the Board of Trustees and the administration how the funds are received and booked, as

well as clarified the intention and purpose of the quasi-endowment. In sum, an actual operating deficit has not existed in the past three years.

Recent past practice has not amounted to a draw down of endowment funds, but rather the booking of unrestricted gifts as quasi-endowment, and the subsequent transfer of those funds at year end to cover the cost of a defined initiative (CFR 3.5). Since the arrival of the new VP for Finance and Administration and Treasurer, policies and procedures, such as the *Administrative Policy Manual*, have been clarified and documented (CFR 3.8). While Mills College has enjoyed unqualified independent financial audits, Mills should encourage its auditors to include in their audit the calculation of the Composite Financial Index, as required by the Department of Education (CFR 3.5).

A strong asset of Mills is its Board of Trustees. Members of the Board working in the area of finance have a clear understanding of Mills' financial condition, particularly the impact of the recent economic downturn on endowments and the institution's financial stability. They have been active in their fiscal oversight, particularly with regard to the spending of income from endowments. A document given to the team at the time of its visit illustrates the effect of market conditions on those endowments. The analysis was prepared and presented at the Board's February, 2009 meeting (CFR 3.9). Like most colleges and universities, endowment investments at Mills have declined dramatically since June 30, 2008. Between 2004 and 2007 the total endowment grew from \$155 million to \$234 million. At the time of the team's visit in early March, the balance was close again to the 2004 amount, undoubtedly due to the condition of the investment market. Nevertheless, thanks to a steady stream of estate gifts from generous alumnae, Mills is enjoying a favorable flow of current gift income. This should assist Mills significantly in maintaining reasonable operating budgets through at least the next several years.

Mills enjoys significant library holdings for a college its size, and has updated its reliance on technology data bases to cover its full range of undergraduate and graduate programs. This is consistent with national trends. In 2006 Mills launched its Blackboard course management system, and currently has more than 150 courses with pages on Blackboard. Overall, faculty and students are pleased with their library services. Both the collection and the services offered appear adequate to Mills' mission. In addition to receiving some support from the general fund, some twenty separately endowed funds support the library budget.

Standard Four: Creating an Organization Committed to Learning and Improvement

Mills College has engaged in an institution-wide strategic planning process. Led by the Board of Trustees, administration, faculty, and staff have joined together to develop the Strategic Plan. This plan, informed by the mission, vision and values of Mills College, sets the strategic direction for Mills for 2007-08 to 2012-2013 (CFR 4.2).

While the Strategic Plan is aligned with academic programs and identifies personnel who will carry out the plan, the team was less clear about how the plan is aligned with the priorities and resources of the college. The Board of Trustees, together with the administration, faculty and staff, are encouraged to delineate priorities in this plan, as well as the fiscal, physical and technological resources needed to fulfill the plan (CFR 4.2). The Strategic Plan is monitored by the Strategic Planning Committee of the Board of Trustees. Mills is also encouraged to review progress toward achieving the plan and revisiting the plan on a periodic basis (CFR 4.2).

The team found that the Office of Institutional Research provides quantitative data to inform the planning processes at Mills. This office has created electronic templates for

syllabi with learning goals, as well as templates for new course proposals or revisions that will be of great benefit to the faculty in their course and curriculum planning. Embedded in the template is an approval process that includes approvals by the library and the accounting office administrations. The team also noted the Program Review Instructions/Guidelines which had an accompanying rubric for evaluation. The Program Review Process is outlined in the Mills Academic Assessment (MAAP) Schedule, copies of which were provided to the team. Each program is reviewed every five years, with reviews of specific program goals in the alternate years. This formal program review process is moving from an emerging level to the developed level, particularly with increased use of data to inform planning and budgeting (CFR 4.4).

Also available to the faculty was the Assessment Report format, with an accompanying rubric created through the research process. While there has been discussion of student learning outcomes at the co-curricular level, especially in the Living Learning Communities, the first year experience for incoming first year women, increased collection and use of data for these programs would facilitate the learning and evaluation process and move the process from an emerging to a developed level (CFR 4.3, 4.4). As always, the key test after gathering data is their use by faculty and others.

While the Strategic Plan outlines a vision and articulates institutional values (again see those listed on Table 7.1 under College Mission), it was not clear to the team the extent to which Mills College had adopted a set of Institutional Learning Outcomes that will be specifically linked to academic programs. Mills is encouraged to make more explicit these over-arching outcomes. They should prove valuable in guiding the program learning outcomes at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, as well as the course learning outcomes for each program (CFR 4.4).

The recent hiring of a Director of Institutional Research, Planning & Academic Assessment should bring stability to that office, troubled by some turnover in the past few years. While a recent hiring freeze has delayed the hiring of an assistant in the office, the Director has provided leadership to the assessment and evaluation process at Mills. The Office of Institutional Research is collecting data on comparator institutions in admission, retention, graduation rates and financial information and uses this information in institutional review and decision-making. Data are also collected that will assist the program directors in assessing student learning, as evidenced in the *Mills College: Fact and Trends* publication. However, the team is not clear whether a review plan has been developed to assess the effectiveness of this research function, or how suitable and useful data collected by the Office will prove to be to the institution. The team senses that Mills College would do well to develop a plan to assess the critical data collection function, which in turn would help move Mills from an emerging level to a developed level in terms of gathering and analyzing evidence (CFR 4.5).

It appears that faculty have become involved in the evaluation of the teaching and learning process. In a discussion with a group of faculty, talk concerning “closing the loop” was heard, although some of the evidence on which change was based was still anecdotal. Faculty who are “pioneering” new approaches to student and program assessment (English and Music are good examples) are starting to see results and sharing their stories with other faculty. This process in turn may prove motivational to other faculty.

The team heard from some faculty that it may be easy to collect the data for assessment and program review, but they questioned Mills’ capacity to change, given the institutional expectations of them in the areas of teaching and advising (CFR 4.6). Mills needs to use the results of the data it collects to effect change in the design of the curriculum

and in the design and practice of the teaching and learning processes (CFR 4.7). A culture of evidence on the campus is moving from the emerging to the developed level, but it needs to be deepened and extended. It is also not clear that a periodic analysis of grades and evaluation procedures is conducted to assess the rigor and effectiveness of grading policies and practice (CFR 4.7).

Included in the Program Review process are guidelines for the involvement of external reviewers and the outline of a protocol for including the remarks and observations of external reviewers. While Mills has a very active alumni association, it was not clear to the team the extent to which the alumni are involved in the assessment of educational programs (CFR 4.8). The college should consider how to include appropriate stakeholders in the assessment process in order to move from emerging communication to a more mature, developed culture.

Student Success

The team addressed the institution's effort concerning "Support for Student Learning and Success" under Standard Two above. The self-study report included considerable information regarding student success, including data on retention, persistence, and graduation rates. Comparisons with similar institutions were derived from the "National Survey of Student Engagement, 2008." Much relevant data in this regard is contained in a 154 page booklet, Mills College: Facts and Trends, 2008-2009. Graduation rates are presented by major. Overall, student persistence and graduation rates are lower than they were ten years ago, but have been improving in the past several years. Most impressively, the data have been analyzed by the College's Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Academic Assessment. For example, the institution has been able to report on the retention of Freshwomen by cohort since 2005, and do so according to that group's ethnicity, state of

origin, grade point average, whether they took lower or upper division courses, whether they were taking high or low loads, and the extent of their unmet financial need.

At the time of the team's visit in early March, 2009, the assessment of student learning within the curriculum was progressing meticulously well in the English and Music Departments, but similar information was lacking from other departments. A review of overall student success data leads the team to observe that Mills is working hard to adapt to its greater student and program diversity and that this adaptation is proving challenging.

III. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Standards Summary

The team reviewed its observations from the visit and the supporting documents supplied by Mills College using the lens of capacity for purposes, integrity, stability, resources, structure, policies, processes, as well as lens of readiness for the Educational Effectiveness visit.

Standard 1: Defining Institutional Purposes and Ensuring Educational Objectives

The team believes that Mills has met CFRs 1.1 – 1.6, 1.9. Mills has a formally approved purpose and mission understood by its various stakeholders (board, administration, faculty and staff), clear objectives as evidenced in its most recent Strategic Plan (2007-08/2012-13), and a leadership team adequate for its plans. It values academic freedom and autonomy, allowing its faculty to create, teach, and research according to the dictates of each discipline and profession. It also shows by its increasingly diverse student body, staff and faculty, that it seeks to work responsibility in a more multicultural world.

Recommendation: Given the rapid change at Mills College (growth in student body size and diversity; additional graduate programs) with resulting administrative actions to find the right

leadership team, as well as the perception by the faculty (evidenced in interviews and in the 2008 HERI Survey) that they have been largely uninvolved in these decisions, the team recommends that the administration engage in more open and clarifying communication with the campus community to build on the ample foundation of shared mission and values. Doing so will more fully meet the spirit of CFRs 1.7 and 1.8.

Standard II: Achieving Educational Objectives through Core Functions

Mills College faculty continue to value their role as teachers and are committed to student learning of the highest quality (CFRs 2.1-2.7). Faculty remain committed and actively engaged in scholarly and creative activity (CFRs 2.8, 2.9). They have sufficient faculty to meet their educational objectives. Their formal policies and procedures support student learning, though because many support functions are decentralized, and, perhaps the recent growth in the number and diversity of the student body, students are sometimes frustrated in receiving timely and sufficient advising on non-course related matters. At the same time, Mills has instituted a number of programs to meet changing student needs which will be explained further in the following section concerning the self study themes on retention, assessment, and graduate education (CFRs 2.10-2.13).

Whether Mills has the infrastructure and readiness for the Educational Effectiveness Review was a major focus of this visit. The team concluded that if the College remains seriously engaged in planning and implementing its current learning outcome and assessment strategies it will be ready for this visit. Specific findings and recommendations are noted below under the assessment theme.

Standard III: Developing and Applying Resources and Organizational Structures to Ensure Sustainability

The team concluded that Mills College has prepared well with regard to CFRs/Standards 3.1-3.10. The institution, despite the economic downturn, has sufficient resources and has taken administrative actions to provide for the fiscal, physical, information resources that the College needs. The College has qualified faculty and staff, and a fairly new senior management team. The faculty however feel that they need more resources to develop their expertise in program and student assessment as indicated in the 2008 HERI survey. The team concurs.

Two strategic planning efforts in recent years (Plan for 2003-08, Plan for 2008 – 12/13), as well as clear trustee support for these plans, provide evidence that all levels of Mills College are working toward similar goals. The team found that Mills has a strong and experienced administration in place (president and vice presidents) which should help steer the new strategic plan to completion. However, as noted earlier, a number of key administrators are new to their roles, which may lead to some slowdown in accomplishing important goals, and, perhaps, some feelings of instability among faculty and staff.

Recommendation: While Mills College has enjoyed unqualified independent audits, Mills should encourage its auditors to include in their audit the calculation of the Composite Financial Index (CFR 3.5).

Standard IV: Creating and Organization Committed to Learning and Improvement

The recently developed strategic plan, the selection of an Institutional Research director, the plans for program review in capstone courses, the implementation of a more comprehensive program review approach indicate an organization meeting the CFRs 4.1-4.8. However to sustain and extend these efforts the team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation: In preparation for the Educational Effectiveness review, it is recommended that the institution **keep to its plan of completion of one cycle of assessment and program review for all its programs.**

Recommendation: The Board of Trustees, together with the administration, faculty and staff, are encouraged to **delineate priorities in the new strategic plan**, as well as the fiscal, physical and technological resources needed to fulfill the plan (CFR 4.2). It is also not clear to the team how this plan will be monitored internally. The team is inclined to believe that the administration will take the lead, but a clearer explication of this would be helpful.

Recommendation: Another good practice is to **align the budgeting process** more clearly with the recently developed strategic plan and **communicate these budgeting decisions widely** (CFRs 4.1, 4.2). The team understands that the administration has begun such a process recently (meetings to communicate to the campus community about budget planning in a troubling economic time).

Recommendation: The team is not clear whether a review plan has been developed to assess the effectiveness of the institutional research function, or how suitable and useful data collected by the Office will prove to be to the institution. The team senses that Mills College would do well to **develop a plan to assess the critical data collection function**, which in turn would help move Mills from an emerging level to a developed level in terms of gathering and analyzing evidence (CFR 4.5).

Findings and Recommendations Related to the Themes in the Reflective Essays

Student retention and persistence

Mills is commended for its efforts to increase the diversity of the student body and has demonstrated success in enrolling a student body that more closely mirrors local and

national demographics. This change in the student body has also challenged the institution to monitor changing retention and graduation rates, using survey data and data derived from its study of enrollment patterns. Living learning communities and the initiatives undertaken by the new dean of student life are responses to what it has learned. Mills is encouraged to evaluate the effectiveness of these recent interventions.

Recommendations concerning theme 1: The team encourages this work to continue and suggests that the College pay even more attention to student experience with advisors and M Center services. Transfer students and “resumers” should also receive more attention since these populations have become a more substantial component of the student population. Finally, Mills should put more resources into studying and implementing programs to increase retention and persistence rates across all four (or more) years of student attendance. Essentially, Mills is in the midst of a significant transformation – especially in the variety of student groups it serves – and needs to continue to study and implement programs that will ensure that this rich mix of learners receives a quality experience in and out of the classroom.

Graduate Education

Mills has had a long history of graduate education dating back to the 1920’s. As part of its mission to women and building on the faculty strengths in its traditional undergraduate programs, the college has recently inaugurated other graduate professional programs such as the MBA and public policy master’s degree. The team met with numerous faculty members who teach in both graduate and undergraduate programs, as well as those who teach in the undergraduate program only. The team was impressed by the serious attention the faculty give to ensuring that graduate programs are extensions of its liberal arts mission. The College’s 4 + 1 programs, as well as its 2 +2 + 1 offerings, are seen as ways that Mills provides a liberal arts grounding to students who aim for graduate degrees. Faculty give

graduate students opportunities to work with undergraduates, teach split courses for both graduate and undergraduate students (with different learning goals for the two levels of students) and faculty themselves collaborate across disciplines to offer students a range of courses not traditionally included in discipline-based graduate programs.

Recommendations concerning theme 2: With an eye toward the Educational Effectiveness visit, the team encourages faculty to consider how the college's overall learning outcomes might be more clearly integrated into graduate programs and help to link, developmentally, undergraduate and graduate education. Do graduate faculty use the overall institutional learning goals (teaching students to think critically, communicate effectively and responsibly, accept the challenges of their creative vision, push the boundaries of their disciplines, act effectively in a global, multicultural society, develop as leaders) as guides for developing curriculum in graduate programs? How do they know that graduate students are achieving these outcomes?

Assessment

The previous questions provide a context for the team findings and recommendations on student assessment – and the team's task of determining Mill's capability and readiness for the Educational Effectiveness visit. Mills has done much work in integrating meaningful assessment strategies into its ongoing work to review the quality of academic programs. In particular, Mills asks each major to specify its assessment plan in its guidelines for program review. It has instituted a major review of capstone courses to determine how these might be used as means to assess program outcomes. Mills has appointed an Institutional Research Director and formed an Assessment Committee. Together, they are effectively assisting faculty to develop home grown approaches to assessing undergraduate majors. They have begun administering the Collegiate Learning Assessment, as well as the National Survey of

Student Engagement. Furthermore, a number of assessment initiatives have been undertaken in a variety of majors from studio art, to English, to economics.

The team also noted the growing willingness of faculty to overcome initial concerns about assessment and engage meaningfully in the process, indicating that they have learned from their work with assessment how they might improve the quality of what they teach and students learn.

Recommendations concerning theme 3:

Though Mills faculty and staff have begun to develop meaningful assessment practices, the pace of this work needs to increase if the College is to be ready for the Educational Effectiveness visit. Specifically, Mills needs to:

1. Clarify what a Mills degree means by articulating which of its institutional learning outcomes it expects every student to demonstrate and how these outcomes relate to the general education and major curricula.
2. Map or otherwise show the relationships that exist between specific course and major outcomes and the overall institutional outcomes.
3. Define the ways it will measure outcomes at the course, major, program and institutional levels. This work has begun as evidenced in the Table 7.1, Inventory of Educational Effectiveness Indicators, but this table shows a considerable number of unfinished areas.
4. Continue, and if possible, increase opportunities for faculty development opportunities (i.e. allocate time and dollars for in-service, workshops, conference attendance) to enhance faculty expertise in student and program assessment.

5. Ensure that more majors implement (not just plan to implement) assessment strategies and use the results to plan improvements in the curriculum, student learning, and faculty teaching approaches.
6. Document the ways program and student assessment are used for improvement.

IV. PREPARATION FOR EDUCATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS REVIEW

The team is encouraged that Mills is positioned to undertake the Educational Effectiveness Review. The institution's administration is keenly aware that success with this second stage review is all important, and, in keeping with the institutional proposal, work has already begun in preparation for that review. The team believes firmly that Mills has the institutional capacity and infrastructure necessary for demonstrating educational effectiveness by the time of the EER. The administration's commitment to assessment, program review, and linking resource allocation to institutional goals is an encouraging development. Recent administrative appointments have been put in place to assure that a structure exists for gathering and analyzing appropriate evidence. Indeed, the team observed that a culture of evidence has begun to emerge and should help to move the institution's level of attainment from the "emerging" to the "developed" level.

The team noted with satisfaction that apparently all departments and programs have developed learning outcomes. That observation is accompanied by a second and somewhat worrisome observation. With few exceptions, the institution is still at a relatively early stage in implementing the processes needed for engaging all faculty deeply in defining measurable criteria, collecting and analyzing related evidence, and applying the results to improve the outcomes of student learning.

Certainly institutional success will be enhanced if continuing progress can be documented in terms of improved student retention. Some continuing refinement of student advising responsibilities between faculty and student affairs personnel may prove helpful in that regard.

Most importantly, given the critical linkage between instruction, students, and their learning, the pursuit of a successful demonstration of educational effectiveness will become manifest through deep faculty engagement. To the administration's credit, it has already put the needed administrative infrastructure in place.

Final Comment

The visiting team wishes to thank the entire Mills College community for their hospitality and helpfulness during the visit. We are especially grateful to Marianne Sheldon, the ALO, for her assistance in scheduling and conducting the visit. We are grateful, too, for whoever arranged that the rains, thought certainly necessary, stopped long enough for us to enjoy the lovely surroundings.