

President Bruce Shepard's WWU Stakeholder Survey: Preliminary Findings and Reflections*

September 17, 2008

Introduction

I cannot help it: I am an academic and love learning, the steeper the learning curve, the better. This last month, I have been learning all I can about Western Washington University. Many people have helped. About 100 people – campus, community, and state leaders – responded in writing to a series of open-ended questions about Western: our strengths, challenges, and future. The replies came about equally from community members involved with Western and from campus faculty, professional staff, and classified colleagues.

Individually and in small groups, I have met face-to-face with another 135 people, spending an hour or more in focused discussion with each. A majority of these meetings involved off-campus groups and stretched around our region and across our state: elected local, legislative, and statewide officials; editorial boards for 5 newspapers; presidents of community colleges, technical colleges, and public and private universities; leaders in the private sector, generous benefactors; current and incoming students, and proud alumni. In larger gatherings, I have socialized with an additional 620 folks, continuing to learn about WWU through these necessarily briefer and more casual conversations.

A remarkably consistent picture emerges. Before turning to that picture, I want to first express a sincere “thank you” to all who have made this busy month so valuable for me: all those who took time to talk with me, certainly, but also the talented administrative team who made the complicated arrangements. Second, I emphasize that this summary represents a beginning of the learning process and not a culmination. We must each be committed to continuing the learning process – I learning from you, of course, but also, together, learning from each other.

Preliminary Findings

Background

So many of you have shared so much. There is no way to do justice to it all in a report that must, necessarily, be sufficiently brief as to be read. So, first know that I value very much all the insights offered to me.

People responded to six broad questions in the survey and, face-to-face, to diverse prompts. I find, though, that the responses can be largely organized around these topics: looking internally at our strengths and challenges; looking externally at our threats and opportunities. These findings did generate any number of reflections on my part, and I will conclude by offering those reflections for you to consider and critique.

Finally, I always feel it necessary to point out the obvious: we are a superb university. I do this at the outset because, inevitably, the surveys I have received – and this report back to you – focus on those areas where we desire to be better. Consequently, a report such as this can end up being read as a critique of Western Washington University. Not at all. We are an excellent university; we know it; we owe an enormous debt to those who have led us to this level of distinction; and, as part of our obligation to them, to Washington, and to ourselves, we look to move forward by critically addressing our challenges and opportunities.

Strengths

By far, our excellent “academic reputation” was the most frequently reported strength. Indeed, it is my impression that the strength of our reputation is most strongly perceived among those off campus and in other parts of the state (legislators, the Governor, editorial boards, in-coming students and their parents, employers of our graduates). Certainly, we on campus are aware of the excellence at Western but I also sensed that we may not be fully aware of just how highly we are regarded.

Our reputation is just that, reputation. What supports it? People were quite specific here, about equally frequently mentioning:

- The caliber of our students. Our students are seen to be bright, well prepared, and motivated. Also often stressed, though, were our students’ passion, commitment to causes, and engagement in their communities.
- High quality faculty and staff. Accomplished in their fields and professions, recognized researchers, scholars, and performers, yes. But other important adjectives were as frequently mentioned: “caring,” “involved with undergraduates,” and, most frequently, “dedicated.”
- Closely related, the high expectations we set for ourselves. Frequent responses such as: “high standards of scholarship and service,” and “emphasis on improving academic standards over the past 15 years.”
- High quality undergraduate learning. That’s what all the preceding unavoidably adds up to. People spoke in many different ways and from varied vantage points. A faculty member spoke of outstanding undergraduate education “based on top faculty teaching smaller groups of motivated students.” A member of the professional staff spoke in terms of “our focus on students and learning as the primary mission of the university.” A person in the community wrote of our primary strength as: “the reputation Western has for high quality undergraduate education and the resultant contributions made by the institution and its alumni to the Pacific Northwest.”

Other strengths certainly related to those supporting our reputation were also frequently mentioned. They include:

- Our commitment to sustainability, green buildings, and environmental quality.
- The natural beauty of the campus and its location.
- The caliber of our facilities.

I wish to report another strength evident through my discussions around the state. First, we have elected officials – and newspaper editorial boards – who genuinely care about public higher education, see its link to continually brighter futures for Washington, who want to understand the nuances of policy, who will, most appropriately, hold us accountable for results while giving us latitude to figure means, and who will translate their commitment to public higher education into tangible support. Frankly, with a national politics too often conducted at the level of the cliché and where “the common good” is too often defined as no more than protecting the pursuit of private interests, I found these discussions with elected officials and leaders in the press to be most refreshing. I will add one other clear conclusion: our legislative relations are so good because our legislative relations professionals are so highly regarded by elected officials and their staffs.

We also have a remarkably dedicated and supportive Board of Trustees. Again, that is not always the norm in American higher education. Here, we have friends who, most certainly, will fulfill their Constitutional and statutory responsibilities but are doing so with Western’s success as their paramount motivation. That is my strong conclusion. But, as further validation of this important institutional strength, also consider the related commendation that the accreditation team recently shared concerning the Board and their engagement.

Ours is a campus that values relationships. That is a strength. We see it, for example, in the way faculty and students prefer to work together. That is a defining element of our approach to excellence in education. Importantly, personal relationships underlie the strongly positive feelings our alumni and supporters statewide report having about Western. And, recognizing this important strength will help untangle, as mentioned at several points later in the report, the frustrations that also result when relationships do not meet expectations or compound the challenge of reaching decisions transparently.

When it comes to strengths, there was also frequent mention of specific programs – many, many programs. I will not list them all here. I came away, though, with this fundamental conclusion: our greatest strength has been our ability to maintain excellence across the campus. While talking to colleague presidents around the state, I would sometimes hear of their need to redirect resources that had been spread too thinly in order to build on areas of excellence. I believe we have a significant strategic advantage here and I put it this way: were a student to throw a dart at our catalog and thereby pick her major (undergraduate or graduate), she could be assured that the resulting random choice would rank among the very best if not the very best available in the state. I have never before been part of a university where I would make so bold an assertion.

Challenges

One challenge was mentioned far and away most frequently: building a relationship of trust, shared direction, and community among those who are the university. The need to build strong, positive relationships between “the administration” and the faculty was mentioned even more often by those identifying themselves as “administrators” than it was mentioned by faculty. Needs for openness, transparency, trust, healing (in the aftermath of the faculty contract negotiations), effective participation in decision-making, and meaningful involvement of governance were all mentioned. Other relationships requiring attention were also identified ranging from detailed descriptions of tensions between professional staff and classified colleagues to “a more hands on approach with the students is needed by the administration.”

Not quite as often, I heard regular mention of “silos.” Here the challenge is that people appear unwilling or unable to cross organizational structures. Information does not freely flow among different entities; individuals too often are averse to taking risks; and there is not clear understanding of the role individuals play in an integrating mission and vision. The result is that we are not always able to draw upon the best contributions of the very talented individuals who are the university.

Those were the two most striking challenges, as you educated me, and their successful resolution is a precondition to effectively addressing other needs. These other needs include:

- Providing compensation that is fair, complete, and supportive of commitments to recruit and retain strong faculty, staff, and classified colleagues.
- Adequately sustaining academic programs. We have academic programs and results that are truly outstanding because of the dedicated contributions of the faculty and staff who are a part of them; however, resource needs in order to sustain that excellence were regularly identified. Further, while instructional capacity has been maintained overall, effects among academic units are perceived to have not been uniform; some programs report increases in enrollments without a concomitant increase in support and, consequently, a greater reliance on adjunct faculty.
- Being stretched too thinly, administratively. The result of past and most appropriate efforts to protect instructional quality during times of budget retrenchment, colleagues providing support services report being stretched very thinly with consequent negative implications for our students.
- Increasing the returns of an already effective and, among donors, alumni, and other off-campus groups, highly professional advancement office. Goals for our advancement efforts must be set that are achievable but also that will force us to stretch. There is, also, a clear need to more fully

engage our campus in understanding, shaping, and, as appropriate, being a part of our fundraising efforts.

- Diversifying our campus. People spoke of the importance of this challenge and its relationship to our campus culture as well as our efforts to recruit and retain diverse students, faculty, and other employees.
- Clarifying the role of the graduate programs. Concerns range from the need to provide better support for existing graduate programs, to defining what, if any, graduate programs should be added, to another observing, “Over the many years I have been at Western, I have never heard a coherent rationale and justification for WWU’s graduate program; indeed, it seems to be an afterthought.”
- Defining the role within the university for educational programs that reach out to meet needs off campus.
- Internationalizing the campus. This is a challenge both in terms of uncertainty about how important a priority this should be and, if a priority, just what should be done.
- Responding to the State’s need to grow higher education opportunities while on a campus that is “land locked” and in a state fiscal environment that is bleak, short-term and where, nationally and long-term, we are likely to see continuing disinvestment in public higher education as states deal with increasing federal mandates, most notably those involving the provision of health care in an aging nation.
- Defining our federal relations purposes and opportunities; organizing appropriately when that definition is in place.
- Investing in an institutional research capability that can support the need for our shared decision-making to be fully informed as well as to be responsive to increasing external requirements for accountability-related budgeting and planning.
- Assuring a fiscally responsible, academically strong, environmentally sound, and well-integrated expansion on the waterfront.
- And last listed but one I worry much about: sustaining innovation and creativity, particularly when operating budgets are stagnant.

Threats

Looking externally, several threats appear to loom largest in the minds of those I heard from or talked with:

- A tough budget situation for the State. The “\$3,000,000,000 budget shortfall” was mentioned by most of our elected representatives and the campus seems to understand that short-term prospects for “new money” are dim; indeed, the more realistic expectation is that we will be reducing budgets.
- Traditional age student numbers leveling off. Those entering Washington colleges and universities this fall come from a graduating class that is the largest in our state’s history and the largest we will see again for some decades. Related, some have observed, is that we risk complacency in adjusting to this fact given we have been able to select from among almost 10,000 applicants for 3,500 openings. Further related are the potential plans to develop a UW campus immediately to our south.
- The need to recruit increasing numbers of faculty and staff. This is all the more problematic, of course, because all other universities are in the same situation as “baby boomers” retire, and that increases the competitive pressure to maintain WWU’s excellence.

Opportunities

The survey included an item that took dead aim at the matter of opportunities and Western's avowed strategic vision. That item read:

Already the premier public comprehensive university in the Pacific Northwest, the University aspires to be the best in the nation. Do you share that aspiration? And, what special opportunities are or may be before the University that you hope the institution will take advantage of as it seeks such stature?

First, as to the vision that guides our current strategic plan and direction: there is almost unanimous and strongly expressed support. Even the two or three who explicitly stated opposition offered helpful insights as they explained their positions, particularly focusing upon potential "wrong headed ways" we might try to attain further prominence. And, among those offering support, essential and valuable qualifications were also frequently included; for example, the faculty member who responded, "Of course, I share that aspiration but it will not come by propaganda It comes by attending to the university's proper mission."

There is a shared view that we must build on strengths, that we should not "myopically pursue rankings" but attend to substance, "develop a clear brand," shed the image of being a "regional" university, relentlessly innovate, and create a presence on the waterfront that is a national model.

Many specifics were also offered. I will not list them all here but note that there are any number of our academic programs that you reported are well positioned to further advance the recognition of Western at the national level.

Reflections

This brief summary does not do justice to all I heard. Perhaps, though, I can best capture what you have shared by noting how they have stimulated my own reflections. Then, you can let me know what I got right. And, what I got wrong.

I do this with some trepidation. What follows is not "the new president's agenda." Rather, they are my current thoughts expressed precisely so that you then have the opportunity to improve, correct, and challenge.

Building Strength by Addressing Internal Challenges

As strong as our university is, and it is truly exceptional, you have identified a number of opportunities for improvement. I will reflect on the several you most frequently and strongly expressed.

Being Open and Transparent

- Clear, timely, and forthright communication is critical. So, I started by looking at the university's communications functions. I will be consulting with campus leadership about proposed administrative changes involving communication functions and taking advantage of the currently vacant Vice President for External Relations position.
- I will be meeting with every department on campus, planning to conclude by the end of January. I would expect each meeting to run for about 60 minutes, unscripted, with my only thought on the agenda being that we spend about half the time on the university and our future (the sort of subjects you find in this report) and about half our time upon the department – its opportunities and challenges. We will arrange for a brief record of the discussions to be kept -- no names, of

course – and placed on the web. While it is important that I learn from you, it is as important that each of you have the opportunity to hear what your colleagues have expressed.

- The current administrative team is particularly strong. But, we also face turnover. I am deeply appreciative of the willingness of Sherry Burkey and Dennis Murphy to provide interim service and am very glad that Vice President George Pierce delayed his long-established retirement plans to help us through the transition. We have, in the openings, though, the necessity to form a leadership team that builds upon our current strengths while responding to our current and future needs. Among the top priorities for all of us as we, together, evaluate candidates will be demonstrated effectiveness in leading through openness, asking questions, and clear communication.
- I will be sharing proposals to restructure our various administrative councils and other bodies. I am convinced that the response to our need for transparency is NOT to create any more such groups. Indeed, I wonder if that might not be part of the confusion. Because of efforts to be transparent, we have generated many advisory groups and so each of us may not be quite sure where participation is most effective. The restructuring I will be asking the campus to consider will include the opportunity for expanded engagement of our governance organizations.

Tearing Down Silos

- First, I will be modeling one very simple principle – we are all in this together – and one firm belief based upon many years of university experience – everybody’s contributions, from those who maintain the grounds to those who get the grants, are valuable and, hence, must be regularly valued. At those meetings with each department or division, all members of the unit should be encouraged to attend and to participate, including classified staff; my biweekly “Breakfast with the President” gatherings with randomly selected colleagues will include, at the same table, custodians, faculty, and vice presidents; at the Opening Convocation, faculty and staff will be joined together rather than, as in prior years, separately meeting with the president to start off the year.
- Modeling is not enough. We do need to further encourage risk-taking. And, paradoxically, expect and accept failures. If we are not sometimes failing, we are missing opportunities to innovate. It’s tautological: we cannot be a leading university if we avoid the risks of getting out in front of the pack.
- Keeping a clear focus on an agreed upon vision and mission is the most powerful way to empower people to cross boundaries, take risks, and lead the university forward. Creative individuals find remarkable ways to serve, move and change the university far more effectively than any top-down approach could attain. Keeping that vision out front is my job. But, it will happen only after I have had the additional months of opportunities to meet with and hear from each of you.
- A more open and responsive budget process, discussed below, will also help tear down silos as there are more explicit means to identify cross-unit consequences and opportunities.

The Strategic Budget Process

- Many have articulated the view that our budgeting and other decision-making needs to be more open. Absolutely. But, we must understand the strengths of our current practices as well as their liabilities before proceeding.
- First, there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that budgeting and other decision making at Western has been relentlessly and persistently strategic. And, it has been effective. I was not around to witness any of that decision making, but I see the result: a university that has achieved excellence through consistent dedication to a clear and aggressively focused mission. That focus is upon what makes Western distinctive – engaged excellence. But the degree of focus is, itself,

distinctive, being greater than I have witnessed at any other public university of our size that I am aware. That did not just happen, and we must make sure that whatever we now put in place continues this source of institutional strength.

- We are able to attract exceptionally talented faculty and staff who, just as we want, have many great ideas. I have often expressed the resulting budgetary challenge this way: for every one dollar we have to allocate, there are at least five dollars of innovative opportunities and basic needs. Here is the added challenge at Western: Where does a person with one of those ideas go? At what point in the budget cycle? With what information? How are those five dollars of competing needs and ideas winnowed? By whom? And, perhaps most importantly, how does that person with the original idea – win or lose – know the outcomes and their relationships to the priorities driving the process?
- Additionally, the strategic budgeting process must be driven by the priorities our Trustees approve at the very beginning of each budget cycle. At the end, when we ask the Trustees to approve the budget that, together, we propose, we must be able to convincingly demonstrate to them (and to ourselves) that, across the campus, we have made decisions on budgets, including continuation budgets, that were meaningfully guided by our established priorities. Further, it cannot be the operational budget in isolation. Our operating and capital budget processes must be integrated and driven by academic planning including but not limited to curriculum planning and enrollment planning.
- Coming up with such a process is not hard. Before the academic year is long underway, we will share a process for you to consider and improve; before the calendar year is out, we will have that process in place; and, as we will never get it fully right, that process will be continually improved, year after year and based upon your and our critical reflection.
- That's the easy part. Changed processes don't improve situations much, though, if the challenges are really more cultural than they are procedural. And, I suspect that is a part of the challenge that we face at Western.
- At Western, it appears to me that significant budget allocations are made as faculty talk with department chairs, as staff seek support for their ideas by talking to supervisors, as chairs work with deans and supervisors work with their supervisors, as deans work with vice presidents, and as vice presidents work with the president. That is the normal hierarchy. We have, though, the administrative style I might characterize as a "culture of connections," where much of this interaction is not routine, clear, and open. One faculty member may not know what arrangements have been made with other faculty in the department; one chair may not know what the arrangements are with the other chairs; one vice president may not know what the arrangements are with other vice presidents. A "culture of connections" is a strength in many areas but, as we have grown in size and complexity, there can be adverse consequences.
- The changes in culture necessary to create a more open process are everyone's responsibility. Are we willing, at a gut level, to accept becoming more "bureaucratic," shedding those interpersonal decision-making habits? We will need to evolve a culture of mutual obligation and accountability where those "up the chain" stick to a competitive budget decision-making process while all those with the creative ideas understand that, to be effective, they must fulfill their responsibility to be actively involved at the beginning of the budget process. Power to make a difference comes at the beginning and not at the end.
- Finally, no improved process – or cultural shift – is going to generate another nickel. There will still be the fundamental problem of \$5 of great ideas/needs for each \$1 available. Choices will have to be made. We must avoid the temptation – too many open and responsive budget processes fall into this trap – of simply sending 20 cents in the direction of each of those 5 needs for a full dollar. That this has not happened at Western is the great strength of the current approach and something we must retain.

Achieving National Prominence

- We are not a regional university. As my meetings with students and proud parents from around the state made clear, we are a “destination university.” Yet, in the hierarchy of public higher education institutions in this state (the perceived hierarchy as well as the public finance hierarchy), we have not yet effectively made that case. Perception has to be brought into line with reality.
- That means we have a marketing challenge ahead. Now, “marketing” makes the hairs on the backs of necks of academics like me stand up: something about selling schlock. But, effective marketing begins quite differently: critically examining what our strengths actually are and then more effectively, more consistently, more persistently communicating them.
- Scholarship and research are the usual domains through which higher education institutions seek prominence. Washington does not need a third research university. Every colleague president and elected official with whom I spoke concurred. As a survey respondent said, “Let Harvard, Princeton, et al. strive for that.”
- What, then, do we stake our reputation upon? Simply put, upon what we are already known for: outstanding undergraduate programs in the liberal arts and selected professional areas. What makes our programs outstanding? There are any number of dimensions but one factor alone stood above all others. Again and again I heard from students, from faculty, from employers, from the presidents of major universities that it is the “hands on” involvement of our students working closely with the “Big U” caliber faculty and staff (that undergraduates would seldom see at a “Big U”).
- And, to this I would add that there is a desirable consistency in the high quality of the undergraduate programs that we offer. Do students seek us out because of particular strengths? Unlike all other universities I know, we have the ability to make an unusual claim: come to Western and, whatever your major, you will have the best available in the state. Our students and their parents already perceive that and see the relevance to the also acknowledged fact that they likely will change majors several times as they grow and learn at Western.
- Several in the surveys and in my broader conversations have characterized our niche as, “private school education at public school prices.” As appealing as that may initially sound, I disagree. The typical private liberal arts college simply does not have the caliber of the faculty that we do, does not have faculty as actively engaged in research and other creativity as we do; and, consequently, does not have the opportunities our undergraduates have to be, shoulder-to-shoulder with faculty on the cutting edge, pursuing knowledge, truths, beauty, How we succinctly and effectively communicate (market) that distinction (without sounding like we want to be Washington’s third research university) is a challenge we must solve.
- Please note, if you have followed my logic through the preceding bullets, then you will understand that, having started with the observation that Washington does not need a third research university, I nevertheless reach a conclusion that, for us to fulfill our real niche, we must continually support, expand, and ever more effectively highlight our research, scholarly, and other creative excellence.
- I have focused upon undergraduate education, largely traditional and residential. Focus we must. But, it is just as clear to me that we, compared to other universities of our type, are falling far short of fulfilling responsibilities for graduate education. Now, I have worked at a doctoral comprehensive university most of my career and fully understand the fact that undergraduate education can suffer when graduate programs are over-emphasized. That, we cannot allow. However, the door is wide open to innovative graduate programs that build on our strengths, that meet needs not being met elsewhere, and that strengthen rather than tax our undergraduate programs.
- As long as I am aiming at possible shibboleths, let me take on several more:

- We also are not meeting the needs of audiences traditionally not well served by American higher education, particularly place-bound or time-bound older than average students. I know from earlier experiences that there are ways, through myriad partnerships, to do a better job here while actually expanding resources available to support the traditional residential campus. We need to take the lid off, here, allowing creative faculty to explore possibilities. As with possible graduate program expansion, of course, we do nothing, though, that would take resources away from core commitments.
- We often use the figure of 12,500 FTE as the maximum student size for our current campus. We do need to clarify what we mean by this limit. Sometimes it is presented as a “carrying capacity” limit: just what the current facilities and campus can handle. Others have seen the limit as necessary to keep the “feel” and appeal of our campus; that is, even if we could physically grow, we would not want to because of the fear that we become a larger, more anonymous campus with a resultant diminution in the quality of campus life and its attractiveness to students, faculty, and staff.
- Why Western at the Waterfront? There are any number of reasons. Growth is the most often cited reason: to allow us to carry some share of the load as the State expands higher education capacity. And, the project will help us there and that particular rationale will help us acquire public support for the project. Here, I add the thought that, in my experience, campuses do not grow by concentrating growth in one area or college. Not unless there is, already, extraordinary unmet demand for a particular program. Rather, the best predictor of how our students will be distributed among programs and areas 10 years from now is simply the way they are currently distributed. As we plan the Waterfront, this possibility (I think it a likelihood) needs to be kept in mind. However, the growth rationale is not important in the context of our vision of national eminence.
- We do not need to be bigger to be nationally eminent. But, there still are important connections between such a strategic objective and the Waterfront Development. Being an effective “steward of place” is one important reason: partnering with the coastal region we call home. We must continually stress the partnership aspect, a partnership driven not by our desire to serve ourselves but by that desire to serve our communities. Most important is to think even bigger than many of us have: to create a presence that is unmatched anywhere in the country in terms of the integrated research and learning occurring at the Waterfront. Further, in terms of acreage, we may be thinking too small. If our footprint is only 6 acres, that might see us through the next decade. But, universities exist for centuries; our choices today are constrained by decisions made at our university 100 years ago; our decisions today will affect the options available to those responsible for Western 100 years from now. And, sometimes, big ideas are actually easier to “sell” than are modest ideas.
- And, finally, because it is so obviously important, we will not be a recognized national leader if we, ten years from now, are as “white” as we are today: student-body, faculty, staff, top administration. The reasons, again, are obvious, but let me briefly restate them: it is the smart and self-interested thing to do. Our nation is increasingly enriched by communities of color; that is where the population growth is; a nation’s wealth (economic, cultural, social) is best measured by the developed talent of its people; and so it follows that we must attract an increasingly diverse student body if we are to fulfill our mission of service to Washington, to the nation, to the world. Beyond self-interest, though, there is the undeniable truth that diversity at Western is important simply because it is the right thing to do. To that I add the observation that a key strategy in attracting such a student body is to have diverse faculty and staff. I am very proud of the progress we have made. Many, many universities are competing with us for success here and we are ahead of most. But, we must continue our leadership. And, our success.

Just a few thoughts after actively learning about Western for about 4 weeks. There is bound to be some I have wrong and much I have missed. I look forward to your continuing help: let me know what I have

missed through email, at the meetings with each department, or through whatever means is most effective for you. You can also e-mail comments to: President.Shepard@wwu.edu

Thanks for considering my thoughts. Thanks for having made Western Washington University the university we all, with great pride, call “ours.”