

Commission on Colleges and Universities  
Northwest Association of Schools and of  
Colleges and Universities

**A REGULAR INTERIM REPORT**

**Western Washington University  
Bellingham, Washington**

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A Confidential Report Prepared for the Commission on Colleges and Universities  
That Represents the Views of the Evaluator

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Accreditation History of Western Washington University**

Western Washington University attained its initial accreditation in 1921 and has maintained that status to date as it transformed from the State Normal School at Bellingham to Western Washington College of Education, Bellingham and then to Western Washington State College and as of 1977 Western Washington University. During its accreditation history, questions have been raised—and addressed—about off-campus programs, international programs, and faculty evaluation. The last full-scale evaluation occurred in 1998 when the Commission reaffirmed accreditation but requested a progress report in spring 2000 to address General Recommendations 1 and 3 (assessment and faculty evaluation). Based on the University's response, the Commission accepted the progress report on the institutional reaction to Recommendation 1 but issued a warning for lack of response to Recommendation 3. A second progress report was requested for spring 2001 to address the issue of faculty evaluation; in addition, a follow-up report on assessment (Recommendation 1) was requested for spring 2002. In 2001, a satisfactory report on faculty evaluation was submitted, and the warning was removed. The 2002 progress report on assessment activities was accepted.

For the regular interim evaluation of 2003, the University prepared a report that focused on 1) the recommendations made by the Evaluation Committee in 1998 and institutional progress on them; and 2) a snapshot of the University's present position on meeting the Commission's nine standards and various policies. The evaluator found the interim report well-written and balanced. Particularly appreciated is the report's honesty in not side-stepping problems but acknowledging them, providing explanations, and offering plans to address issues. In addition to the report itself, the University provided helpful appendices, available in advance to the evaluator as well as accessible on campus. Western staff responded to requests for further information during the campus visit quickly and efficiently. Web sources were also readily available.

The University prepared for the site visit with care, arranging a schedule of meetings with Trustees, faculty, administrators, faculty, staff, and students for conversations about the institution's performance. In addition to the usual list of university stakeholders, the evaluator requested meetings with specific individuals mentioned in the report, a request that was met with alacrity. The input from the various constituents of the university was extremely helpful to the evaluator in gaining a clear impression of the institution. The evaluator expresses her appreciation to President Morse and her colleagues and staff for making this site visit one that exuded hospitality and cooperation.

**Eligibility Requirements**

On the basis of the review of materials and the visit to the campus, the evaluator finds that Western Washington University exhibits continued satisfaction of the Commission's eligibility requirements.

## **PART A: RESPONSES TO GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **General Recommendation 1:**

**The Commission stresses outcomes assessment as essential to institutional planning and evaluation of institutional effectiveness. Each institution is asked to formulate a plan which includes outcome measures that are consistent with its mission, goals, and structure....**

**However, while there are numerous assessment activities that have been conducted and planned, there is no overall formal institution assessment plan. In addition, the Committee observed selected deficiencies in educational assessment at the course and educational program level. Commission Policy 2B2 requires institutions to "identify and published expected learning outcomes" for each of its degree and certificate programs.**

**The WWU catalog notes a strong institutional commitment to strategic planning and educational assessment. This institutional commitment to strategic planning and educational assessment warrants the immediate attention of the academic leadership to actively engage faculty in defining learning objectives and developing specific plans to assess and evaluate the outcomes at the course and educational program level.**

### **Findings:**

The Commission found in 2002, based on the progress report, that the University was making progress on meeting Policy 2.2, on Educational Assessment, which requires evidence of success of assessment activities in making an impact on the direction of its educational programs. Likewise, in 2003, the University has made tremendous strides in educational assessment; yet a culture of assessment is not apparent in all programs and units. A formal University Assessment Plan exists, and three separate offices operate to support assessment initiatives: Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing; Office of Survey Research; and Office of Institutional Research and Resource Planning. It is not clear why these offices are separate entities rather than one unit. The professionals in these units and administrators understand assessment processes and goals; they have a clear idea on how assessment should link to the mission statement and strategic action goals.

In addition to the professional staff charged with supporting assessment, the University has a standing committee that oversees such activities. This committee was renamed in 1999 to the Committee on the Assessment of Teaching and Learning (CATL) from its former name of Assessment Committee. Of particular note is a ranking system that the University has established to benchmark program involvement in assessment, using the Levels of Implementation grid developed by the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges. By using this ranking system, the university monitors its programs' stage of development. Most, but not all, of the academic programs have published student

learning outcomes; likewise, many of the academic programs have written reports detailing how programs are changed to improve teaching and learning as a result of evidence gathered. Academic units have been allowed to mature at their own pace with gentle nudging. The University will need to continue its vigilance in assuring compliance with the Commission's Policy 2.2 on educational assessment.

Assessment activities reported by the University and detailed in reports reveals a multi-front attack on ensuring that educational programs are evaluated and strengthened. First as part of a statewide initiative, the University is analyzing four student learning outcomes—writing, critical thinking, quantitative symbolic reasoning, and information technical literacy. The definition of outcomes for these areas varies from in process to being drafted or completed. Second, a representative committee has reviewed the general education program, and the university community has been consulted broadly in consultation with appropriate Faculty Senate committees to make recommendations for different models. (The assessment of general education was long overdue, last having been reviewed in the 1970s. The evaluator recommends that once a different model is in place, assessment should be continuous rather than intermittent.) Third, the university publishes examples of significant assessment activity; most notable are the electronic showcase course portfolios.

According to Standard Two and Policy 2.2, faculty members are responsible for the design, delivery, evaluation, and revision of the educational program. Although there is still some naiveté about how one participates in educational assessment either at the course or program levels, notable advances have been made through faculty dialogue groups that range from informal but consistent gatherings to ad hoc committees. Western's participation in the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) is noteworthy. The development of summer research stipends for faculty to work on developing student learning objectives common to the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences demonstrates a creative approach to involving faculty and giving them ownership over pieces of the overall assessment plan.

The University has focused many of its first-year student assessment activities on the cohort involved in Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs). The creation of an administrative role to oversee undergraduate education has resulted in a number of initiatives—such as FIGs—that bring attention and coherence to this essential part of the university. First-year cohorts will participate in Western Educational Longitudinal Study (WELS) beginning in fall, 2003. There is a definite sense that undergraduate education—always a strength at Western—is receiving increased attention and developing in vibrant ways.

Among the colleges and their departments, Huxley is particularly noteworthy for its analysis of the educational program, gathering of evidence, and program revision as a result. Likewise, Woodring College of Education has revised programs based on assessment evidence. A primary method of obtaining evidence to use in assessment activities is the survey; this includes written response as well as telephone interviews. The University may wish to consider a wider variety of instruments and processes as it continues to enhance its assessment activities.

Significant progress has been made in meeting the Commission's policy on educational assessment, but there continues to be some resistance. The evaluator offers a general recommendation at the conclusion of this report.

### **General Recommendation 2:**

**We applaud the considerable effort of the University to update the campus master plan to reflect the dynamic challenges of projected enrollment and program growth. The productive and cooperative working relationship with the City of Bellingham and other entities is recognized as well. Nonetheless, in the face of projected acute space shortages, the University must proceed with the completion and adoption of this plan at the earliest feasible date so that it can serve as an official guide to establishing capital construction priorities and achieving WWU's strategic planning goals.**

### **Findings**

The evaluator found that this recommendation is no longer a concern as the campus and the City of Bellingham adopted the Western Washington University Institutional Plan in fall of 2001. The University engaged in an inclusive and extended planning process to reach consensus on the plan. Moreover, the University has developed a strategic set of principles that emphasizes maintaining the academic core of the campus. The University is to be lauded for its careful, proactive approach to planning.

### **General Recommendation 3:**

**The Faculty Senate decision to conduct substantive reviews of faculty every fifth year must be reviewed in relation to the Commission on Colleges standard that requires reviews be done every third year. It is recommended that the faculty senate adjust the policy to be consistent with Commission Policy on faculty evaluations.**

### **Findings**

This recommendation has become moot with the revision of the Commission's Policy 4.1 on faculty evaluation to move it from a three-year cycle to a five-year cycle. Western Washington University is in compliance with that standard.

On the other hand, the evaluator was concerned with the Faculty Handbook policy that states that "evaluation of courses is voluntary." The Deans noted that in essence course evaluation is mandatory for those in the probationary track, seeking promotion. and being reviewed. In practice, only 50 of courses are evaluated, and these evaluations are not necessarily public to students. (The students, by the way, have begun discussions of their own version of course evaluations.) According to Policy 4.1, "Multiple indices" should be used including "the evaluation of teaching through student,

peer, and administrative assessment." The University has a good range of evaluation instruments so that the instrument can be tied to the type of instruction. The University may need to be clearer on how it meets the "multiple indices" test of the policy.

## **PART B: INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES**

### **Standard One: Institutional Mission and Goals, Planning and Effectiveness**

The University has not changed its mission statement since the last full-scale evaluation. The goals for the institution were revised to be more specific in 1997, resulting in a Strategic Action Plan. The tri-part plan includes goals for 1) quality; 2) diversity; and 3) community service. These are defined in detail in the Strategic Action Principles and Strategies document; in addition, each is monitored to gauge progress. This set of benchmarks and reflective evaluation bodes well for the institution and should provide the basis for assessment during the next full-scale evaluation. The planning process is open and public.

Unlike so many institutions, the University has a real sense of its niche as a high-quality regional institution focused on undergraduate education. Mission creep is not a problem at Western. Its consistent, coherent message and image is a notable achievement. Likewise, it has an admirable sense of place and how the environment plays a role in all aspects of a student's life: intellectual development, physical development, spiritual and aesthetic development.

Significant changes in the structure of the university have occurred. Notably, the College of Arts and Sciences will be divided into two colleges: 1) Humanities and Social Sciences; 2) Science and Technology. Although there was "severe disagreement" by some members of the faculty within the current college, much of the tension has dissipated by the time of this visit, and many predicted it would be a distant memory within the year. The search for two new deans has proceeded accordingly with candidates for Humanities and Social Sciences visiting campus early in May and the candidates for the second college soon thereafter. Students voiced support for the reorganization, particularly for the increased feeling of "community and connection" that should arise from smaller units; additionally, they cited a need to improve advising. They felt "lost" in the large college and envied the experiences of peers enrolled in smaller, more personalized colleges.

The Extended Education program was merged to form Extended Education and Summer Programs; the search for a new Executive Director is drawing to a close. The centralization of these programs will allow greater quality control and will help the University meet its goal of enhancing community service.

### **Standard Two: Educational Program and Its Effectiveness**

As already noted, there has been some restructuring of the largest college and a merger of extended education. In addition, a number of programs have been added or deleted since the last review, all in accordance with institutional and state policy.

Of particular note is the creation of an administrative role to over see undergraduate education. Increasingly across the nation, such vice provosts are being created to pay

attention to the important task of overseeing undergraduate education, centralizing efforts and initiating new programs to meet institutional goals and manage enrollment. While much of the campus has engaged in dialogue about undergraduate initiatives such as first-year experience, teaching and learning, general education, and assessment, the Vice Provost is key to moving the initiatives along. Likewise, the Vice Provost for Research is moving the undergraduate research agenda forward, enhancing the institution's reputation as providing a quality undergraduate experience. (Mapping of undergraduate research—as has been done with graduate students—could be illuminating in assessing the impact on students.)

The University is finally undertaking an analysis of its general education program, which has not been formally reviewed since the 1970s. The Final Recommendations report of the Task Force (issued 15 April 2003) details the elaborate consultation among campus constituents. The need for a review is clear. The student newspaper reported in its 2 May issue that students feel general university requirements (GURs) are roadblocks to graduation. Students asked for honesty in GURs, citing that 67 credits are required but few students complete with that number the average being 78.2 credits. The evaluator was particularly impressed by the "analysis of cost of proposed general education curriculum" prepared by the Office of Institutional Research and Resource Planning. The clear timeline on process and campus participation as the Task Force coordinated with Faculty Senate committees is a model in effective planning.

At the graduate level, the University has chosen to limit itself to focused masters programs; again, this bodes well for an institution that has a good sense of self-identify. Programs have been added or deleted or moratoria placed on admission in some cases as the institution regulates and oversees with attention. Niche markets for the institution include new degree programs in Rehabilitation Counseling and Environmental Education. The graduate students have an admirable track record in scholarly, creative, and research production.

The new Extended Education and Summer Programs (created 2001) offers continuing education courses, summer programs, institutes, and conferences. This unit may be key in meeting community needs as Bellingham ranks as one of the premiere places to retire in the United States.

### **Standard Three: Students**

Responsibility for enrollment management falls within the purview of student services. The University has targets for enrollment established by the state and must abide by those as closely as possible, potentially experiencing a loss of budget for not meeting the target and no support for going over the target. Given that it is less painful to over-enroll, the University currently has some 200 students who are unfunded by the state. Assessment of enrollment practices and the first year experience of students is fairly extensive. The selectivity of the institution continues to increase, and the University's competitors are the state's research universities rather than its peers. To support students, Student Affairs reorganized earlier in the year, adding new positions and re-

aligning others. Planning through the Board of Trustees lays out the framework for increased enrollment in academically-talented freshmen with opportunity admits; academically-prepared transfers; diverse students; non-residents; and balance in class standing.

The University has no Greek system; in fact, students note their "independence of spirit" and the attraction of a campus without fraternities and sororities.

#### **Standard Four: Faculty**

As noted in the findings on General Recommendation 3, the University is in compliance with the policy on faculty evaluation.

The University was making good progress on its initiative to bring faculty salaries more in line with peers (goal of 75th percentile among public comprehensives) until the national budget crisis of 2001-02. The President was able through allocation to increase salaries by 1 for the coming year; faculty note that Western (as with most institutions) is experiencing rising health costs. The faculty lauded the President as "the one leader in the system who stands up for us in salary issues."

Representatives from the Faculty Senate asked for more participation in administrative councils (e.g.. Board of Trustees, Provost's Council) and increased communication—a feedback loop—to enhance "shared governance."

Follow up on a survey among senior women faculty was requested, too, with a possible leadership program that could build on and perhaps extend the University's fine mentorship program for new faculty.

The scholarly and creative output of the faculty has increased over a five-year period. In fact, the faculty has a reputation as committed teachers and engaged scholars.

#### **Standard Five: Library and Information Resources**

The University has advanced almost 30 points in Yahoo! Most Wired University survey and was one of only three that received an A+ rating for its innovative implementation of student technology resources. Of note are the wireless computing and laptop loan program; the Cascade consortium for interlibrary loan; and the President's Faculty Workstation program. Renovation that linked Haggard Hall and Wilson Library provided "magnet" spaces for students to study. The library has addressed a concern of the last review by centralizing journals that had been dispersed among other units.

#### **Standard Six: Governance and Administration**

The Board of Trustees is a group of engaged, energetic individuals committed to the University's success and active in the planning process. The Board noted its appreciation for being included in discussions early in the process and never being

surprised. Information is available on a daily basis to the members of the board in 1998, a student member was added to the Board. No faculty member serves on the Board.

The President is concluding ten years at the University and is widely respected in the state and community for her advocacy for Western, her forthright and honest demeanor, and willingness to be available for Foundation efforts. A new Provost and Academic Vice President was appointed in 1999. Five deans have been appointed since 2000, and two additional .new deans should be appointed in the coming weeks. The offices of External Affairs and Development have been reorganized, resulting in the appointment of a new Vice President for External Affairs (1999) and a new Vice President for Advancement (2002). The Faculty Senate has raised the issue of shared governance. No students sit on the Faculty Senate as representatives. The student government participates in governance by meeting regularly with administrative counterparts and by participating in key committees.

### **Standard Seven: Finance**

The University is noted as the most efficient baccalaureate institution in the state in terms of lowest cost per student and most efficient use of resources. Funding shortfalls per student is estimated at \$1,188 per student FTE compared to its peers. While the financial support for the University is lower than expected, the prudent fiscal management of the institution impressed the evaluator. One result was eroding state support is an increase in tuition. A concern of the faculty is access to higher education among students from lower economic groups. The implementation of SCT Banner has obviated the need for shadow systems to monitor finances. A budget working group established in 2002 to discuss efficiencies in processes. The University has wisely refinanced bonds to take advantage of existing low-interest rates.

### **Standard Eight: Physical Facilities**

The University is completing two new buildings: Student Recreation Center and a Communications Facility. This follows on the heels of a new Campus Services Facility. Renovations and additions include Haggard Hall and Viking Union as well as a number of preservation projects. The first phase of a campus infrastructure development is complete as is the integrated signal distribution system, which provided a new telecommunications backbone.

Of significant concern is an unacceptably large deferred maintenance amounting to \$72-80 million.

The University's priority is to maintain a residential environment while expanding to meet expanded capacity. Non-academic functions have moved to the campus' perimeter. The buildings, landscape, and artwork, set among a stunning landscape and coast, contribute to a very pleasant environment for teaching and learning.

**Standard Nine: Institutional Integrity**

Western Washington University has a solid tradition of institutional integrity and has recently strengthened its efforts in this area. A new Student Rights and Responsibility Code will take effect fall, 2003; disciplinary processes have been strengthened by the addition of a new university Judicial Officer. The Faculty feels the freedom to speak out; there is a good sense of intellectual and academic freedom. Policies and codes are widely published.

## CONCLUSION

### Commendations

#### General Commendation 1:

The evaluator commends Western Washington University for its consistent, focused mission that results in a clear identity of an institution devoted to high quality undergraduate education.

#### General Commendation 2:

The evaluator commends the University on its emphasis on "sense of place," evidenced in its integration of environment in the curriculum—especially true in its signature colleges, Fairhaven and Huxley—the role of environment in the physical, spiritual, and intellectual development of its students; and finally, careful attention to aesthetics in architecture, landscape, and art.

#### General Commendation 3:

The evaluator commends the University on its prudent fiscal management in a time of declining resources as evidenced by its place in the state system of higher education as the most efficient baccalaureate institution in the state in terms of lowest cost per student and most efficient use of resources.

### Recommendations

#### General Recommendation 1:

The evaluator recommends that the University continue implementation of its institutional assessment plan, ensuring that assessment is integrated fully and thoroughly. While significant progress has been made in planning and some units have noteworthy successes, some programs have not yet identified and published learning outcomes. Furthermore, there does not appear to be consistency in reporting on how the evidence gathered on the "effectiveness of educational programs" results in "improvements in the program" as a result of the evaluation process.

(Standard Two: Educational Program and Its Effectiveness; Policy 2.2 Educational Assessment)