Western Washington University begins the year 2015-16 in a strong position in many ways. However, as always, internal challenges to maintaining that position present themselves, as do opportunities to further strengthen that position and external threats to that position. This document will view those strengths, challenges, opportunities, and threats at a strategic level, with a view toward guiding the University’s thinking concerning its strategic plan and any need to update that plan.

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**STRENGTHS**

- **People:** Western’s primary strength is its people: faculty, staff, students, alumni, and supporters. As a knowledge-centered organization, it cannot function at a high level without such a strength.
  - **Faculty:** Western’s faculty as a whole combines the passion for undergraduate education with a drive to conduct important research; in fact, many faculty see these
aspects of education as inextricably linked. Further, Western’s faculty are committed to opening experiential opportunities for students, whether that be as research partners or as guides and mentors for students working in the community. Finally, Western’s faculty are committed to helping students fulfill the tag line “Active Minds Changing Lives” by working closely with them to provide the knowledge, skills, and abilities students need to fulfill their world-changing dreams.

- **Staff:** Western’s staff in all areas understand and embrace the University’s academic mission and their role in supporting that mission. Whether their roles be student advising, facilities maintenance, advocacy with supporters and legislators, or the myriad others necessary to give students the best possible learning environment, staff through the University work with that goal in mind.

- **Students:** Western continues to attract quality students, and the student body is becoming increasingly diverse. These students, who come to Western to learn how to make a difference in society, attract the strong faculty who in turn attract strong students in a symbiotic relationship. Student diversity, an important element in a well-rounded education both in class and out of class, continues to increase, with all-time highs in the fall 2015 student body in the percentages of students of color (24.8%) and non-resident students (10.7%).

- **Alumni:** Western’s alumni display a strong commitment to their alma mater. This commitment manifests itself in several aspects of alumni support, whether it be the hiring of graduates, speaking in classes, mentoring, networking, or financial support. Alumni play a crucial role in the success Western students attain.

- **Supporters:** An increasing number of successful people in the Puget Sound area and beyond support Western even if they are not alumni. These people are attracted to Western because of its orientation and philosophy of education, its faculty, and its students. As with alumni, they support Western in many ways and often provide a margin of excellence that otherwise could not be reached.

- **The Liberal Arts and Sciences Foundation:** Western’s core values embrace the importance to all students of a strong educational base in the liberal arts and sciences. All colleges recognize the value of and support instruction in these base areas. Many of Western’s most effective teachers, whether they be tenure-track or non-tenure-track faculty, concentrate their efforts in this area.

- **Programs:** Western’s academic programs are well known for their strength in terms of preparing students for graduate-level education and challenging careers as leaders in their fields.
  - **Discipline-based majors:** In every college and in most departments, Western’s major programs provide students with great preparation for their careers, whether those careers be in the public sector, the private sector, education, or the not-for-profit sector. Students graduating with these majors are highly sought after by organizations and graduate programs.
  - **Interdisciplinary programs:** Western is highly unusual among institutions of higher education in having faculty and students who embrace the crossing of disciplinary lines. This is most obvious in two intentionally interdisciplinary colleges—Fairhaven College of Interdisciplinary Studies and Huxley College of the Environment. However, increasingly Western faculty are taking advantage of the freedom to explore such programs to work with colleagues from multiple colleges in subjects that leak outside the disciplinary silos.
Western has committed to supporting such efforts with faculty governance and administrative infrastructure.

- **Partnerships:** Western understands it is embedded in multiple societies, both geographic and professional. It reaches out to partner with individuals and organizations in these societies to enhance its ability not only to fulfill its mission but to play its role as a publicly purposed institution.
  - Western helped form the Northwest Higher Education Coalition, which includes several community and technical colleges and the Northwest Indian College, to help its members be both more efficient and more effective in providing education and educational services to their students. The coalition has had success in collaborating on such initiatives as service to veterans.
  - Western is a leader in working with other educational institutions along the entire P-20 spectrum. Curricular programs operated through Woodring College of Education and others, outreach programs such as Compass2Campus, and Western's partnerships with community colleges in the Puget Sound region and the Kitsap and Olympic peninsulas all help Western and its partner institutions further access to higher education.
  - Western is committed to effective partnerships with institutions of higher education from other countries. Exploration of these partnerships has accelerated. Infrastructure is being built to ensure that Western's faculty and students have the opportunities they need to gain a global perspective, whether through travel abroad or through interactions with exchange and other partners on Western’s campus.
  - Western works closely with organizations in the Bellingham community and throughout Puget Sound in areas such as economic development and the ongoing development of the Bellingham waterfront. This is another area in which Western has invested in infrastructure to be more effective in forming and sustaining these partnerships.

- **Processes:** Western has worked hard in several areas to institute processes that enable efficient work and effective participation in University decisions.
  - Western instituted, over the last seven years, processes and bodies that help to ensure the reality of shared governance matches its promise. These include transparent and bottom-up capital planning and budgeting processes that intentionally seek input throughout from the campus community, as well as the University Planning and Resource Council that brings together representatives of all University stakeholders.
  - Western has conducted and continues to conduct various analyses to help streamline processes throughout campus. Further, it has instituted a process by which initiatives to increase functionality and ease of use of its Banner ERP software can be proposed and implemented.
  - Western is an innovative campus, one that works hard to be understanding of and adopting best practices, and even to be in the forefront of movements that allow institutions of higher education to be more efficient and effective.
  - Western has strong systems of accountability at all levels, for faculty, staff, and student behaviors and performance.

- **Values:** Summarized by the long-time phrase, “Western Cares,” Western has a strong commitment to taking care: of each other, the communities we are privileged to call home, the state we are here to serve, the mission we are proud to serve.
We do not duck engagement in and pursuit of innovative initiatives to address such challenges as mental health, suicide, and sexual assault.

We are proudly a Community Engagement Classified Institution as selected by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; Western is one of two public institutions in the state to receive this honor.

We are, quite literally, change makers and recognized as such: Western is recognized as a Changemaker Campus by Ashoka U, one of 33 such campuses in the world and the only one in Washington.

Western shows its commitment to sustainability through initiatives in many areas. Students lead many of these initiatives, as do staff and faculty within and across multiple divisions at the University.

Western has a strong belief in engagement with students and employees of all types, such as in the structure of the President’s Cabinet and the University Planning and Resources Council.

Western commits itself to a vibrant culture of student and employee health and safety. The Wade King Student Recreation Center and the Employee Wellness Program foster stakeholder health, and University Police and Environmental Health and Safety work to keep the workplace and study place as safe and conducive to good health as possible.

Western holds diversity of faculty and staff as a core value. In pursuit of that diversity, the University has committed funds designed to hire and retain faculty and staff from underrepresented groups, including bridge funding for opportunity hires that will increase the University’s commitment to diversity.

**Reputation/Position:** Western as a university, and individual programs, carry strong reputations locally, regionally, and nationally. These well-earned reputations open doors to Western faculty, students, and staff; they also attract the interest of prospective faculty, students, staff, and supporters. In a virtuous circle, Western’s strengths—along with its consistent communication about those strengths and Western’s mission—build its reputation, attracting people of quality, who then help Western’s strengths become even stronger.

**CHALLENGES**

**Resources:** Western made the intentional choice during the recent recession and resultant budget cuts to protect its core academic function of teaching, and continued student access to that teaching, as much as possible; it then, as the economy recovered, made the choice to increase faculty resources through the hiring of tenure-track faculty in the last few years. This decision has had positive consequences, as the quality of its programs has been maintained and enhanced. However, the decision’s side effects in two areas mean the University has two distinct challenges related to resources. Other resource-related challenges also exist.

**Staffing:** Most if not all areas of the University are operating with as lean a staff as possible. In some cases it is likely that staffing levels are not sufficient for performance to be sustainably high. Some staff are attempting to perform, in addition to their own jobs, functions that previously were assigned to staff positions that no longer exist. These issues have effects on performance that may be exacerbated by lowering morale among staff. Classified staff increasingly feel marginalized at the University. The lack of staff affects important student metrics such as retention rates and time to degree; more
important, it affects the lives of the students Western pledges to serve as well as the faculty and staff who are serving those students.

- Operating dollars: The need to maintain access has caused some academic units to shift funds from operating dollars (those covering goods and services, travel, equipment, and other non-personnel expenses) to personnel, in particular faculty expenses. It also has caused the other divisions on campus to give up resources to Academic Affairs. To make up for these cuts, divisions have used creative ways to fund operations, but there are limits to that creativity.
- Workforce maintenance: Besides the workforce challenges mentioned under staffing, in all areas the workforce is aging. Over the next several years, as the large number of faculty and staff in the Baby Boom generation retire, their expertise, experience, and institutional knowledge will be taken with them. Because resources are lacking, many, particularly in staff positions, cannot receive training that would help managers and administrators engage in professional development of younger staff as part of succession planning. Departments will face the possibility of changes in departmental, college, or even university culture with the replacement of Baby Boom-aged faculty and staff by their younger successors.
- Infrastructure: Western has many relatively recently constructed buildings. However, many are older and in need of substantial maintenance and upgrade work. To the extent this work is deferred, programmatic needs may not be met and basic building performance may be compromised. Technology infrastructure also is in need of support as investments have not kept up with needs.

- Diversity: Western’s commitment to diversity in its faculty, staff, and student body is strong. However, challenges do exist in this area.
  - Demographics: although Western continues to increase its numbers of faculty, staff, and students from underrepresented groups, that progress has reached neither the level nor the velocity desired. Competition for faculty, staff, and students from underrepresented groups is strong. This factor is likely to become stronger, at least in terms of students, as the trend of underrepresented groups forming an increasingly high percentage of high school graduates continues.
  - Climate: Western views itself and is viewed for the most part as a welcoming community. However, perceptions of the climate reported by faculty, staff, and students from underrepresented groups are not as positive as is desired. The reputational effect may very well contribute to difficulty in attracting people from underrepresented groups, and the perceptions may contribute to difficulty in retention.
- Campus Climate: Surveys of students, faculty, and staff document that Western’s campus climate, as experienced by women, ethnic and racial minorities, and LGBTQ colleagues is quite different from the experiences of dominant groups. These are normed surveys and show that we are similar to our institutional peers. Average is not good enough for Western. We have recognized this is a serious institutional challenge, one the campus is coming together to attempt to address.
- Living the Full Mission: Generally Western’s mission and strategic plan are clear and embraced by the faculty and staff. In a sentence, that strategic vision is to apply Western’s considerable strengths to meeting the critical needs of the state of Washington and beyond. Western
traditionally has lived that strategic vision by focusing upon campus-based, residential Washington undergraduates selectively admitted. This has provided great focus but left fulfillment of the strategic mission incomplete in the areas of graduate programs, extended education, transfer programs, and international education. Beginning seven years ago, questions were posed, listening sessions undertaken, white papers written, leaders recruited to key positions, and structures reorganized. There have been any number of successful initiatives as a result. But there also have been concerns from those who fear abandonment of the more traditional set of commitments. Consequently, we list “Living the Full Mission” as both an internal challenge and, looking to the world coming at us, as an external opportunity.

- General Education: As mentioned previously, the liberal arts and sciences are the core of all Western education. The nature of that core, as embodied in the General Education Requirements, is in question. Students historically have not seen the value of Western’s general education program until well after graduation; instead, they see it as a series of check boxes to fill out. Multiple attempts to revise either the program or its narrative have not materially improved student perception, and satisfaction with the general education program continues to be markedly lower than that with other aspects of the Western experience.

- Student Demand: As with many four-year higher education institutions, Western has some difficulty in responding quickly to shifting trends in student enrollment. It must find the balance between flexibility and stability, and it must detect the difference between a true trend and a one-time event. Such a true trend, evident over the last several years, is a shift in demand toward the sciences. Western’s challenge is to maintain a high level of access to accommodate that shift in the current or any future model of allocation of resources.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Presidential Transition: During 2015-16, Western will be seeking its next president. There is the opportunity, in so doing, to engage thoughtfully as a campus community in discussion of what, given something like this SCOT analysis of internal and external factors, logically then emerge as strategies that Western needs to adopt going forward.

- Outreach: Western’s strong reputation, built on the strengths described above, allows it to work externally with individuals and groups that can enhance the quality of its education. There is a wide variety of such individuals and groups covering all sectors of society. Many are highly interested in working with Western in ways that involve and help students.
  - P-12 Schools: Public schools are going through demographic and other changes. Their knowledge of Western through existing successful programs such as Woodring College, SMATE, and Compass2Campus (as examples) provide Western with the chance to extend these and other programs further into Washington’s schools. Western can thus help the schools prepare students for college, benefitting the community with the likely side effect that many of those students will be interested in attending Western.
  - Higher education: Western’s leadership in the Northwest Higher Education Coalition gives it a forum from which to help shape and indeed model the collaboration among all types of higher-education institutions in the region. Additionally, Western administrators have taken on leadership roles in statewide organizations, including the
Council of Presidents. These forums allow Western to promote its values statewide and to influence the conversation about higher education in Washington.

- Community: Western is increasingly recognized as an important element in the development of the Bellingham/Whatcom County community. For example, Western has been and will continue to be an important participant in conversations about the future of the Bellingham Waterfront. This participation allows Western to have a measurable impact on any development and possibly locate programs that will expand student and faculty opportunities within the community. Western also took the lead in a planning process funded by a grant for emergency planning with other county institutions and has worked with Whatcom Community College and Bellingham Technical College to develop a joint position in this area. With increased permanent presence in Seattle and Everett and on the Kitsap Peninsula, Western also has the opportunity to play important and similar roles along both sides of Puget Sound.

- Economic development: Western units have played important roles in economic development in Whatcom County for many years. However, Western now is looked to as a leader in conversations about economic development. Further, Western’s interest in partnerships off campus has encouraged community organizations, particularly those that promote innovation and entrepreneurship, to desire partnerships with Western and access to Western expertise and creative thinking. These types of partnership can give students and faculty experience and entrepreneurial opportunities.

- Private and NGO sectors: Western’s students have become increasingly involved in experiential learning, with positive results for the organizations with which they have worked. This creates continuing opportunities to expand experiential learning programs, be they internships, class projects, service learning, or co-curricular programs run through student clubs or other organizations.

- Through our Extended Education programs, we have a presence in many communities. These are highly regarded locally, and Western’s success has led to any number of invitations to expand the size, scope, and nature of such efforts.

- International: Western’s growing reputation opens doors abroad to possibilities for student and faculty exchange, faculty-led study abroad experiences, and perhaps even joint degree offerings. All of these possibilities would strengthen Western’s internationalization efforts.

- Donors: Western’s Foundation has had success in its comprehensive campaign. However, further opportunities exist as more alumni of financial means are discovered and Western’s programs and philosophy appeal increasingly to non-alumni of means.

- Responding to Niche Needs: Western has many strong programs that fill niches in their fields, defined as areas of specialization outside the usual practice—programs that specialize in preparing students for graduate school, programs that educate students to fill particular slots in a field or an industry. Two further possibilities are available:

  - Interdisciplinary programs: Organizations in all sectors look increasingly for their leaders to people who can see multiple perspectives, a skill that is intentionally and naturally developed through interdisciplinary education. Western’s development of successful interdisciplinary programs, and the interest and capability of its faculty to work across disciplines, could give students the chance they would like to have. It is beyond this
analysis to suggest specific areas or structures, but multiples of each are possible. Many more such opportunities, importantly including those off of our campus, are emerging.

- **International:** Groups both internal and external to Western have reported on the University’s opportunities in this area, and infrastructure is being built to take advantage of the identified opportunities. Further investments could allow goals identified in the reports to be reached more quickly.

- **Meeting State Needs for Washington Baccalaureate Grads:** Washington ranks 48th in the size of the pipeline it supports to public baccalaureate education. Yet the state has a knowledge-based economy. Western has been responsive; for example, it has responded aggressively to shifting student interest in the sciences. But, with expanded state support, we have the capacity to also grow the pipeline, and do so in a way that continues to highlight the advantages of a Western, liberal arts-and-sciences based education. If Western can find the right balances, it could not only better meet the needs of students and employers, but contribute substantially to the well-being of the state by educating students who will become leaders in their fields.

- **Growing Regard for Western:** The Washington State Legislature increasingly understands the role of higher education in the state, in multiple areas including economic development and strengthening society. More specifically, the Legislature has recognized Western’s high quality in several ways and also has funded several Western initiatives. Western has an opportunity to build on that support in seeking additional funding. This offers further opportunities to gain funds to live Western’s vision of applying our strengths to critical state needs.

- **The Importance of Higher Education:** Higher education is among many critical needs in Washington, yet tangible evidence that public higher education has a high priority in the executive branch of state government is hard to find. This provides Western with an opportunity—indeed, the necessity—to continue to seek to meaningfully engage and educate the state’s executive leadership.

- **Diversity:** The increasing racial and ethnic diversity enriching our state offers enormous opportunities for Western to live its mission as a proudly public university. We meet a critical state need but, in so doing, we also enhance the quality of the education of every Western student whatever their background.

**THREATS**

- **State Fiscal Capacity:** The state’s fiscal structure is designed for an economy that no longer exists. Unless there is the will to fix the tax structure, improvements in the state’s economy do not produce corresponding revenue increases. On the expenditure side, states are facing major budget impacts as the federal government shifts various obligations to the state level. Additionally and specific to our state, the need to comply with the State Supreme Court directive to significantly increase funding for K-12 education continues to place an additional major burden on the already broken and overburdened revenue structure. Most of the state’s budget is protected from significant cuts because of constitutional, political, or statutory considerations. Cuts thus will have to come from the remaining minority portion of the budget; most of the money in that portion is in the social services and higher education sectors. Higher education, historically and in the current political configuration of the legislature, largely loses in that competition. The state, in cutting tuition rates for the 2015-17 biennium and then linking tuition increases to the state’s median income, has limited Western’s ability to grow its own
revenue; its reinvestment in higher education to mitigate the tuition reduction will continue to be threatened by the factors mentioned previously.

- **2017-19 Budget Prospects:** It is quite likely that the additional state K-13 funding challenge recently reemphasized by the State Supreme Court will be pushed by the legislature past the November 2016 election and so into the 2017-19 biennium. The already fundamentally inadequate approach to public revenues used in Washington will therefore be further challenged, with the price in the billions of dollars. Consequently, it is most likely that any 2017-19 WWU budgetary requests will need to be highly strategic, have strong political legs, and be modest in size.

- **Sustaining Selectivity:** The number of graduates from Washington’s high schools has declined from its peak a few years ago. It will not reach the peak level again for several years. In combination with the changed competitive environment (see below), this could push either the number or the quality of Western students (quality as measured by Admissions Index scores) down from their current levels. If demographic trends continue that show a higher percentage of high school graduates coming from groups that have historically had low college-attendance rates, it is possible that the actual number of high school graduates interested in attending four-year universities will decline further than the overall number of high school graduates.

- **Competition:** Several aspects of the competitive environment are changing. Some changes are in response to the demographic trends mentioned above, and some are in response to resource constraints arising from the recent recession. Most of these trends are linked to maintaining or increasing enrollment and tuition dollars. Other aspects of the competitive environment are changing due to other trends, including technology and private support.
  
  - **In-state students:** Four-year institutions, noting the demographic trends mentioned previously, have begun to offer greater incentives of different types for high-potential students to enroll at their institutions.
  
  - **Out-of-state and international students:** These populations have become increasingly attractive for several reasons, academic, fiscal, and cultural. For students within the United States, the competitive pressure is compounded: each institution is recruiting out of state, so institutions are competing with each other in multiple geographic markets, each trying to retain its own in-state students and poach the other institution’s in-state students. The international population faces similar pressures, although because of the continued prestige of a U.S.-based degree, the pressures are somewhat less.
  
  - **Technology:** Developments in technology, particularly information technology and access, allow the opportunities to gain an education to multiply. These, as currently deployed, do not threaten the educational role Western fulfills. But, will that continue to be the case?

- **Campus Safety:** University campuses across the country have seen an increased number of violent incidents. As well, natural disasters have increasingly hit campuses. Western is in an area prone to earthquakes and threatened by tsunamis; as with all organizations, it is in danger of suffering through acts of violence from multiple sources. As a repository of information, much of it personal in nature, Western also is vulnerable to cyberattack.