What can we at WWU do to address issues of affordable access to a quality education?

Western is no different from any other higher education institution in needing to address the triad of cost, quality, and access. All universities would like to increase quality, increase access, and decrease cost. If that’s not possible, universities must decide the trade-offs they are willing to make and the elements they are not willing to compromise. To make those decisions, we need a full discussion with good understanding of each of the elements.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT AFFORDABILITY

- Absolute costs to Western students have risen dramatically over the last five years, as has the percentage of the university’s budget paid by students
- Western costs and value relative to other institutions have remained relatively stable
- Western’s tuition and fees for 2013-14 is $8,863 for an in-state undergraduate student taking a full credit load; a comparison can be found in this table (Western’s listed tuition and fees in the table does not include all required fees)
- Institutional financial aid\(^1\) accounts for 15.1% of total tuition received by the University; this compares with an average of 16.7% for the other state regional institutions and 19.3% for the state’s research institutions
- Western includes in its budget 11.4% for tuition waivers; this compares with an average of 12.8% for the other state regional institutions and 15.3% for the state’s research institutions

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT ACCESS

- Anecdotal evidence suggests access to both courses and majors is more difficult now for Western students than in the past
- Time to degree measurements suggest otherwise for most majors but do show some majors with increased time to degree

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT QUALITY

- In his convocation address, President Shepard made it clear that there be no compromise on the issue of quality at Western
- Western is known primarily for the quality of its on-campus undergraduate education and its faculty
- Quality can be defined in terms of outcomes, in terms of process, or some combination
  - For example, quality can be defined in terms of the level of student-faculty interaction through measurable metrics (say, student-faculty ratio and mean office hours); this says nothing about the effect that interaction has on outcomes that also can be measured (through metrics such as job/graduate school placement and starting salaries);
  - There are many qualitative factors that cannot be measured by numbers or metrics but are vital to offering a good college education and producing important research.
- Quality is affected by the academic preparation of incoming students.
- Quality in teaching and scholarship is affected by the number of full-time tenure-line faculty.

\(^1\) Includes the institutional load fund and tuition waivers.
• Quality also means considering what defines a good college education and how best to offer it. Quality therefore refers to broader questions than the specific outcomes of any particular program or course.
• Any discussion of quality must make clear whether it is referring to inputs, outcomes, process, or both, as well as account for both quantitative and qualitative factors.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT WESTERN’S POSITION

Western’s position historically (say, over the last 30 years) has been of high quality, reasonable access, and low cost. However, Western is entering an era in which state appropriations likely will remain flat. If appropriation are increased, they are likely either to be targeted to specific areas, to be accompanied by provisions limiting tuition increases, or both. Because of these realities, continuing affordable access to a quality education may be the most fundamental strategic issue the university faces.

Additional questions to consider in response to this question

Affordability

In light of the changing demographics of the Washington high-school population, what tuition/aid model should Western use in the future?
Should Western place more emphasis on tuition waivers or private support for its financial aid?

Access

Should the question of access be examined primarily through the perspective of majors or courses?
Should access be viewed differently when approaching general education versus majors?

Quality

What is the essence of a Western education?
How should Western go about maintaining this essence in the dynamic environment that is higher education and given the changing demographics of student populations?