A Summary of Western’s Interim Accreditation Report to the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)

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INTRODUCTION

Western will host an on-site accreditation visit from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) October 20-21. Dr. Alan Egger, a commission evaluator and professor of math at Idaho State University, will be on campus to assess Western’s progress in carrying out four NWCCU recommendations. Although numerous meetings with individuals, unit representatives, or committees are scheduled, please note that it is not uncommon for evaluators to ask also for unscheduled meetings. To help the University prepare for the evaluator’s visit, this issue of Dialogue summarizes Western’s progress in responding to the recommendations.

BACKGROUND

Western completed a 10-year accreditation self-study in 2008. After reviewing the self-study and completing an on-site evaluation, NWCCU reaffirmed Western’s accreditation. However, the NWCCU evaluators required the University to prepare a focused interim report and to host a commission evaluator in fall, 2010, to address the University’s progress in carrying out the four recommendations. The recommendations concerned 1) transparency and faculty participation in resource decisions, 2) assessment, 3) the library’s strategic plan, and 4) the University’s committee structure.

Western has made significant progress in each of these areas over the past two years. This progress is documented in our “Focused Interim Report,” available for viewing and/or down-load at the Provost’s web site, or this direct link: http://www.wwu.edu/provost/planning/accreditation.shtml.

The changes and improvements made since 2008 have been structural as well as procedural. Western has revised its faculty governance structure and the committees responsible for joint governing arrangements. The architecture of academic assessment activities has been revised. We have established new operating and capital budget development processes, and new methods of sharing and distributing resource-related decisions and information. More significantly, new norms and standards for collegiality, transparency, and service to students and constituents have been established. These changes are described in our “Focused Interim Report” and in the summaries below.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Recommendation 1 asked that Western review its operating budget process to provide more transparency, “more discussion prior to decisions, better and consistent communications of results, and greater demonstration that funding decisions are linked to strategic priorities.” The need for these changes was further affirmed by the new collective bargaining agreement, and by comments President Shepard heard while meeting with faculty and staff during the “Listening Campaign” he conducted over the first months of his tenure as university president.

In response, wholesale changes were made to both the operating and capital budgeting processes, which are now transparent and efficient. University Planning and Budget (UPB) improved operating budget processes within the University; the offices of Business and Financial Affairs and Capital Budget did the same for the capital budget
processes. These new budget processes have been opened up for community review and consideration (by staff, faculty and students) with a focus on bottom-up decision-making. Budget requests are now clearly linked to the missions of the planning units, as well as the SCOT analyses created by those planning units. Budget forums have been held, budget discussions audiocast and recorded, budget materials openly posted on the university web site, and budget discussion forums (via the Viking Village web discussion site) have been created.

Complementing these developments has been the establishment of the University Planning and Resource Council (UPRC). The UPRC, which reports to the Faculty Senate, has clarified and strengthened the role of the faculty in joint governing procedures concerning resources and planning. Other significant changes have strengthened the representation of faculty within the President’s Cabinet, and other committees.

Recommendation 2

Recommendation 2 required that Western “close the assessment feedback loop” by more systematically documenting how we use assessment data to improve programs and inform resource decisions. Recommendation 2 also noted “inadequate progress on the implementation of key aspects of an institution-wide plan of program assessment.” More specifically, recommendation 2 required the university to improve the committee structure regarding general education and to develop a general education assessment and improvement plan.

Closing the Assessment Loop

Western analyzed the assessment plan that was in place and concluded that it was clearly deficient. The plan included charges to offices that no longer existed and a structure that mapped poorly onto Western’s institutional processes. Simple responsibility charting makes this evident. (See Table 1.)

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<tr>
<th>Assessment Level</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Supervisory</th>
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<tr>
<td>Course</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
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<td>Degree</td>
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<td>NWCCU</td>
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To rectify these deficiencies, the Provost named the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education (VPUE) as Western’s Accreditation Liaison Officer, and further added the duties of “Director of Academic Assessment” to the VPUE’s job description. These steps clarified campus responsibility for assessment. After study and research into assessment “best practices,” a new assessment structure was designed, publicized, vetted and accepted. (See Figure 1 on page 3.) Again, simple responsibility charting shows the specificity of responsibility within this new structure. (See Table 2, also on page 3.)

With the new assessment structure in place, a new academic assessment plan is being developed, overseen by the VPUE and the University Academic Accreditation and Assessment Advisory Committee (UAAAC). Departments have posted their mission, student learning outcomes, and current assessment plans on departmental web sites; last spring, all departments submitted annual reports of how they used assessment findings to make program improvements. In addition, each college and academic department has named a designated assessment coordinator. As Western’s overall assessment plan is developed and refined, so too will department-level assessment plans.
Table 2: New Assessment Plan Responsibility Chart

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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>CIIA/Chair/OSR</td>
<td>Department Assessment Coordinator</td>
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<tr>
<td>College</td>
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<td>VPUE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
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College level responsibility for assessment may be delegated to an Associate Dean, a faculty member or committee. For General Education, the CUE committee occupies the College position.

CIIA = Center for Instructional Innovation and Assessment
OSR = Office of Survey Research
GUR Assessment

To address the NWCCU’s concern with GUR assessment, Western again began by conducting a thorough study and analysis of where it currently stood on GUR assessment. Eventually it was decided that the problem of general education assessment and improvement was the diffusion of responsibility for these activities across several offices and individuals.

To rectify this issue, two committees that had previously shared GUR responsibilities—one had authority for improving general education, the other for assessing it—were combined into a single committee with responsibility for both improving and assessing the GUR program. The establishment of the Committee on Undergraduate Education (CUE) represented a transfer of authority from the VPUE to the faculty, and has already made significant progress toward the development of a GUR assessment and improvement plan. Moreover, the First Year Planning Group, Student Affairs, and other programs have strengthened and systematized their assessment procedures and have made significant improvements based on assessment results.

Recommendation 3

Recommendation 3 asked that the library conduct a fundamental and thorough planning effort, informed by assessment, to consistently support the University’s academic mission. This has been accomplished with a thorough and assessment-based strategic plan. External and internal assessments and recommendations were gathered and compared to the university’s academic mission and strategic plan. Based on this process, the library established a cohesive mission, and a statement of its values and strategic themes. The final plan is ambitious, addressing every aspect of the library mission. Implementation of the strategic plan has been rapid and ongoing.

Recommendation 4

Recommendation 4 asked that Western address the structure and working relationships of the numerous committees, processes, and reports that populate the governance process in order to enhance communication and effectiveness. The accreditation committee felt that the good faith effort to provide multiple opportunities for input and review had, in some areas, created confusion and tensions as to where reports go, how processes work, and which group has responsibility for making decisions and implementing recommendations.

Essentially, the changes made in response to Recommendations 1 and 2 also addressed the issues raised by the accreditation committee in Recommendation 4. For instance, conveying to the Committee on Undergraduate Education (CUE) responsibility for both the assessment and improvement of the GURS concentrated authority for general education into one committee. Similarly, the restructuring of operating and capital budget procedures as noted in Recommendation 1, combined with the establishment of the new University Planning & Resource Council (UPRC) and the restructured President’s Cabinet, improved joint governance and facilitated faculty participation in strategic planning and resource and budgeting decisions.

More Information

For any questions about accreditation or the on-site NWCCU visit, please contact Steve VanderStaay at: Steven.VanderStaay@wwu.edu.

Moreover, the entire “Focused Interim Report” is available at the Provost’s web site, or this direct link: http://www.wwu.edu/provost/planning/accreditation.shtml.