

Year One Peer-Evaluation Report

Weber State University

Ogden, Utah

October 2011

*A confidential report of findings prepared for the
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities*

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Roster of Evaluators

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities arranged for the following evaluators to review Weber State University's year one self-evaluation report:

Chair: Dr. Stephen Adkison, Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs,
Eastern Oregon University

Ms. Jane H. Baillargeon, Assistant Director, Institutional Research and Assessment,
University of Idaho

Dr. David R. Hubin, Senior Assistant to the President, University of Oregon

Introduction

In March 2010, member institutions of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) were notified that the changes to the accreditation standards and cycle had been accepted. At that time, Weber State University (WSU) was informed that their seven-year cycle would begin with a Year One Report in Fall 2011. This report was submitted by the institution in September 2011 and reviewed by a panel of three evaluators in September and October of that year.

Assessment of the Year-One Self-Evaluation Report and Supporting Materials

The evaluation panel found the Weber State University Year One Self-Evaluation Report to be comprehensive and well-constructed, particularly clear in its structure and formatting. The report was easy to work with relative to NWCCU standards applicable to Year One reporting. The WSU report clearly aligned the mission and interpretation of mission with the University's Core Themes and articulated well-integrated objectives and associated indicators supporting the strategic objectives under each Core Theme.

In addition to addressing the relevant portions of the Eligibility Requirements and Accreditation Standards, the institution also provided a summary of institutional changes since their last report in Fall 2009. The actions requested by the NWCCU as a result of their 2009 evaluation were specifically directed to WSU's Year Five Report due in September of 2013, therefore no review of responses to remaining recommendations is required at this time.

Eligibility Requirements

The Standard One Self-Evaluation Report indicates that WSU is authorized by the Utah State Legislature under Utah State Code, Title 53B, Chapter 1, which establishes the Board of Regents of the Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) and vests in that body the power and authority to oversee the institutions of higher education. The current WSU mission was approved by the Utah Board of Regents May of 2011. The WSU Core Themes were adopted by the WSU Board of Trustees (by delegation from the Utah Board of Regents) in June of 2011.

Standard One Findings —Mission, Core Themes, and Expectations

Standard 1.A.1 Mission

As noted above, WSU’s mission was revised and approved by their Board of Regents in May, 2011. The University has also articulated three fundamental mission-related goals, which are designed to help shape the planning of the themes and objectives of WSU. These are to:

- Provide access to academic programs in liberal arts, sciences, technical and professional fields;
- Provide an engaging teaching and learning environment that encourages learning and leads to students’ success;
- Support and improve the local community through educational, economic and public service partnerships and cultural and athletic events.

The three Core Themes developed by WSU under these three broad goals align well with both the institutional mission and their academic planning, which articulates the objectives and associated indicators under each Core Theme.

As Weber State University continues to serve both its community college and regional university roles within its region, the thoughtful and sound process behind its mission articulation and related planning has been of particular value in terms of articulating the essential purposes and qualities of the University. As WSU notes in their report, their planning and implementation of strategies align well and coherently with their three core themes, serving as a reaffirmation that the University remains mission-centered.

Standard 1.A.2 Mission Fulfillment

To determine mission fulfillment WSU articulates the connection between the three Core Themes and the nine objectives underneath them through 16 related objectives and 26 indicators. While the overall shape and direction of WSU’s approach to assessing mission fulfillment is sound and consistent with the structures and processes they have developed, the evaluators do not see specific performance benchmarks for the indicators, as listed under each objective. The evaluators urge WSU to develop clear performance benchmarks and criteria for each strategic indicator.

Standard 1.B.1 Core Themes

Weber State University has identified and described three Core Themes, which align with its mission, dual roles, and three broad goals as described in their Year One Report. The three Core Themes are as follows:

Core Theme 1: Access: Weber State University serves communities with significant socio-economic and cultural differences. As their Year One report notes, WSU is the “educational, cultural and economic leader for the region.” As such, WSU strives to provide meaningful access for prospective students to educational programs that respond to student and market needs. As their rationale for Core Theme 1 indicates, by offering valued degrees and proactively mitigating barriers to participation and completion, WSU provides opportunity for a quality higher

education to the people in their region, regardless of their life circumstances. The three objectives under this first Core Theme are well articulated in support of the theme.

Core Theme 2: Learning: Weber State University is first and foremost an institution of higher education that provides and supports “excellent learning experiences for students” in an environment that values “freedom of expression” and engaged learning through “extensive personal contact among faculty, staff and students in and out of the classroom” and “research, artistic expression, public service and community-based learning.” As their rationale for Core Theme 2 indicates, WSU’s students are backed by effective educational support and experience an engaging environment, achieve identified learning outcomes, earn degrees and experience post-graduation success. Students and alumni are satisfied that their investment in WSU is or was important to their success as educated persons and professionals. The four objectives articulated in this Core Theme are designed to accurately capture the breadth of expectations that the institution expresses in this theme.

Core Theme 3: Community: As Weber State University articulates in its Year One Report, “Public service and community-based learning” represent both pedagogical emphases and community commitments. For the “university to serve as an educational, cultural and economic leader for the region,” WSU must be an active participant in regional learning endeavors and the social and economic life of the community. As the rationale for this Core Theme notes, through partnerships with their communities, WSU focuses on improving public education, enriching the regional cultural amenities and stimulating economic development. The three objectives articulated for this theme accurately capture this intent.

In sum, Weber State University’s three core themes are well connected to the institution’s current mission and well-integrate the various elements of the institution’s strategic planning efforts. For each Core Theme appropriate objectives have been articulated, which are underpinned by concrete and measurable indicators. However, while general benchmarks tied to peer group performance have been indicated, there are no clear articulation of these peers or their performance levels to indicate to WSU success for the indicators listed for each objective, either with respect to where they are currently situated or where they desire to end up. As noted above, the evaluators urge WSU to develop clear performance benchmarks and criteria for each of the indicators under each of the three Core Themes.

Standard 1.B.2 Core Theme Objectives and Indicators

Overall Weber State University has concretely tied each Core Theme to the University’s mission and strategic planning. Each Core Theme is well described, as is its place in the larger context of institutional goals and associated strategic planning. The connection and rationale articulated in each case between the objectives and their associated Core Theme are appropriate to understanding how that theme is tied to mission fulfillment. The basic framework provides a thoughtful, sound, and focused understanding of how the University intends to fulfill its mission and where and how University resources might be directed to accomplish desired objectives. The Core Theme Objectives and Indicators as articulated well-position WSU to move forward in meeting NWCCU standards over successive years of the current accreditation cycle. However, WSU needs to clarify and/or articulate how, exactly, it will benchmark and compare measured performances under each indicator it lists under each Core Theme, its current baseline as well as its expected performance goals relative to an as-yet-unspecified peer group.

For each of the three Core Themes' indicators and associated metrics, the institution provides a clear overall rationale of why the indicators are meaningful, assessable and verifiable indicators of achievement. As well, the metrics listed for each indicator seem appropriate. However, the expected performance articulated for each indicator is overbroad and tied to a vague peer group, either in-state or national, depending on a given indicator. While some objectives will be clear when met, others will need clarification, as will the institution's overall sense of how well it is doing with regard to mission fulfillment at a given point in the current accreditation cycle. The evaluators find it unclear how the institution will ultimately measure overall progress toward mission fulfillment. Concrete benchmarks for each of their indicators, which articulate specific expectations for each metric, as well as a specific peer group for comparative data will need to be developed for understanding performance relative to each objective and its stated indicators.

The task remaining for WSU relative to their planning and assessment for mission fulfillment is, in short, to articulate in specific terms, what successful mission fulfillment looks like for each indicator listed under each objective.

Summary

Under the new NWCCU standards and process, the Standard One Self-Evaluation Report is an opportunity for an institution to reflect on its mission statement, clarify the themes that define its mission, and provide indicators of achievement against which the institution can measure itself in the future. Weber State University has taken advantage of this opportunity to articulate a sound set of structures and processes focused on its mission, core themes and strategic planning, which will help the institution direct resources effectively toward mission fulfillment.

Recommendation

The evaluation panel makes the following recommendation:

Recommendation: The panel recommends that the university develop specific measurable benchmarks and criteria for each indicator under each Core Theme, assigning specific designations of an acceptable level of performance for the metrics underlying each indicator. (Standard 1.A.2)