

Weber State University
Nontraditional Student Center and Hourly
Childcare
Program Review 2010
Final Report

Site Review Team

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Preface

The Site Review Team would like to thank the Nontraditional Student Center at Weber State University for the comprehensive data presented in the departmental self-study. This information was integral in providing an initial understanding of the structure and function of the Center, and provided a baseline from which to begin our inquiries. Additionally, the Team would like to express our appreciation for the time and effort invested by the faculty, staff, and students who graciously agreed to visit with us during our two-day site review of the Nontraditional Student Center at WSU.

This report is a compilation of the Team's findings based on our review of the self-study, and our discussions with participants during the review process. The information gathered from the site review attempts to examine, among other things, the strengths, areas of improvement, and overall effectiveness of the Nontraditional Student Center. It is an assessment tool, for the purpose of program evaluation. It should not be viewed as an evaluation of the dedication, or commitment of time and effort, of the Center's personnel. It was evident during all conversations that the faculty, staff, and students associated with the NSC are dedicated individuals who believe in making WSU a great place for nontraditional students.

Program

From its inception, the Nontraditional Student Center has existed to meet the diverse needs of WSU's nontraditional student population. This population is currently defined as students who are over 25, married/divorced/widowed, have children (legal dependents), are disabled, or are veterans. The Center provides academic support directly (computer lab, printing, peer mentors) and indirectly (social programming, childcare). The following comments are points of consideration, observation, and accolades with regard to the Center's standards for program review.

Program Review Standards

Unit Mission, Goals, and Outcomes:

- In general, the Nontraditional Student Center (NSC) has a mission consistent with the aims and measures the University and Division of Student Affairs have developed. While opportunities to clarify and further align goals and objectives to institutional priorities exist; in general, the NSC is having success achieving their stated goals and outcomes.

- The Center's broad mission is to help nontraditional students (25 years or older, married, have children, divorced or widowed, veterans) make a successful academic and social transition to Weber State University. They are accomplishing this ambition through diverse programming, student hosting efforts, academic support initiatives and specific programs like the Nontraditional Student Center Hourly Child Care program.

- With the definition of a "nontraditional" student at Weber State encompassing a broad spectrum of potential recipients of Nontraditional Student Center services, the center has been mindful of the diverse needs, and continues to display sensitivity to the demands of a large nontraditional student population. However, many concerns were mentioned that the NSC is focused almost entirely on children and families, and is not serving the needs of young "marrieds," singles, or couples without children.

- The staff in the NSC has worked hard to establish an environment, which provides emotional support for nontraditional students. Many students interviewed throughout the site review commented that the center provides a "safe haven" and "refuge" from the demands of campus and is a place where they can come and network with other students who are in similar circumstances. Creating a climate of comfort is one of the objectives the NSC has outlined in their self-study and certainly their location in the new Student Center and their commitment to this endeavor has helped them establish an environment where students generally feel comfortable. The "students-at-large" group appreciated several of the services the NSC provides. These students connect to WSU through places/people where they can feel comfortable, and that comfort level seems to be of great importance.

- Seemingly, the Nontraditional Student Center is attempting to accomplish two conflicting objectives: 1) a focus on successful academic and social transition to the institution, and 2) a desire to provide a welcoming and inviting environment where students can network and "escape" the traditional student environment. While both objectives can be accomplished in harmony it should be recognized that if the presumptive aim is to *transition* nontraditional students academically and socially then programs to integrate nontraditional students may need to take precedence over efforts that actually isolate nontraditional students from campus. Obviously, sensitivity and careful consideration should prevail in any approach. There has

been value in the creation of a nontraditional computer lab for example and many students feel comfortable in using the services at the center like the refrigerator, but if the students aren't using the services to transition into the institution academically or socially then the center is not accomplishing its stated mission. This is an interesting philosophical question for many Student Affairs departments: While it is agreed that encouraging students to isolate themselves is not beneficial, is the attachment to certain services evidence of dependency? For example, if a student uses tutoring services throughout their years at WSU, is this evidence of a smart student availing him/herself of resources to be successful, or is it dependency? It is not our contention that the NSC is intentionally or unintentionally supporting isolation; rather, the answer being that there are certain students who will choose not to explore or grow if they find a safe spot. *(It is noted by the committee that the students interviewed are likely some of the most involved students, who regularly utilize the resources of the NSC. However, there are undoubtedly other nontrad students who have already used the NSC as a point of transition, indicating that the NSC is likely meeting both objectives discussed in this paragraph.)

- All agree that the Nontraditional Student Center (NSC) should provide students academic support both directly and indirectly. There is some confusion on the best ratio of these supports (direct support workshops vs. a social environment to create sense of belonging). It seems that efforts to offer educational workshops have not been successful in attendance; whereas, activities that are more social in mission, especially involving families, attract the largest participation.

- While it is understood that using resources efficiently occasionally means having dual roles, it does seem to be causing problems/confusion with regard to the reception desk. Several comments were made by students that the reception desk is not consistently covered, nor with students who are dedicated to the task and knowledgeable about campus services. Determining if students are requesting the Nontrad Center or the Women's Center also seems ambiguous. As the first point of contact, the interaction at the reception desk can make or break the student's experience with the Center, and whether he/she returns or refers other students. Hence, the current model of peer mentors or student assistants serving a dual role as receptionist and peer mentor may not be an effective solution to staffing.

- The recruitment vs. retention role seems to be understood differently at different levels. Recruiting students into WSU was mentioned as a goal, in addition to recruiting WSU students into the Nontrad Center. The Coordinator and Dean's level seemed to have differing views with regard to the mission of the NSC as it relates to off-campus recruiting.

- The Nontraditional Student Center has achieved many new goals over the past several years.

Programs and Services:

- The NSC has multiple programs that have continued from year to year and still demonstrate growth. Considering the low level of staffing (especially professional staffing), the NSC has done very well with successful programs. There are some programs that are working like clockwork (e.g. childcare, computer lab) but there are other programs, which seem ambiguous (e.g. parenting classes). Nonetheless, it is clear that there are many opportunities in place for nontrads at WSU.

- The Hourly Child Care Center is greatly appreciated by all students interviewed. Due to compliance and availability, staff must turn away children between 9 a.m. and 12 p.m., as the spots for these hours are most in-demand. All staff suggested adding evening hours based on input from students. Students noted concern that the current available hours end prior to afternoon classes, which often last until 4 p.m. It is important to note that there were many comments lauding the child care staff. Students feel comfortable leaving their children in the center, but there were many comments regarding the need for more hours and more space.

- The Purple Pals program is a huge success for the NSC. In fact, programs and social activities that are provided to the whole family seem to be greatly appreciated and well attended by students. There were concerns noted by some students/faculty that the NSC seems to be highly focused on students with children, wherein questions were raised whether programs/services are meeting the needs of young “marrieds” without children, or older students without children at home. However, our findings are inconclusive as to whether or not these groups want/need additional support. It may be the case that the students with children are the “appropriate” group upon which to focus efforts, as they may need the most support. **A comprehensive quantitative needs analysis of the entire nontraditional student population is recommended by the committee to determine potential unmet needs.**

- The literary publication, *Epiphany*, provides an option for nontraditional students seeking to publish their academic work. It is important to note that *Epiphany* does provide one option for involvement of nontrad students who are not parents [of course it is not mutually exclusive to this subsection, and could (and does) provide positions for students who are parents as well.]

- The current Nontraditional Student Senator is not representative of the students utilizing the NSC. The committee recognizes that this is a difficult “fix,” as this student is an elected representative; however, the committee would like to express our concern regarding the current situation. (With all due respect to the NT Senator, perhaps we did not see his passion or concern for the population he represents; nonetheless, we simply did not hear it, or see it – hence the concern.)

- The NSC works with other Student Affairs teams on some projects throughout the year, although collaboration is not yet strategic. Very little is coordinated with

others outside of Student Affairs, although a new liaison system was started in October, which appears to be very innovative. There was no mention of any connection with Continuing Education other than some coordination of workshops at the WSU West Center; however, it was noted that other partnerships likely exist (i.e., Davis Campus, International Students, Student Involvement & Leadership) but were not highlighted, due to representatives from these entities not being present during the site review process.

Leadership and Staffing:

- Ms. Debbie Cragun is highly praised by everyone she works with and by the students utilizing the NSC services. She is very passionate about the NSC and the nontraditional students' success. She is dedicated to providing great support services and creating a sense of belonging for everyone involved. Debbie has created roles for nontraditional students to serve, given them definition, and the students are very devoted to the Center.
- All staff members of the NSC and Hourly Child Care Center also seem very dedicated to serving the WSU nontraditional students. They see their role as being a friend and assistant to students as they begin and progress through their academic career at WSU.
- The committee was incredibly impressed with the diversity of the peer advisor staff. Debbie is providing strong leadership and good expectations. It is obvious that in the past Debbie and her assistant, Cathy Barrow, generally have been a two-person operation and it should be interesting to see the development of the peer advisors and the part-time advisor position. The liaison approach is innovative and forward thinking.
- Students interviewed greatly appreciate the services and programs provided. Students' only complaints were the need for more space and childcare hours, and the need for a receptionist with knowledge, maturity, and professionalism.
- Additional student workers were added in October 2010 along with a new part-time Advisor Specialist position. This should greatly help to serve the increasing numbers of students utilizing the center. The part-time professional should be able to add a great deal of intentional programming. As mentioned before, the liaison program sounds like an effective method of connecting departments.
- Although some training is provided, staff commented that they would like more opportunities in leadership skills and working with diverse populations. Staff would also like staff meetings at time/day all can attend. (i.e., Staff meetings are held on the Administrative Assistant's day off.) Additionally, support staff did not seem to be aware of the Academy of Leadership.
- Given the information gathered through interviews, it would appear beneficial to

have one full-time reception desk staff member (or two part-time) to provide a consistent and informative initial point of contact. Coverage is currently inconsistent and not providing needed referral and resource information. Additionally, it is suggested that nametags be provided and required for all staff members so visitors can tell whom to approach for assistance. There was some confusion about whether students who sign in are intending to go to the Women's Center instead of the NSC, what the differences are in their general services, and if there is any connection between the two departments.

- While this point was made under the subsection of "Programs and Services", the committee would again like to mention the goal of collaboration with other campus entities and departments, as it pertains to staffing/leadership. This includes strengthening the relationship with the nontrad student Senator. The committee feels it may be beneficial to the university as a whole to clarify who is promoting nontrad services, (i.e. Continuing Education), specifically as it pertains to the recruitment and retention of nontrad students. Additionally, providing transparency to the role (and interdependence) of the NSC, Orientation and Enrollment Programs, Academic Advisors, etc., with regard to each entities' role in advising/assisting nontrads.

Financial Resources and Budget:

- The NSC appears to operate well with its current annual operating budget, providing a breadth of programs and services for nontrads. Unless the center can move away from a funding model which provides resources exclusively from student fee allocation then the center will continue to function with constraint. There are a number of services, such as upgrading the computer lab, extending child-care hours and offering more programming that are dependent on additional funding which will not be plausible without an increase in resources. Despite the financial constraints, which inhibit growth, the center has done an exceptional job carving out a half-time Nontraditional Advisor position, and creating new Peer Advisor positions.

Facilities, Equipment and Technology:

- Staff and students greatly praised the new space provided for the NSC, since the Union's remodeling. The space is welcoming, and in a great location. The enlarged computer lab and common space is very helpful. Although, while it was universally recognized that the NSC has more space now than in prior configurations, it is still not enough – especially given the enormous percentage of nontraditional students on the WSU Ogden Campus. This request for more space was strongly expressed by staff and students in order to serve an ever-growing population. The computer lab, while serving its purpose well, is often full. The Child Care Center is full with standing reservations during the most popular class hours, and is not open for evening classes.

- Students felt an expanded NSC would be a great recruitment tool to prospective nontraditional students who are not aware of the support available through the NSC and other support offices. (Perhaps space that is more proportional to the ratio of the traditional v. nontrad population at WSU.)

- Concerns were also discussed by students and staff regarding the shared space with the Women's Center, specifically regarding differences in mission and services provided. (One example given was the ambiguity surrounding the new Single Parent Alliance and how it collaborates with or takes the place of the Single Mom's Group sponsored by the Women's Center.)

- Regarding technology, an added presence on the WSU website, in addition to further developing social networking communication channels (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, etc.) may be helpful in the continued promotion of the NSC.

Ethical and Legal Responsibilities:

- Unfortunately, information regarding ethical and legal responsibilities was not discussed, except as they pertain to the Childcare Center. (i.e. State regulations on how many children can receive services at one time, etc.)

Assessment and Evaluation:

- As previously mentioned, the committee recommends a formal, comprehensive quantitative needs analysis of the entire nontraditional student population, for the express purpose of determining potential unmet needs. A needs assessment could answer queries such as, "How does the NSC know they are really being successful and reaching the students that need them the most?" In this sense, a needs assessment would assist the NSC in validating or dis-confirming funding for programs for certain demographics within the nontrad population. With limited resources, the NSC (as is the case with many departments) needs to identify any "low hanging fruits" as well as opportunities that provide the highest impact on student recruitment/retention.

- Additionally, deciding how to integrate the "transitional model" that integrates nontrads into the university, while simultaneously providing the "home away from home/safe haven refuge" for nontrads is a challenge that the NSC may want to explore. It is certainly a laudable goal to function on both levels; it is in the attainment of both goals that opacity may prevail. Furthermore, the committee recognizes that it can be challenging to resist reacting to serving the needs of those who are most involved; however, the center does seem to be highly favoring the students who are parents. The Program Review staff may not have asked the right questions to extract this information, but other than the physical study space and the computer lab, it is somewhat unclear what services /programs the center offers to students who are not parents.

- It may be mutually beneficial for the NSC and other WSU units outside Student Services (e.g. Continuing Education, Enrollment Services, Academic units) to collaborate on recruitment and retention initiatives, such as recruiting at elementary schools.

- In summation, the NSC is doing a commendable job with limited space and resources. They have a dedicated coordinator and staff who are committed to assisting the nontraditional student population at WSU, and the students accessing NSC programs and services are clearly finding value in their experience. Students involved as Peer Advisors and Epiphany staff are appreciative of the unique experience that has been afforded to them in their status as nontraditional student role models. Parents whose children attend the Child Care Center, and/or are involved in the Purple Pals program recognize (and appreciate) the value in making the entire family a stakeholder in the educational experience at WSU. Students who stop by to utilize the NSC study space or computer lab are pleased that they have a space to call their own, wherein their place in the university community is recognized and appreciated. Many of the institutional barriers (Fairchild 2003) faced by nontraditional students in higher education are not an issue for students at WSU because of the Nontraditional Student Center, and the programs and services it provides its nontraditional student population.

Works Cited

Fairchild, Ellen E. "Multiple Roles of Adult Learners." Meeting the Special Needs of Adult Students: New Directions for Student Services, No. 102 (2003): 11-16. Print.