

Mid-Cycle Peer-Evaluation Report
for

Weber State University
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Report prepared by:

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Introduction

On behalf of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), the evaluation team reviewed Weber State University's Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report and conducted a site visit October 3-5, 2017. The purpose of the Mid-Cycle Review was to assess the likelihood that Weber State University (WSU) will be prepared to meet the requirements and standards of the comprehensive Year Seven reaffirmation of accreditation evaluation and to offer observations and suggestions. The evaluators received a very well-prepared and thorough Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report from WSU and are grateful to the WSU community for the time and energy they devoted to the site visit as well as their candor and responsiveness to the team's questions and observations. Since WSU had received no recommendations from their previous Year-Seven evaluation, the evaluators focused on an assessment of, and response to, the key elements of the WSU Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report and observations based on additional information gleaned during the site visit.

WSU is a comprehensive public university that offers associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees – combining the mission of a regional university with that of a community college. WSU's nearly 27,000 students (16,500 FTEs) are served on two major campuses (located in Ogden and next to Hill Air Force Base in Davis County, Utah); at numerous smaller centers in the region; and via distance-mediated offerings. Approximately 19% of WSU's total enrollment is online.

WSU's mission statement reads: "Weber State University provides associate, baccalaureate, and master degree programs in liberal arts, sciences, technical and professional fields. Encouraging freedom of expression and valuing diversity, the university provides excellent educational experiences for students through extensive personal contact among faculty, staff and students in and out of the classroom. Through academic programs, research, artistic expression, public service and community-based learning, the university serves as an educational, cultural, and economic leader for the region."

WSU's core themes are: Access, Learning, and Community. Related objectives are as follows:

Access:

- A. Weber State will offer programs that address the needs of the community.
- B. Weber State will serve cohorts of interest in the community.

Learning:

- A. Students who enroll will be retained.
- B. Students will participate in engaged learning experiences.
- C. Students will achieve general education learning outcomes.

- D. Students will achieve program learning outcomes.
- E. Lower-division students will achieve success.
- F. Students will complete degrees.

Community:

- A. Weber State University will contribute to K-12 education in the community.
- B. The community will participate in a wide array of WSU sponsored cultural programs.
- C. Students will engage with the community and become productive members of society.
- D. Faculty will contribute to their professions.
- E. Faculty, staff, and students will support the community through service and outreach efforts.
- F. Weber State will contribute to the economic development of the region.

Site Visit Overview

The site visit was extremely well-organized and provided ample opportunities to meet with faculty, staff, and administrators – with sufficient time for in-depth discussions that addressed all of our prepared questions and all follow-up questions that arose. In general, those questions focused on the following:

- 1) where WSU sees itself now and what the institution will need to do to demonstrate mission fulfillment in the next Year-Seven self-study and site visit;
- 2) the extent of various university community members' buy-in and commitment to the institution's mission, vision, core themes, and strategic plan;
- 3) the primary challenges associated with the fulfillment of the institution's mission, vision, core themes, and strategic plan – in particular, in terms of necessary and sufficient resource (re)allocations;
- 4) enrollment trends and related revenue streams;
- 5) the role of graduate programming in mission fulfillment;
- 6) the potential impacts of exogenous factors on mission fulfillment (e.g., unfunded legislative mandates, changes in enrollment, another economic downturn, changes in the Utah state system of higher education);
- 7) the two exemplar programs (General Education and Program Review) – including why they were selected as exemplars; the extent of various university community members' buy-in and commitment to these undertakings; the assessment strategies, techniques, tools, measurements, and results to date; and the resources committed to these endeavors.

Observations and Suggestions

The evaluators have five (5) primary observations and related suggestions to share with WSU. They are as follows:

First Observation and Related Suggestion

WSU has a great number of ongoing initiatives – each of which are in and of themselves quite complex. For example, drawing from the Academic Affairs 2016-17 Goals summary, WSU is working on the following: 1) establishing an Academic Affairs Master Plan; 2) improving student retention and persistence, including launching Starfish-based programming the day the Mid-Cycle evaluators arrived on campus – along with multiple other initiatives; 3) reviewing and revising the General Education Program; 4) developing a Strategic Enrollment Management plan – including increasing out-of-state student recruitment and enrollment – while ensuring a focus on retention efforts; and 5) continuing to implement the institution’s Community Civic Action Plan – with an initial focus on East Central Ogden housing, education, and health outreach programming. The MCE self-study did an excellent job of describing and documenting how these goals are grounded in the institution’s mission and core themes of Access, Learning, and Community.

In addition to these five major undertakings, WSU also continues to: 1) implement the institutional Program Review process and engage in Specialized Accreditation for numerous programs to ensure their students are achieving learning outcomes; 2) assure access for a diverse student body through, as just one example, their Dream Weber scholarship program that provides access to higher education for students from lower socioeconomic status households; and 3) focus on engaged learning initiatives both in the classroom and throughout their community. The MCE self-study also did an excellent job of describing and documenting how these initiatives are grounded in the institution’s mission and core themes. It is also important to note that across all of the groups with which the evaluators met, there was impressively strong commitment to, and buy-in for, these endeavors.

In terms of WSU’s numerous – and complex – initiatives, the evaluators think it would be helpful to provide two types of timelines for the Year-Seven evaluation team. First, beginning with WSU’s last year-seven site visit, the evaluators suggest WSU create historical timelines showing the multiple initiatives the institution has undertaken – highlighting key milestones along the way. An historical timeline, for example, could provide a clear overview of the review, revision, assessment, and continuous improvement of the General Education Program. Another useful historical timeline could document the development of Starfish-based programming from the initial discussions about which tool to select to enhance student retention initiatives – through the buildout of the metrics, measures, messaging, and assessment of programmatic impact.

Second, in addition to these historical timelines, the evaluators suggest WSU develop and present timelines that explain key assessment and continuous improvement processes including WSU's 18-month Program Review cycle; the institution's multiple Specialized Accreditation programs and related review cycles; and General Education assessment. The evaluators believe these timelines will help WSU's Year-Seven evaluators visualize and better understand the important, valuable, and complex work WSU is doing to fulfill its mission.

Second Observation and Related Suggestion

WSU's mission states that the institution offers associate, baccalaureate, and master degree programs. While all three levels of degree are included in the Mid-Cycle Evaluation self-study, references to graduate programs are notably limited. While the evaluators are aware that WSU's graduate programs are small in number compared to the institution's undergraduate programs, the evaluators suggest WSU be attentive to incorporating more information about graduate programs in the Year-Seven self-study.

Third Observation and Related Suggestion

The evaluators were greatly impressed by the amount and diversity of data and information brought to bear on WSU's Mid-Cycle Evaluation self-study and encourage WSU to do likewise in the Year-Seven self-study. It is particularly important to acknowledge the extremely high-quality work of WSU's data analysts from Institutional Effectiveness, Student Affairs, and Institutional Research. It is also well worth noting the strong collaborations among the analysts from these three units – and the evaluators strongly suggest these valuable partnerships continue.

Fourth Observation and Related Suggestion

The evaluators understand that, in an effort to make improvements, the ways WSU has defined particular indicators and measures have changed somewhat over time and may continue to evolve. Likewise, since their Year-One report, WSU has changed some of their assessment strategies and techniques. In the evaluators' opinion, it is perfectly acceptable and indeed, provides added value, for WSU to change indicators, measures, and assessment strategies – provided the institution documents this evolution and these improvements from the institution's Year-One report submission through to the Year-Seven self-study.

For example, WSU's Year-One report indicated that the institution would use focus groups to assess students' achievement of both general education and program learning outcomes. After conducting numerous focus groups, WSU came to the conclusion that the focus groups did not directly assess the thresholds that had been established, and so began using the Graduating Student Survey open-ended questions to assess these objectives. Moreover, from meetings with the data analysts from Institutional Effectiveness, Student Affairs, and Institutional Research, the evaluators know WSU engaged in multiple discussions about the coding of these open-ended questions and have been working, since the Spring 2017 administration of the Graduating

Student Survey, to refine the questions to enable enhanced assessment. The evaluators strongly support WSU's continued development and enhancement of these qualitative measures, including the revision of survey questions, to better assess mission fulfillment. To the evaluators' minds, WSU's mixed methods approach enhances the reliability of these analyses.

To assist the Year-Seven site visit team, the Mid-Cycle evaluators suggest that WSU's data analysts in Institutional Effectiveness, Student Affairs, and Institutional Research document the changes made to indicators, measures, and assessment strategies – discussing and describing how these changes better enabled WSU to understand and evaluate the extent of mission fulfillment. The evaluators anticipate that, through the collaboration among Institutional Effectiveness, Student Affairs, and Institutional Research, the quality and quantity of indicators and measures will continue to improve, providing the institution with increasingly valuable information to help inform decision-making and to document and demonstrate mission fulfillment.

Fifth Observation and Related Suggestion

The institution's mission states that WSU values diversity. This element of the institution's mission is partly addressed in the Mid-Cycle Evaluation self-study through the development of "cohorts of interest," which better ensure that university objectives focused on access (participation/enrollment) and learning (retention) encompass all students, not just the average student. This approach has the potential to enhance the institution's understanding of areas in need of additional work and where successes are happening. The evaluators, however, suggest that WSU's Year-Seven self-study speak more fully and directly to how the institution is fulfilling the diversity aspect of its mission through the work WSU is doing to engage with its community. In particular, the evaluators recommend highlighting some of WSU's initiatives, such as the Dream Weber scholarship program noted above, that bring enhanced opportunities for postsecondary education to more diverse populations. Furthermore, WSU's third core theme, Community, has the potential to be a particularly powerful vehicle for demonstrating the institution's commitment to the students and region it serves and to partnerships within the local community.

Conclusion

The evaluators were very impressed with Weber State University's Mid-Cycle Evaluation Report, supporting materials, and the deep commitment to assessment, continuous improvement, and mission fulfillment the faculty, staff, and administrators with whom the team met demonstrated.

During the site visit exit session, the evaluators shared the observation that "Weber State University has undertaken a great number of complex initiatives – and is doing them very well." As Weber State University continues their important work, they are very well situated to demonstrate mission fulfillment and sustainability in their Year Seven Self-Evaluation Report and site visit.