

Year One Peer-Evaluation Report

Western Oregon University

Monmouth, Oregon

March 1 - May 20, 2011

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

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Year One Peer-Evaluation Report: Western Oregon University

I. Evaluators

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

Dr. Dana L. Thomas, Chair, Vice Provost and Accreditation Liaison Officer,
University of Alaska Fairbanks,
Dr. Jane Sherman, Vice Provost for Academic Policy and Evaluation,
Washington State University, and
Ms. Sally Graves Machlis, Professor and Chair, Department of Art and Design,
University of Idaho.

II. Introduction

The evaluation panel received electronic and hard copies of the Western Oregon University Year One Self-Evaluation Report and hard copies of the WOU 2010-11 Course Catalog.

III. Assessment of the Year-One Self-Evaluation Report and Support Materials

The panel finds the year-one self-evaluation report and supporting materials to be well-written. The report addresses the elements of standard one and is formatted according to Commission expectations.

IV. Topics Addressed in Response to Commission Recommendations

WOU notes that a Progress Report was submitted in April 2010, but does not include any information about the recommendation(s) that led to that report, nor about the Commission's action on the report. It is not clear to the panel whether, or to what extent, the material in the Preface under the heading "Accreditation Specific Changes" relates to the Commission's recommendation(s) following either the 2009 Interim Report or the 2010 Progress Report. Assuming that the Preface reflects recommended actions, it is apparent that WOU has recently implemented changes in data management and in shared governance, but it is not yet clear what the effects of these changes will be.

V. Eligibility Requirements

In light of the late notice from Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities about year-one self-evaluation reports addressing eligibility requirements 2 and 3, the panel encourages Western Oregon University to provide a brief summary of how the institution meets these eligibility requirements when revising the response to standard one for the year-three report.

VI. Mission, Core Themes, and Expectations

Standard 1.A Mission. Western Oregon University’s Mission Statement is brief and direct. It is appropriate for an institution of higher learning and gives direction for its efforts.

WOU is governed by a system board, the Oregon University System, which has its own mission and goals to which all seven of its institutions must subscribe. WOU notes that it is moving through the approval process of a new, institution-specific mission statement. Therefore, the mission statement in its year-one report is not the same as that in the catalog or on the website. The panel recognizes that -- should the proposed mission statement be approved – it is more useful to the institution to have been working from the new one throughout the seven-year accreditation cycle rather than changing after year one. However, while the new (as well as the old) WOU mission statement is generally consistent with the system mission statement, it is not the same as the system mission, and there is no guidance provided to the reader about the relationship between them.

WOU defines mission fulfillment as achievement that is “significantly positive on all objectives.” A number of the 28 Key Performance Indicators associated with the objectives have measurable “outcomes” that could, at some point, be rolled up to determine whether the objective can be assessed to be cumulatively positive. However, the panel could not consistently discern this connection among the objectives and their indicators and outcomes in a way that represents an acceptable threshold or extent of mission fulfillment. For example, “in relation to its comparator institutions,” if WOU does not “rank as ‘near expected’ or ‘above expected’” on the CLA, how will that impact its assessment of mission fulfillment?

Standard 1.B Core Themes. Western Oregon University has articulated three core themes that manifest elements of its mission and collectively encompass that mission. The narrative description of each theme is helpful in understanding the definition and scope of each theme. Each theme is defined by three objectives, each of which is measured by multiple Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) supported by associated Rationales and Outcomes.

For the most part, the outcome identified for each KPI is a reasonably assessable measure of success on that indicator, but in some instances the reverse seems to be the case. For example, one KPI is to “Achieve faculty and staff applicant pools that meet affirmative action guidelines for diversity,” which appears to be a measurable outcome. The associated “Outcome” is to “Maintain diverse faculty and staff applicant pools,” which is a goal or objective, but not an assessable indicator without a standard against which to measure it.

In addition, Outcomes do not always match the indicators – e.g., another KPI is to “Increase the persistence rates of undergraduate racial/ethnic minority students enrolled at WOU compared to national comparator data,” while the Outcome for that indicator is that, “The persistence and graduation rates among the racial/ethnic minority students will be the same or higher than non-minority students,” which is a different metric.

In another case, the meaning of one objective, “WOU is an institution that is accessible to diversity of student populations across the campus community,” is not entirely clear to the panel,

although the associated KPIs help to clarify the intended range of the objective. As a further example of inconsistency between KPI and outcome, the first KPI under this objective references the demographics of Oregon, while the Rationale and the Outcome identify a different reference group – the six-county region -- for that KPI.

A number of KPIs and outcomes are both meaningful in relation to the theme and assessable. For example, “Increase the percentage of first-generation undergraduate college students who persist from freshman to sophomore year at WOU” is meaningfully related to the theme of supporting diversity; and the related outcome of, “The persistence rates for first generation undergraduates will be equal to or greater than the non-first-generation students” is assessable and verifiable. However, some outcomes are not assessable in their current form. For example, “appropriate faculty-to-student ratio” lacks an assessable definition of “appropriate,” as do terms such as, “minimum emissions,” “lowest possible level,” “reasonable rate,” “significant level,” and “significant percentage.”

A few outcomes are not yet defined. For example, the outcomes for “Create, sustain, and document partnerships involving WOU students, faculty, and staff that benefit underserved populations,” are not yet defined. WOU notes that it is currently engaged in collecting data and finalizing plans that will establish assessable outcomes for those KPIs.

VII. Summary

Western Oregon University has provided a year-one self-evaluation report that evidences broad participation and thoughtful attention to the relationships between themes and objectives. WOU has identified an appropriate mission for the institution, for which it is in the process of gaining institution-wide and system-level approval. The mission is supported by three core themes that are clearly derived from its mission and that manifest essential elements of that mission.

While many of the outcomes are assessable, in their current form others are not; and in a few cases there appears to the panel to be confusion between an indicator and an outcome.

Finally, the panel cannot determine how mission fulfillment will be measured – i.e., how “significantly positive on all objectives” will be defined and assessed.

VIII. Commendations and Recommendations

The evaluation panel makes the following commendation and recommendations:

Commendation: Western Oregon University has provided a year-one self-evaluation report that evidences broad participation across the institution and thoughtful attention to the relationship between mission and themes. In addition, identifying which unit or entity is responsible for each Key Performance Indicator demonstrates a commitment to institution-wide involvement in achieving mission fulfillment (Standards 1.A.1 and 1.B.1).

Recommendation One: The panel recommends that WOU clarify its definition of mission fulfillment in the context of its expectations. The institutional outcomes that, collectively, will represent an acceptable threshold or extent of mission fulfillment need to be articulated in a way that lends itself to that determination (Standard 1.A.2).

Recommendation Two: The panel recommends that WOU revise its indicators of achievement to insure that they are all meaningful, assessable and verifiable (Standard 1.B.2).