

Mid-Cycle Evaluation

Washington State University

Pullman, Washington

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

Table of Contents

Evaluators.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Part I: Mission Fulfillment.....	4
Part II: Student Achievement.....	5
Part III: Programmatic Assessment	6
Part IV: Moving Forward	7
<i>Part V: Previous Recommendations.....</i>	<i>8</i>

Evaluators

Dr. Frank Shushok, Jr., Virginia Tech (Chair)

Dr. Rebecca L. Johnson, Oregon State University

Dr. Selena Grace, NWCCU Liaison & Senior Vice President

Introduction

The remote evaluation team for the Mid-Cycle evaluation of Washington State University consisted of Dr. Rebecca (Becky) L. Johnson, Vice President for Oregon State University's Cascades campus, and Dr. Frank Shushok, Jr., Vice President for Student Affairs at Virginia Tech (Chair). Dr. Selena Grace, Senior Vice President at the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), served as the NWCCU liaison during the visit on April 19-20, 2021.

As part of the visit Drs. Johnson and Shushok met with a broad representation of institutional leaders of Washington State University (WSU), including the President, Executive Vice President & Provost, the Faculty Senate, student leaders, system leaders, including campus specific chancellors, and representatives from Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, the Graduate School, as well as others responsible for planning, assessment, and fiscal oversight. In addition, the review team met with representatives from two WSU provided program assessment case studies: The Department of Human Development and the University Common Requirements General Education Programs (UCORE).

Washington State University is Washington's land-grant research institution with a student body of over 31,000 students enrolled across six campuses, including a medical school in Spokane. In June, 2020, Washington State University adopted its first system-wide strategic plan.

Part I: Mission Fulfillment/Institutional Planning

The Mid-Cycle report describes an inclusive process leading up to the new system-wide strategic plan adopted in June, 2020, with many people and committees involved. There were 56 listening sessions with university groups, and surveys for people to provide input. University leadership noted that there is broad support across WSU for defining the success of the institution as fulfilling the modern land grant mission and serving all the people of the state.

Leadership recognized that there were too many metrics in the previous strategic plan, and many were inputs rather than outcomes. The number of metrics were reduced to a manageable number that were more outcomes-based and that demonstrated the impact of WSU.

WSU's planning is based on the principle of using evidence collected through annual assessment to make decisions and allocate resources about institutional development. The plan requires an annual environmental scan and plan review. This gives more opportunities to involve the university community in planning. The organizational structure around planning includes committees working at different levels of the university and has representatives from across the institution.

Institutional Research (IR) has been deeply involved in strategic planning, and it is important that IR staff be represented on committees that are continuing to meet in the scanning and revision processes. New tools, such as Workday and Tableau, are being implemented to improve accuracy, access and analysis of data.

While we observed progress, it is too early to tell whether the new strategic plan and the continuing planning processes will result in data-driven planning and decision-making. The plan has not been in place long enough to see results.

Some faculty and students shared skepticism about the strategic plan and the process. These folks feel that they were asked to provide input in order to “check the box” for participation. They do not operate at the “system planning” level and will need to see how annual assessment in the planning process results in changes that are relevant to them, e.g., more resources if they can show they have helped move the metrics.

There is still some skepticism about the resources being deployed for strategic planning – lots of committees, consultants, and time commitments. People will need to see ‘actions on the ground’ resulting from those efforts. Also, a robust communication plan will be needed so that everyone understands the process and decisions resulting from the strategic plan.

WSU has recognized that the strategic plan cannot be operationalized without a budget model that drives behaviors toward outcomes. The proposed Responsibility Centered Management (RCM) hybrid model has the potential to do that, especially if there is a strategic reserve. Such a model will improve transparency and accountability in the budgeting process. While the model is still being developed, it sounded like campuses will still be budgeted separately, which allows them some degree of autonomy and ability to respond to their regional needs. As a new budget model is implemented, leadership shared a commitment to ensuring that units are not subject to large, immediate negative impacts as a result of the new model.

While progress is being made, it is too early to tell whether the budget model will be successful in driving investments toward strategic plan goals, and internal constituents will certainly be watching attentively.

Part II: Student Achievement

The mid-cycle report and strategic plan places significant emphasis on strengthening the student experience, and especially increasing retention and graduation rates. During the site visit, we learned about many compelling programs and initiatives launched to address these goals, often with grant or other short-term funding streams. The Transformational Change Initiative (TCI) is especially noteworthy. The passion to support students, particularly by closing gaps in unmet need, is to be commended.

The commitment to address equity disparities was a theme throughout conversations with participants, and initiatives to collect multiple types of data, including qualitative measures, will deepen WSU's understanding of how to support students in sub-populations. As WSU moves forward, the need for a coherent overarching framework was expressed. While there are mechanisms to share information about initiatives and brainstorm ideas, the lack of an empowered campus-wide champion to convene stakeholders, advocate for funding, and integrate and disaggregate data as part of an overarching framework is a critical next step.

Having clear evidence for why students are departing (at a sub-population level), identifying high risk students, delineating proposed interventions, and collecting/analyzing both integrated and disaggregated data are important next phase goals.

WSU has improved its student information system and can do sophisticated analyses of factors influencing student achievement. WSU is looking at intersectionality of factors that are usually present for students at risk, rather than looking for single variable causation. WSU is also compiling data on student engagement and how that fosters success. The data are available by campus, program, and other categories so that comparisons can be made and addressed if gaps exist.

WSU has expanded its data collection and analysis beyond at-risk students to at-risk courses to identify barriers to student achievement. This includes using data on course failure/withdrawal rates. One example is the finding that students taking certain combinations of difficult courses in a single term are having more difficulty. This data point can help advisors when working with students on course schedules. Continued investment in these practices will prepare WSU well for the Student Achievement Standards, particularly 1.D.2 and 1.D.4, in its next review.

Providing services to all students in the system at the same "level" is challenging and may be unrealistic. One example shared was of the medical program accreditation requiring "access to recreation" at all locations that resulted in some students in some locations having to pay for gym memberships. WSU should consider how they will address discrepancies in services available across the various locations to ensure comparable services and supports are available to students.

Part III: Programmatic Assessment

Thanks to substantial improvements over the past decade, there is a strong culture of assessment at WSU. Full-cycle assessment is being used across the institution to varying degrees, with several particularly outstanding examples.

During the mid-cycle review, the evaluators were able to gain an in-depth understanding of two institutional examples of programmatic assessment. The first case study was the Bachelor of Arts in Human Development, a large undergraduate degree program offered on

the Pullman and Vancouver campuses, as well as on-line through the WSU Global Campus. During our meeting with campus leaders of this program, we were impressed with the comprehensive, well-coordinated, and collaborative assessment infrastructure in place. Program leaders modeled the collection of multiple sources of data that were consistently analyzed and applied to strengthen the program's aspired learning outcomes. Efforts to collect internship mentor data to measure and enhance student skill building, especially with consideration of students' career choices, was also impressive.

The second institutional example we reviewed highlighted the University Common Requirements (UCORE) General Education Program. The UCORE program is offered on all WSU campuses, including online through the WSU Global Campus. The evaluators were again impressed with the comprehensive and well-coordinated assessment program, and especially the broad-based participation among the many stakeholders across the campuses. We were able to study the UCORE Assessment website, learn about how data were informing course adaptations, and recalibrating the timing of student enrollment in capstone courses to ensure developmental readiness. Moreover, the UCORE assessment of capstone courses across the curriculum allows faculty to address shortcomings within their disciplines rather than defaulting to a one-size-fits-all approach.

The two case studies demonstrated multiple ways that assessment is being used to improve programs and advance learning outcomes. The evaluators expect for these to be exemplars and encourage WSU to highlight the assessment efforts of these two programs.

PART IV: Moving Forward

WSU identified three initiatives it plans to work on as it looks forward to the year seven review, and all are somewhat related. The three areas are diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI); educational equity gaps; and overall retention. The efforts related to DEI will surely impact the educational equity gaps and overall retention. There were a number of initiatives that have already been started, such as diversifying the faculty through a cluster hiring process, addressing unmet financial need, and teaching and learning grants.

There is great energy and enthusiasm from the people addressing these issues, and WSU has invested in positions and programs to move the initiatives forward. We heard the importance of systemic change, not just focusing on changing the numbers or representation of marginalized populations. We saw evidence of participation across the WSU system in these efforts. Trainings are being developed collaboratively and attendance across the system is good. There are new positions with responsibility for DEI at a level of the university that can impact change.

Moving forward, it will be important to have equity goals across all units of WSU, and metrics should include both climate (e.g., sense of belonging, turnover rates, net promoter scores) and representational metrics.

PART V: Previous Recommendations

Response to Recommendations

Standard 3.A.3: “The evaluation committee recommends that Washington State University’s comprehensive planning process is informed by the collection of appropriately defined data, which can be disaggregated to identify differences among campuses, learning modalities, and other subdivisions of this large complex institution.”

Since the 2018 site visit, Washington State University has made progress in building a reporting infrastructure to allow institutional leaders to use disaggregated data to make context specific strategic decisions. The Office of Institutional Research has created enhanced reporting mechanisms, including customized services, that can be detailed at the campus, college, and department level from 2012 to present. The 2021 implementation of “Workday,” is affording enhanced analysis of personnel and financial data that can be disaggregated. At the time of the mid-cycle review, WSU shared a path for applying data streams to monitor, adapt, and strengthen its new strategic plan. At this point, however, these efforts are in the early phases of implementation.

Standard 3.B.3: “The evaluation committee recommends that results of core theme assessment and results of assessments of programs and services are more consistently used for improvement, by informing planning.

In the mid-cycle review, it was clear that Washington State University is applying lessons learned from the previous strategic plan to its new System Strategic Plan. By reducing the number of outcome metrics to track performance, developing a hierarchical management structure, and initiating a dashboard for performance metrics, WSU is positioning itself to use data more effectively to evaluate progress on strategic initiatives, programs, and services. As acknowledged in its response to the standing recommendation, “Washington State University is actively evolving into an institution that bases both planning and action decisions on data...”. The mid-cycle review team observed first-hand the progress on this recommendation and encourages Washington State to remain focused on identifying which data will assess strategic aims, how data across the system can be integrated to offer a holistic evaluation of progress, and how disaggregated data can inform focused attention to sub-population interventions. Ongoing efforts toward full-cycle assessment were demonstrated by two cases studies, the Bachelor of Arts in Human Development, and UCORE, which is system-wide. Applying these practices to the core themes of its new strategic plan will prepare WSU well for its next review.