

Year One Peer-Evaluation Report

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

May 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 Eastern Washington University's year one self-evaluation report:

Chair: Dr. Michael Bowers, Executive Vice President and Provost, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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

Ms. Megan Carlson, Academic Project Specialist, University of Alaska, Anchorage

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, Eastern Washington University was informed that their seven-year cycle would begin with a Year One Report in Spring 2011. This report was submitted by the institution in March 2011 and reviewed by a panel of three evaluators in March and April of that year.

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

The evaluation panel found the Year One Self-Evaluation Report to be well written and summarized the history and mission of the institution. The report addressed the elements of Standard One and was formatted according to Commission expectations.

In addition to addressing the relevant portions of the Eligibility Requirements and Accreditation Standards, the institution also submitted a progress report as requested by NWCCU as a result of a Focused Interim Visit in Spring 2009. Eastern Washington University's accreditation was reaffirmed by the NWCCU Commissioners in July 2009. The progress report specifically addresses issues relating to the recommendation listed in the Spring 2009 Focused Interim Evaluation Report. The evaluators' findings related to this recommendation are noted under Section Two.

Eligibility Requirements

The Standard One Self-Evaluation Report indicates that the Eastern Washington Board of Trustees reviewed and approved the EWU mission in June of 2005. The report also notes that the Core Themes were approved by the President's Executive Committee in Fall 2010. However, the report does not indicate the authority under which the Eastern Washington University operates and offers degrees. In light of the late notice from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities about year-one self-evaluation reports addressing eligibility requirements 2 and 3, we encourage Eastern Washington 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.

Concern One: The panel reminds Eastern Washington University to provide a brief summary of how the institution meets NWCCU eligibility requirements when preparing the Year Three Report.

Section One: Standard One Findings —Mission, Core Themes, and Expectations

Standard 1.A.1 Mission

As noted above, Eastern Washington University’s mission was last reviewed in 2004 and approved by the EWU Board of Trustees. The university also has articulated six strategic goals underpinning their mission and has mapped their institutional strategic goals onto the six goals developed by their Board of Trustees. The three Core Themes developed by EWU align with both the mission of the institution and the six strategic goals of the institution and the Board of Trustees, respectively. The EWU Year One Report notes that “The mission recognizes the EWU commitment to instruction at a number of academic levels The core themes, their objectives and their outcomes collectively express the university’s mission, strategic goals, and the goals of the Board of Trustees.”

Standard 1.A.2 Mission Fulfillment

To determine mission fulfillment Eastern Washington University notes that “each core theme objective will be rated according to Excellent, Good, Fair, or Poor. An acceptable extent of mission fulfillment will be met when 80% of the objectives are rated Excellent or Good. Any objective rated as Poor will be addressed in [the Year Three report], along with an initial quality improvement plan.”

While the overall shape and direction of EWU’s approach to assessing mission fulfillment is sound and consistent with the structures and processes they have developed, the evaluators find it difficult to understand the concrete connections between specific performance on the indicators under each objective and how that performance is linked specifically to how performance relative to a given objective would be rated Excellent, Good, Fair, or Poor. The evaluators urge EWU both to develop concrete benchmarks or expectations for performance for each indicator (see comments under 1.B.2 below) and to tie these indicator benchmarks to their assessment of mission fulfillment through specific criteria for the performance ratings assigned to their objectives.

Standard 1.B.1 Core Themes

Eastern Washington University has identified and described three Core Themes which align with its mission as a public university and the six Strategic Goals of their Strategic Plan, as well as the six Goals of the EWU Board of Trustees. The three Core Themes are as follows:

Core Theme 1: A rigorous and engaged student learning experience.

Core Theme 2: An academic community that supports and engages faculty and staff throughout their careers.

Core Theme 3: An institution-wide commitment to local, national, and international community engagement and awareness that benefits the university and region.

For each Core Theme, the university articulates from two to three objectives with two to four outcomes articulated under each objective, with one to five indicators designated for each outcome. For the three Core Themes, there are a total of 9 Objectives with 12 associated outcomes. EWU proposes to use 39 indicators to understand performance relative to mission fulfillment.

Standard 1.B.2 Core Theme Objectives and Indicators

Overall the university has concretely tied each Core Theme to the university mission and strategic plans, both the institutional plan and the EWU Board of Trustees plan. Each Core Theme is well described, as is its place in the larger context of institutional planning and assessment. The objectives underlying each Core Theme are appropriate to understanding how that theme is tied to mission fulfillment. The basic framework exists for providing a sound understanding of how the university will measure performance under each Core Theme and where and how university resources need to be directed to accomplish desired objectives.

For each of the three Core Themes, the institution provided an overall rationale of why the indicators are meaningful, assessable and verifiable indicators of achievement. As their report notes “All three core themes include indicators of productivity, reflecting, in part, the state legislature’s concern with higher education degrees in Washington. Thresholds for productivity contained in the institutional indicators have been established” However, the evaluators found no information in the Year One Report which spoke to the specifics of these thresholds and how the institution would employ them. Overall, the indicators seem appropriate for understanding performance relative to each outcome and related objective, but without concrete benchmarks set for each indicator which articulate specific expectations for that measure, the evaluators find it unclear how the institution will ultimately measure progress toward mission fulfillment. Further, the institution should consider whether single measures, which is to say indicators, under several outcomes will render an accurate picture of institutional performance. The task remaining for EWU relative to the objectives and related indicators is, in short, to articulate in specific terms for each indicator what successful mission fulfillment looks like.

Section Two: Progress Report Findings

As noted above in the Introduction section of this report, Eastern Washington University also submitted a progress report as requested by NWCCU as a result of a Focused Interim Visit in Spring 2009. Eastern Washington University’s accreditation was reaffirmed by the NWCCU Commissioners in July 2009. The progress report specifically addresses issues relating to the recommendation listed in the Spring 2009 Focused Interim Report. The evaluators’ findings relative to progress made toward the recommendation are listed below.

RECOMMENDATION FROM 2009

Although Eastern Washington University has implemented a strong formal assessment program and has made significant progress toward ensuring that its assessment activities lead to the improvement of teaching and learning, a number of programs are still not responding to requests for program assessment data. Because those programs and hence the University cannot then provide full evidence that its assessment activities are leading to the improvement of teaching and learning, the reviewer recommends that the University proceed expeditiously with its planned activities to complete the last phase of its assessment plan (Standard 2.B.3).

As EWU notes in their progress report, the institution approaches learning assessment from “a broad perspective that extends beyond traditional boundaries of academic learning outcomes and the classroom environment.” The evidence presented in the institution’s progress report supports the finding that EWU has successfully laid the foundation for a culture of assessment that should, over time, encourage their full range of academic programs to take advantage of support for learning assessment that the institution is developing to enable effective assessment activities across the university. The progress report first reviewed the infrastructures developed to ensure systematic integration of assessment into educational programs, the effectiveness of which were recognized by the Focused Interim Visit Report in 2009. Then the progress report described subsequent progress in student learning outcomes assessment.

Assessment efforts across EWU’s four colleges, as described in their progress report, are proceeding well along the course set by the institution in response to the recommendation above, as well as earlier recommendations. For the 2009-2010 Student Learning Outcome Program assessments, more than 50 program areas across the four colleges participated; those few programs which did not participate in that year’s cycle were undergoing comprehensive self-study processes related to professional accreditations. Efforts undertaken relative to EWU’s General Education Curriculum Assessment program were similarly robust. A notable feature of these efforts has been concrete documentation of how the assessment data have been used to revise program/curricular offerings.

Next steps for EWU, as noted in their Year One report, include institutionalizing departmental assessment coordinators across the four colleges and to host a series of coordinator training workshops over the course of this spring and the coming year. Plans for next year’s student learning outcomes assessment have been communicated to departments, and the process set in motion for this next cycle. Similarly, plans for the next piece of the General Education assessment are well in hand and will focus on university competencies in English, Mathematics, and Computer Literacy for the next year.

In sum, the evaluators find that EWU has built a sound and consistent assessment process for both its program-based student learning outcomes assessment, as well as for its university-level General Education competencies assessment. The Advisory Committee for Academic Assessment seems to be functioning well and providing solid guidance and oversight of both processes at the Provost’s level.

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. Eastern Washington University has taken advantage of this opportunity and has articulated a sound set of structures and processes focused on strategic planning, assessment, and budgeting that should enable the institution to direct resources effectively toward mission fulfillment.

Commendations and Recommendations

The evaluation panel makes the following commendations and recommendations:

Commendation One: Eastern Washington University has made impressive progress toward a data-driven institutional culture of assessment since their last comprehensive evaluation and subsequent focused interim visit. Programs across all four colleges are well-engaged with data collection and analysis aimed at understanding how expectations for learning are being met, and program faculty are using the results of the assessments to drive program changes. The panel strongly urges the university to continue this progress.

Recommendation One: The panel recommends that the university develop and assign specific designations of an acceptable level of performance for each outcome indicator for each objective under each Core Theme, articulating in specific terms for each indicator what successful mission fulfillment looks like. (Standard 1.A.2)