Mid-Cycle Peer Evaluation Report

Lake Washington Institute of Technology

Kirkland, Washington

October 13-14, 2014

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

Ms. Carol Schaafsma
Retired, Executive Vice President
Linn-Benton Community College
Albany, OR 97321

Ms. Tracy Donnelly
Director of Health Sciences
Clackamas Community College
Oregon City, OR 97045

Dr. Pamela J. Goad (Off-site Liaison)
Vice President
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities
Redmond, WA 98052
**Introduction and Scope of Visit**

Lake Washington Institute of Technology (LWTech) is a public technical college located in Kirkland, Washington. It has evolved from a vocational training school to a technical college offering a comprehensive curriculum that includes professional-technical associate programs, applied baccalaureate programs, basic skills, academic preparation and continuing education programs.

In the Fall of 2011, LWTech underwent a comprehensive Evaluation resulting in four recommendations and the following year underwent a Year-One Peer Evaluation resulting in continuation of the recommendations addressed. The Commission reaffirmed accreditation after both visits. Recommendation #2 will be explored as part of this visit and addressed in a separate report. Recommendations 1, 3 and 4 will be addressed at the time of the Year Seven report.

The Mid-Cycle Evaluation is intended to ascertain an institution’s readiness to provide evidence of mission fulfillment and sustainability in year seven. This visit is meant to assess if an institution has the assessment processes in place to successfully complete a year seven self-evaluation and visit. A confidential recommendation of accreditation status is not included as part of the Mid-Cycle visit.

**Assessment of Institution’s Self-Evaluation Report and Support Materials**

LWTech was well on the way to completing their Year Three Self-Evaluation Report when asked by the NWCCU to participate in a newly developed Mid-Cycle Evaluation process. Thus, evaluators for this visit were sent both the Mid-Cycle report and appendices as well as the Year Three report and appendices. All reports, including a college catalog and Basic Institutional Data Form, were received in a timely fashion and sent as electronic and hard copy.

Both reports have proven useful in reflecting on the level of institutional preparedness for a year seven report and visit. Although the Mid-Cycle Evaluation answered the questions as requested by the Commission, the evaluators found the information from the Year Three report about Standard One and the information in Standard 2.C to be especially informative in relationship to understanding the institution’s core themes, objectives, indicators and educational assessment efforts.

It was evident to the evaluators, when reading the mid-cycle report, that a good deal of effort had gone into ensuring the clear connection between many of the indicators and the core theme. And for the most part, the evaluators could see the connection clearly, even without a narrative to describe the connection. Although interviews have provided some of the answers and increased our understanding, the following areas did not appear to be adequately covered in the report. These include: What is your mission statement? (We did not find it in the Mid-Cycle Evaluation report.) What does entrance point mean? Does counting the number of outreach events indicate success in relation to your mission? What are your global outcomes (they we not available in the appendices) and how do they connect to your core themes and mission fulfillment? Does the money you bring in really reflect your mission or the external engagement core theme and how does this demonstrate partnerships? What do you mean by partnership? How are outreach events attended or not attended (Indicator 1.A) linked to the core
theme? Again, the information and descriptions provided in group discussions and interviews helped fill in the gap, but these areas could be more thoroughly addressed in the next report.

The college provided a well-organized and well-equipped team room for evaluators. The team would like to thank the college, and in particular Dr. Ruby Hayden and Dr. Dennis Long for all their work in preparation for the visit.

**Observations of the Institution’s Plans for Aligning Mission with Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability**

Lake Washington defines mission fulfillment as the achievement of “a minimum threshold (75%) of core theme outcomes”. This definition requires a set of core theme outcomes that are closely tied to the mission of the institution. The rationale for each core theme, and each outcome of those core themes, must point the institution back to its mission, providing a laser-like focus on that mission. In this way, the institution’s definition of mission fulfillment can help it stay focused on the work that is most important to its mission, and the core theme outcomes will provide feedback and focus for improvement efforts that will make a difference in mission fulfillment.

Lake Washington appears to have some core theme outcomes and indicators that are directly linked to the mission. These are especially evident in the student achievement core theme. However, other core theme outcomes and indicators, although related to the core theme “title” and mapped to the description of the core theme, do not appear, on paper, to relate strongly to college mission fulfillment. Stated another way, what do these data points mean in relation to the mission of preparing students for today’s careers and tomorrow’s opportunities? How do they add to the assessment of mission fulfillment for this college? And how do they help you improve your efforts to fulfill your mission? The college did not provide clear evidence and rationale of this relationship within its report, although the connections became clearer as a result of interviews and conversations.

The college has done a good job of bringing together strategic planning and core theme planning efforts (Institutional Planning and Effectiveness Committee) to align short term (five year) strategic goals with core themes. The Strategic Plan has been adopted by the Board, vetted with the College and is a process upon which the college is committed to success. Using the developed goals and strategies, the college has identified strategic plan performance measures, and attempted to align these measures with the core theme outcomes where possible. This alignment has again focused on the core themes, and might benefit from conversations that look at the strategic plan, its relationship to the mission statement, and the opportunities to contribute to efforts to improve mission fulfillment. Can this plan add to the story of mission fulfillment and support but not duplicate the efforts of the core theme outcomes?

This same planning and effectiveness committee is charged with analyzing core theme outcome results and providing recommendations for areas of emphasis and priorities. The committee expects to have data to analyze after the 2014-2015 academic year. Although the institution has identified who will do this, and when, it is unclear to evaluators if this committee has developed a process for how to analyze results and set priorities. The committee is encouraged to begin now to determine methodology and processes for the analysis and setting of priorities. In conversation with the committee, an idea
emerged to look at data currently available and use it to test and develop new processes. These "practice runs" might be helpful to the institution in a variety of ways. The committee may find it needs additional capacity, expertise, or representation as it embarks on this work. The committee may find ways to streamline its processes to make them more effective when all the data is available for analysis. They may also find ways to do some initial analysis of current strategic plan priorities (such as completion and diversity) and tying them to mission fulfillment. This is clearly a committee that is ready and willing to continue its work. Following through on these ideas could give the committee, and the institution, a head start on this work.

Overall, the institution appears it has been intently focused on core themes, and now needs to turn toward providing a clear picture of how mission fulfillment will be or is achieved. For a successful year seven report and visit, the institution will need to demonstrate the systematic collection, analysis and use of evidence of outcomes over several years and the thoughtful analysis comparing outcomes to institutional mission.

Observations of Institution's Examples from Student Achievement Core Theme

In its Mid-Cycle Report, LWTech used its student achievement core theme as an example of how it has operationalized its mission and themes, progressing from objectives to indicators to outcomes to mission fulfillment. The college readily admitted in its report that they had not yet examined mission fulfillment because 2014-15 data is not yet available.

Indicators for this core theme include data that already has been collected over time. They include assessments developed by the institution, data collected throughout the state, and data collected nationally that allows for national comparisons. Of the four core themes, data points for Student Achievement represent the most obvious connection to mission intention and mission fulfillment.

The institution has an educational assessment and improvement process in place that includes processes for program outcome assessment and review as well as assessment of institution-wide (global) outcomes. These assessment processes, which involve both full-time and part-time faculty across the institution, are the focus of annual training. Outcomes are linked to specific courses and certain outcomes are assessed each year. Through a three year rotation, all outcomes are assessed and teaching improvements are identified. This system appears relevant and well-designed, but could be improved before the year seven report by emphasizing and increasing participation, ensuring teaching improvements are implemented and assessed again, and examining results across the institution to identify common themes that might be better addressed by institutional response rather than individual department or faculty responses. This more institution-wide look at assessment might help the college more clearly connect the educational assessment work with mission fulfillment.

The student achievement core theme and the completion initiative report of 2014 appear to have strong data and a narrative that demonstrates key areas of success and focuses on key areas for improvement. These data demonstrate a system and process that is in place and people throughout the institution are paying attention to it. The other three core themes could benefit from this same clear narrative, relevant data, and common understanding across the institution. When discussing External Engagement
and College Community during the visit, there was less agreement on the meaning of these core themes and their alignment with the college mission. This variance in understanding of these two core themes, and perceived lack of strength in some of the indicators for these core themes, should be addressed before the Year seven report and visit.

**Strengths and Opportunities for Future Work**

Throughout the visit, employees identified and evaluators observed many strengths in the work the college is doing, ultimately to prepare evidence-based evaluations that describe the extent to which you are fulfilling your mission (Standard 5). Some of these strengths include:

- People recognize and appreciate the collaborative spirit that has developed around this work. It was described as (and evaluators agree that it appears to be) energizing, transparent, inclusive, focused, and meaningful.
- You have a clearly stated mission that drives institutional programs and services and you appear to have a shared understanding of its meaning across the institution.
- You have taken time to carefully consider and fully vet core themes, outcomes, indicators and measures across many parts of the institution and all employee groups as well as students.
- You have identified many indicators that are collectible over time and that you can use for years to come, assuming they prove to be meaningful and useful for identifying areas of improvement.
- You have developed an effective educational assessment process, including global outcomes and program outcomes, which you work to continuously improve. The detail associated with the collection of data from each student and their performance is impressive.
- Your decision to align core themes with the strategic plan appears to be a decision that is serving the college well and is gaining momentum in collaborative work toward continuous improvement. The two priorities for this year appear to have the support and attention of the institution. Strengths of this strategic plan include it can be changed, results can be measured, and it captures work that is meaningful to the college community.

Throughout the visit, employees identified and evaluators observed some areas that are opportunities for continued work as you continuously improve on the path toward mission fulfillment. These areas include:

- More clarity across the institution about mission fulfillment – what it is, what it means, and how do you tell your story of mission fulfillment using both data and the passion you share for your mission?
- Continuous monitoring of your indicators to make sure they keep you focused on reaching mission fulfillment. This work is most needed in the Pathways, External Engagement, and College Community core themes.
- Increased consistency of participation and implementation of teaching improvements in your educational assessment processes. As this is an indicator of the Student Achievement core
theme, having a higher rate of participation college-wide is important to show mission fulfillment.

- Clearly define processes for analyzing core them data, setting priorities and assessing your mission fulfillment status. Will you be better prepared to dive into the data if you can identify and begin implementing processes early? Standard 5 refers to results over time, so multiple years of data, analysis, improvement and mission fulfillment status is needed in the year seven report. Although planning is an integral part of the seven year review cycle, analysis and drawing conclusions is an equal part of this iterative process. The college will need to shift the focus from planning to analysis and set the intention of creating a narrative about how these data support Mission Fulfillment.

- Develop methodology to collect the core theme indicator measures that aren’t currently being collected. Creating and implementing a plan to address this gap, and arriving at year seven with a robust analysis is imperative.

- Clearly define the role of the Board in the evaluation of mission fulfillment. The evaluators heard that the Board has a desire to use a data-driven governance model and it appears that the college has a plan to assist them in this work. When asked how the Board is involved in the accreditation process, including understanding the core themes, there did not appear to be the same intentional plan outlined.

Conclusion

Throughout the reports, the institution appeared focused on its core themes and objectives, rather than fulfillment of its mission. The interviews during the visit provided evaluators with greater clarity about the connection between core themes, objectives and selected data to be measured. The institution can improve their self-evaluation for year seven by including more developed rational of these connections in the report. The interviews also provided an opportunity to see the institution begin to shift its thinking and focus to fulfillment of its mission through the analysis of the core theme indicators.

The purpose and drive of many of the groups working on the planning and effectiveness processes at LWtech was evident to the evaluators. This was especially true in the Institutional Planning and Effectiveness Committee. The passion for your mission and the work you are doing was strongly felt from each individual on the committee. People are taking their tasks seriously and proud of their accomplishments. Their confidence in their ability to tackle any task at hand is impressive. Employees appear committed to the success of the students and the success of the institution. If the college can maintain this drive and use it to create processes that are specifically intended to do the work required for the seven year report, the college will be well poised to meet the intended requirements to show how you as a college are striving to meet mission fulfillment and how you are continuously improving in your efforts to do so.