

Western Washington University

A Case Study on the Institutional Dynamics and Climate for Student Assessment and Academic Innovation



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I. INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

A. Brief institutional description

Western Washington University (WWU) is a comprehensive liberal arts university in northwest Washington state between the North Cascades National Park and the San Juan Islands. WWU is situated in Bellingham, a city of 62,000, overlooking Bellingham Bay and many of Puget Sound's 172 San Juan Islands. The campus is 90 miles north of Seattle and 55 miles south of Vancouver, B.C.

WWU is one of six state funded, four year institutions of higher education located in Washington. The school operates on a September-to-June academic year (quarter system) with a six-and nine-week summer session.

WWU is organized into a Graduate School and six undergraduate colleges: College of Arts and Sciences, College of Business and Economics, College of Fine and Performing Arts, Fairhaven College, Huxley College of Environmental Studies and Woodring College of Education.

To fulfill its academic objectives, Western's curriculum includes a program of broad general education; intensive studies designed to develop scholarly competence in the arts and sciences; professional programs for both public school personnel and a variety of other professional's; and graduate programs in professional education, the arts and the sciences. Western's undergraduate and graduate programs lead to the following degrees: Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Arts in Education, Bachelor of Fine Arts, Bachelor of Music, Bachelor of Science, Master of Arts, Master of Business Administration, Master of Education, Master of Music and Master of Science.

As of fall 1998, WWU employed 542 full time equivalent faculty, including 433 full-time faculty members. Of those, 87 percent had terminal degrees. The student/faculty ratio is 21:1. Nearly 90 percent of the faculty hold full or terminal degrees, and faculty, staff and administrators participate in national and international forums in their areas of expertise.

Enrollment during the fall of 1998 included 11,655 full-and part-time students. Approximately 92 percent of the students come from the state of Washington. Undergraduates totaled 10,910 while post baccalaureate students numbered 741. WWU has students from 47 other states and the District of Columbia, led by Alaska, California, Oregon, and Hawaii, and from 39 other nations, led by Canada and Japan. Students of color comprise 13.2 percent of the student body. In 1997, students of color made up 13.6 percent of the 1997 graduating class. This figure is up from 10.8 percent in 1996. These numbers have increased since 1991. According to the 1996-97 Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange report, Western's retention rates for African American and Native-Americans were higher than national averages, and very competitive for all students of color.

The governing body of WWU is the Board of Trustees, which consists of eight members appointed by the governor and confirmed by the State Senate and includes a student appointee. This body establishes policy for WWU; approves appointments; executes contracts on

recommendation of the President and in consultation with the faculty, the staff, and the students; and performs other duties prescribed by law. The President of WWU is the representative and spokesperson for the Board of Trustees. The faculty, through the Faculty Senate, works closely with the President and Provost/Vice President for Academic Affairs in formulating, implementing, and evaluating university policies. It is the policy of Western Washington University that there shall be meaningful participation by the faculty, through the Faculty Senate or other recognized faculty bodies, in matters relating to academic planning and budgeting and to other matters at all levels of internal university governance. This is consistent with the University's policy of open participation in governance.

B. The College of Arts and Science

The College of Arts and Sciences, Western's largest academic division, contains 20 departments offering more than 50 major programs at both bachelor's and master's degree levels. Students may select majors in the traditional disciplines of the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences, and a variety of professional and applied areas. In addition, there is available a variety of interdisciplinary programs, and students may design their own majors through a program managed by the Department of Liberal Studies. The College offers its undergraduate students a three-component liberal education: first, a program of education-in-breadth through General University Requirements intended to prepare students for post-graduate life as educated persons and citizens; second, a program of education-in-depth in a disciplinary, interdisciplinary, professional, pre-professional or vocational major designed to prepare students for post-graduate careers or advanced courses of study; and third, a choice of elective courses that is aimed to help satisfy the student's curiosity about any of the multitude of subjects which the University's curriculum embraces.

II. Institutional Approach to Undergraduate Assessment

A. Overview of History and Development of Institutions Approach

While assessment of WWU's educational effectiveness began long before many national and state initiatives, in 1987 the Washington State Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) conceived a Master Plan "to develop a multi-dimensional program of performance evaluation" for each of its member colleges and universities. The goal of this plan was to use assessment as a link between two separate but complementary goals: to improve the quality of undergraduate education and to provide needed information about student outcomes to the HECB. This plan was operationalized in 1989 in a resolution directing each member four-year institution and community college to follow an evaluation program.

According to this resolution, the evaluation program had two complementary goals:

- A. Provide a means for institutional self-evaluation and improvement.
- B. Meet the state's needs for institutional accountability in order to assure quality in the state's higher education system.

The belief of the HECB is that "assessment is at present more valuable as an aid to helping institutions continuously improve than as a tool for evaluating them as they existed one or two years ago."

As a result, there have been two series of assessment reports from the member institutions, the first series, which covered the 1991-1993 biennium, and the second, which covered the 1993-1995 biennium. In the second biennium assessment, the reports were used to focus attention on "how students learn, how faculty/curricula/institutions help them learn, and what contributes to student learning". With the aid of these reports, the state has documented specific examples of how assessment has already been, and can continue to be an "aid to policy."

B. Type of Student Performance Data Collected

The Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing (OIAT), in conjunction with the Office of Survey Research, conducts surveys, collects and analyzes data, and writes reports on a variety of subjects associated with student behavior, student performance, and university performance. These reports provide valuable information for improving university programs and services through the assessment process, and for measuring and reporting how well the University is accomplishing its various missions through the accountability process.

Through the Testing Center, OIAT also manages the administration of student evaluations of teaching, and provides test scoring and grade book services to faculty. It also works closely with the Center for Instructional Innovation (CII) in providing data for improving the quality of both teaching and student learning throughout Western's academic programs.

Assessment reports cover a wide range of topics, from academic programs, health attitudes, and student risk behaviors, to time-to-degree studies, graduation rates, and employer satisfaction surveys.

III. Institution-wide Support Patterns Guiding and Promoting Student Assessment

Institutional support for assessment comes straight from the President's Office in various forms including personal "good job" notes from the president. Despite the fact that assessment is not yet fully supported or endorsed by all of the academic departments, the administration of WWU has made it clear that assessment is a valuable part of the University.

WWU's commitment and support of assessment was further made clear in their 1999-2000 catalog which states that "...as part of an ongoing effort to assure the quality of the education received by its students, Western Washington University has instituted a comprehensive assessment program designed to measure student learning outcomes." The catalog further states that "from time to time students may be asked to participate in outcomes assessment by completing satisfaction surveys, sitting for achievement examinations, compiling portfolios of their academic work or providing other academic performance indicators." According to the catalog, the purpose of all such activities is "to monitor the quality of Western's academic program." As such, students are strongly encouraged to participate in these assessment efforts when asked to do so.

A. Regular Institution-wide Events Related to Student Assessment

WWU established the Center for Instructional Innovation (CII) to enhance both teaching and learning at WWU. The center promotes discussion and debate about teaching and learning, provides support to faculty in instructional innovation and course development, and helps nurture a culture of educational innovation and instructional excellence in their teaching.

While CII provides workshops and seminars, sponsors speakers, and holds open houses, very little of this activity is centered specifically on assessment.

B. Planning and Coordination for Student Assessment

OIAT has actively responded to state mandates in accountability as well as developed useful studies, surveys, and data analysis, according to the WWU's 1997 accreditation self study, many of the faculty and staff stated that there is no centralized coordination of assessment activities. Organizations such as the Committee of the Assessment of Teaching and Learning (established by the Faculty Senate), the Enrollment Management Group (deals with admission and retention issues), and the Accountability Work Group have all had some level of influence on student assessment, but it has not occurred through a centralized process. This lack of centralization in assessment was also noticed by the WWU accreditation committee that wrote in their report that "the lack of a formal institutionalized assessment plan has created select deficiencies in educational assessment at course and educational levels."

As a result of WWU's lack of a coordinated assessment effort, the accreditation committee recommended that the academic leadership of WWU actively engage faculty in defining learning objectives and developing specific plans to assess and evaluate outcomes at the course and educational program level.

IV. External Influences

A. State Level

As mentioned earlier the Washington state Higher Education Coordinating Board has considerable influence over WWU and other state institutions of higher education. HECB is a nine-member board of citizens, appointed by the governor, to represent the broad public interest in the development of higher education policy.

The HECB administers state-funded student financial aid, and performs some oversight and authorization functions in addition to its financial aid and policy duties. HECB expects the following components to be incorporated by each four year and community college systems performance evaluation programs: collection of entry-level baseline data; intermediate assessment of quantitative and writing skills, and other appropriate intermediate assessment as determined by the institution; end of program assessment; post-graduate assessment of the satisfaction of alumni and employers; and periodic program reviews.

Writing and quantitative skills, alumni and employer satisfaction are mandated outcomes arenas. The manner in which these are measured is left to the discretion of the community college

system and the individual four-year public institutions. There is no indication that this autonomy in measurement has created difficulty in making comparisons across institutions.

Despite HECB's "dangling carrot" approach to assessment, many of the WWU faculty and staff involved with assessment feel that HECB, along with the state legislature, have attempted to negotiate realistic accountability measures on which WWU, HECB, and the state can agree.

B. Regional Accreditation

The regional accrediting agency for WWU is the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (NASC). WWU's 1997 self-study report to NASC contained detailed departmental responses to the following standards:

- 1) That degree and certificate programs demonstrate coherent designs, appropriate breadth, depth, sequencing of courses, synthesis of learning, assessment of learning outcomes, required use of library and other information sources.
- 2) For each academic program, a description of the degree objectives and coverage of content, intellectual skills, creative capabilities, and methods of inquiry is provided.
- 3) That a policy on educational assessment be developed which includes student information, mid-program assessments, end-of-program assessments, program review and specialized accreditation, alumni satisfaction and loyalty, dropout and non-completers, and employment and employer satisfaction measures.

V. Academic Management Policies and Practices

A. Resource Allocation (for assessment activity or unit performance)

As mentioned previously, HECB and the state legislature have allocated funds to various state institutions that meet certain accountability measures. According to one interviewee, WWU lost approximately \$100,000 for not meeting one of the retention standards set by HECB.

At the institution level there is no indication that separate funds are allocated for or tied to assessment or assessment outcomes. However, another interviewee stated that within departments, assessment reports could affect the way resources get distributed for programs and initiatives.

B. Student Assessment Information Systems (scheduled, computerized, teaching, data integration)

Western is in the process of coordinating a campus wide student assessment database. Included in this effort are plans to develop a website that will allow various faculty and staff access to data that is related to their departments. Currently, all student assessment information is maintained and disseminated by the OIAT.

C. Accessibility of Individual Student Data to Various Groups

There are currently four publications that provide varying degrees of information to various groups:

1. **Technical Report:** This is typically a 15-50 page report that provides great detail about a particular study including all statistical information.
2. **Focus Summaries:** Generally viewed as the “People Magazine” version of the technical report. This is a more user friendly, condensed version of the technical report minus much of the statistical information.
3. **Dialog Series:** These are discussion papers that focus on the most prevalent issues at the University.
4. **Info Fact Sheets:** Provides bits and pieces of information that is typically of interest to parents, legislatures and students.

All of these reports are generated out of the OIAT and are accessible to the public.

D. Student Policies (purposes stated, participation required or encouraged individual feedback)

There is no indication that any student policies have been established as a result of assessment studies.

E. Professional Development Opportunities for faculty, academic or student affairs administrators or students on or off campus

According to many of the interviewee’s, WWU provides many opportunities for professional development. WWU typically provides funding for attendance to national conferences and meetings to faculty and staff. In addition there are several offices on campus that also provide opportunities for professional development.

Center for Instructional Innovation

As mentioned earlier, The Center for Instructional Innovation (CII) is dedicated to the enhancement of teaching and learning at WWU. The Center promotes professional development through the hosting of conferences addressing various initiatives in teaching and learning.

In the fall of 1998, Western joined a national conversation sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation on the scholarship of teaching. During the 1999/2000 school year, part two of the Campus Conversation called for Western, along with 130+ colleges and universities to continue a dialogue on the scholarship of teaching.

Center for Service Learning

WWU has a Center for Service-Learning (CSL) which exists to facilitate quality educational experiences through community-based service learning. CSL connects campus and community resources to create diverse learning experiences and to serve community needs. Its programs integrate the academic, service and reflection components of service learning by providing resources, including training and technical assistance, to students, faculty and community.

Two of the major programs sponsored by CSL during the 1999/2000 school year were:

1. Brown bag sessions to discuss the value and impact of service learning in various departments.
2. A Continuum of Service-Learning Conference to bring together students and faculty from around the country to discuss service learning.

F. Faculty Evaluation or Rewards for Promotion, Salary, or other recognition

There is very little in the literature obtained that discusses faculty evaluation or promotion relative to assessment. However, many of the faculty that were interviewed stated that to their knowledge, assessment was not a factor in faculty evaluation or promotion.

G. Academic Planning or Review at department, general education, or course level in student support services.

While assessment has been an active part of the WWU culture for more than 10 years, academic planning as a result of assessment data has been slow in occurring at the department level. However, several of the faculty interviewed stated that assessment is beginning to have an impact on academic planning within certain departments.

VI. Assessment Culture and Climate

A. Nature and Role of Assessment in Institution

As stated earlier in this report, assessment has long been a significant part of the culture of WWU. While recent state mandates have increased the necessity of assessment at WWU, WWU still view assessment as essential to providing quality education to its students.

B. Meaning to Faculty Role

Despite the importance of assessment at WWU, it has had little impact on the role of faculty. Within some departments, financial incentives may be tied assessment, but not on an institutional level. However, outside of those departments, and in some instances in those departments, many faculty are somewhat resistant to assessment. Much of this resistance appears to be due to the confusion surrounding the institutions definition of "assessment" and what role the faculty should play in assessment.

C. Its role in reshaping academic governance patterns in the institution

While assessment has been utilized for nearly 2 decades at WWU, its impact on the reshaping of academic governance has been little. This is in part because the utilization of assessment is not evenly spread across departments. While some departments fully embrace and use assessment, other departments see assessment as a necessary evil. As such, the reshaping of academic governance occurs primarily on the department level. At the institutional level, assessment is used to measure the quality of education students receive at WWU. However, it appears to have had little affect on the reshaping of academic governance patterns at Western Washington University.