

Westfield State University

Institutional Response to the Final Report of the Evaluation Team Prepared for the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges

Introduction

Before addressing the findings presented by the Evaluation Team in their Final Report, the Westfield State community would like to express its gratitude for the Team's efforts on our behalf and our appreciation for the clarity of the group's insights.

The Evaluation Team's appreciation for the University's unwavering "focus on the centrality of students and their educational experience" affirms the institution's fundamental character and culture. Among the many strengths identified in the Final Report are the passion and commitment of the University's faculty and staff; a clear focus on teaching and advising and admirable retention and graduation rates; outstanding student support programs; a consistent sense of identity and mission throughout the institution; a strong commitment to shared governance; notable student engagement in governance; an open and inclusive administration; a transparent budget process and sound financial management; and increasingly effective civic relations with the City of Westfield and across the region.

The team also identified several areas of concern, consistent with weaknesses recognized in the University's Self-Study. Our response to those concerns and some minor issues follows.

Concern: Westfield needs to develop a more effective integration of strategic and academic planning. Current processes do not appear mutually consistent and the complex organizational landscape of committees and other governance structures impedes progress on initiatives in planning, curricular revision and assessment.

As the Final Report notes, "Westfield colleagues acknowledged the need for better coordination between committees and other process limitations to their progress." While the University is pleased with the successes it has had in developing and implementing a comprehensive and inclusive planning process in the decade since the 2002 Final Report identified planning as an area of concern, the need for "more integration and coordination among planning committees" was identified as an Area for Improvement in the University's Self-Study.

Over the past several years, the All College Committee (ACC) created a number of discrete Special Committees to address distinct planning needs. Following the 2002 Comprehensive Evaluation and the 2007 Fifth-Year interim report, the implementation of strategic goals and priorities and the evaluation of progress have been a focus of

considerable attention. The Evaluation Team concludes that the impact has been positive: “The supporting materials supplied with the Self-Study suggest that the plan’s prioritized goals for the most part were achieved, or were determined to be ongoing beyond the timeframe of the plan.” At the time of the visit, the University’s Strategic Planning Committee was in the final stages of work on new mission, values, and vision statements and in the process of the development a new (2012-2017) Strategic Plan. [Since the Evaluation Team visited campus, the University’s All College Committee and president approved the new statements and the 2012-2017 Strategic Plan (Appendix A), which are on the agenda for the Board of Trustees meeting on October 11th, 2012.]

Rather than also charge the Strategic Planning Committee with the concurrent development of a campus process for academic planning, the ACC created a separate committee for that purpose. While the Committee made significant progress in developing a process and establishing evaluation criteria – arguably, more progress than a single committee could have made while also dealing with the development of the mission statement and strategic plan – it became clear over the course of AY12 that there was significant overlap in the mission and goals of the Strategic Planning Committee and the Committee on Academic Planning. Both committees expired at the end of June 2012; when the ACC reconvenes in September, it will create a single planning committee to manage implementation of the Strategic Plan and continue the academic planning process. The ACC will take the Evaluation Team’s recommendations into consideration prior to reestablishing any other ad hoc or special committees, and will look for ways to streamline our committee structure: this will include looking closely at the role of the Institutional Assessment Committee and Long Range Planning Committee before reestablishing either.

Concern: Current resources directed toward institutional planning may not be sufficient to provide effective support to planning and evaluation work.

The University’s Self-Study noted that the workload in the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment was “too much responsibility for one person,” and we have created a new position to provide additional capacity in that area. The position was posted in June 2012, and we expect to have it filled by the start of the fall semester (Appendix B).

Concern: Westfield needs to continue to develop and implement a comprehensive and systematic assessment of student learning and program review. A good start has been made in this area, but more work that will reach down to the operating unit level is needed.

As the Team notes in its Final Report, Westfield State has made significant progress toward the creation of an authentic culture of assessment on campus, and assessment measures are not simply implemented but also embraced by faculty in a number of our academic programs – something that could not have been said at the time of our last comprehensive evaluation. The Team concludes that “Overall, the e-Series forms indicate that about 80% of Westfield’s undergraduate degree programs and 100% of their

graduate programs are collecting data for use in assessment of student learning outcomes.” While those figures represent significant progress, they also make it clear that work remains. The amount of work remaining is made more clear in the Team’s finding that only about 60% of undergraduate programs and 63% of graduate programs are “closing the loop,” and that this critical stage of the assessment process is conspicuously absent in assessment of the Common Core.

In endeavoring to address the existing weaknesses, Westfield State is committed both to the continuation of the efforts currently underway, since they are making significant progress, and to the search for new approaches. The Evaluation Team commends the University for “sensitizing the campus community to the culture of assessment and for providing resources to faculty to attend assessment workshops and forums.” The FY13 budget approved by the Board of Trustees in June 2012 continues to direct significant resources toward both faculty development and release time for the development and implementation of assessment measures that advance assessment of both academic program and Common Core learning outcomes. For the first time, the University has also committed to providing release time for faculty who play a leadership role in academic program review, allowing faculty engage more deeply in the review process and reinforcing the importance of the process to the University. As the Evaluation Team noted, progress on assessment “may require increasing or re-allocating resources to augment the staff of the Institutional Research and Assessment office in order to better support planning and assessment efforts,” which we have also committed to doing (above).

As the Commission is aware, the University is also fully engaged with the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education’s Vision Project, including the Advancing a Massachusetts Culture of Assessment (AMCOA) Working Group and the LEAP State Initiative. Although concerns about the state’s top-down approach to the development of statewide learning outcomes and assessment measures have triggered resistance across the state university system, the strong emphasis on assessment at the DHE and the work of AMCOA in particular continue to provide momentum on campus.

As we press forward, top priority will be given to developing and implementing a more comprehensive assessment plan for our general education core that is compatible with the LEAP State Initiative, and assuring that *all* programs have developed and implemented assessment plans that are used to inform program revisions (in conjunction with the work of AMCOA).

Concern: The University has work yet to do to develop a coherent and substantive common core curriculum.

The Common Core of Studies at Westfield requires students to complete 43-52 credits from five major sections consisting of Humanities (18 credits); Social Science (12 credits); Mathematics/Applied Analytical Reasoning (6-8 credits); Science (7-8 credits) and Diversity (6 credits). The University considers it to be a coherent and substantive general education core.

That said, the University also recognizes the limitations of the current Common Core: in our Self-Study, for example, we note that it does not *assure* that students will be exposed to upper-level coursework outside their academic major or that they will develop an appreciation of multi-disciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches. Nor is sufficient attention given to ongoing evaluation of course content in relation to the articulated Core standards or the formal assessment of anticipated competencies or learning outcomes across the entire Core.

For several years, the University has been wrestling with the revision of our general education requirements. Under the terms of the MSCA Agreement, responsibility for assessment and revision of the Common Core falls to the standing Curriculum Committee, and our efforts are focused on the moving the work of the Committee forward. There has been progress, but it remains insufficient. As noted in our Self-Study, the Curriculum Committee and the ACC are acutely aware of the need for progress, and are committed to developing and implementing a revised Common Core.

Additional Updates and Minor Corrections

Since the Evaluation Team visited the Westfield State campus in early April, the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Vice President for Student Affairs positions have been filled on a permanent basis. Searches to fill the Dean of Faculty and Vice President for Administration and Finance positions have begun, and will conclude during the fall semester.

Page 5: The Final Report indicates that “The institution does not appear to have useful evidence about the success of its recent graduates.” Our Office of Career Services conducts an annual Post-Graduate Survey, and the data from the Class of 2009 was included in the Electronic Workroom. The results of the Class of 2010 and Class of 2011 surveys had not been evaluated at the time of the visit, and we acknowledge the need to make more effective use of the evidence.

Page 13: Course release time for a number of specific activities, including chairing an academic department, is determined not by the administration but by the MSCA Agreement.

Page 13: While the University does not maintain a faculty handbook, much of the information that the Evaluation Team references is available online as a link on the Academic Affairs webpage: <http://www.westfield.ma.edu/prospective-students/academics/academic-resources/academic-affairs/faculty-resource-guide/>. Additional information is provided through a comprehensive orientation for all new full-time faculty and annual workshops offered collaboratively by the Office of Academic Affairs, MSCA, and the Faculty Center. That said, we are currently finishing drafts of two faculty handbooks: one for full-time faculty, and the other for our adjunct faculty.

Preface page and pages 11-12: A degree of confusion about the University’s online programming was evident throughout the visit and is reflected in the Final Report: it seems to stem largely from the information provided on the preface page and on Data-

First forms on pages 5 and 50 of the Self-Study. The University offers several online degree completion programs: these are not complete 120 credit undergraduate degrees, but offer students who have completed specific programs of study at Massachusetts Community Colleges the opportunity to complete a Bachelor's degree online. The online courses comprising these programs constitute a small percentage of our total online offerings; online course are offer through both the Day Division and the Division of Graduate and Continuing Education. As the Self-Study and Final Report both note, we are in the final stages of developing and implementing a series of policies related to our online programming (Appendix C), currently now in our governance process.