

Northwest Commission on College and Universities

A FOCUSED INTERIM REPORT

Pacific Lutheran University
Tacoma, Washington

October 19, 2009

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*A Confidential Report Prepared for the
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities
That Represents the Views of the Evaluator*

INTRODUCTION

Pacific Lutheran University (referred to hereafter as the “University”) underwent a comprehensive evaluation and site visit by a team of evaluators representing the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (referred to hereafter as the “Commission”) in April 2008. The Full-Scale Evaluation Committee Report contained four recommendations. Recommendation 1 focused on publishing learning outcomes for all programs. Recommendation 2 addressed systematic assessment of learning outcomes. Recommendation 3 focused on faculty evaluation. Recommendation 4 addressed the role of institutional research. The Commission requested that the University write a progress report addressing each of the four recommendations in preparation for a focused interim visit to consider its responses to the four recommendations. The University was informed by the Commission that Recommendations 1 and 3 of the Comprehensive Evaluation Report identify areas where the University does not meet Commission criteria for accreditation. The University’s Focused Interim Report demonstrates that a concerted effort has been made to address all four recommendations and that positive steps have been taken to address the recommendations.

Addressing all four recommendations presented a challenge to the University given the relatively short time frame of eighteen months since the April 2008 comprehensive evaluation. Even Recommendations 1 and 3, which were relatively straightforward, required significant faculty engagement and official faculty approval. Moreover, effectively addressing the long-term ramifications of Recommendations 2 and 4 entail both time and resource considerations. The overall effort of addressing the four recommendations is made even more challenging by the current economic environment faced by all of higher education. The Focused Interim Report was well prepared, providing thorough coverage of all four recommendations along with informative supporting materials.

I am most grateful to Dr. Laura Polcyn, Associate Dean for Graduate Studies and Special Academic Programs, and Ms. Kristin Plaehn, Registrar, for their fine work in scheduling my visit and making it productive and enjoyable. Throughout the one-day visit I was especially impressed with the dedication and commitment to the University of all of the faculty and administrators that I met. Finally, I express my appreciation to President Loren Anderson for providing a warm reception and friendly environment for the visit.

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THE FOCUSED INTERIM REPORT AND MANNER OF EVALUATION

The Focused Interim Report clearly addressed each of the four recommendations. Approximately 25 appendices attached to the report supplied valuable background material. The report described the various processes that have been developed for addressing each of the recommendations. In some instances, such as publishing learning outcomes (Recommendation 1), implementation has been completed and was documented. In other cases, the extent to which implementation has occurred is less clear, although in many instances implementation plans have been articulated. Documentation and presentation of assessment evidence related to Recommendation 2 (assessment) was somewhat limited. Additional assessment information was obtained from the University's Annual Unit Report for the 2008-2009 academic year. A copy of this report was provided for perusal. Also, while on site, the Faculty Handbook was reviewed to establish the context in which Recommendation 3 had been implemented.

Before conducting the focused interim visit, the Focused Interim Report was reviewed along with the Full-Scale Evaluation Committee Report for the April 2008 visit. The University's Catalog and website provided useful information as well. The Faculty Handbook and the University's Annual Unit Report were provided onsite. During the visit, interviews were conducted with administrators and faculty from all of the academic divisions and schools. Throughout this process, the standards in the *Accreditation Handbook 2003* were consulted.

Meetings and Interviews were conducted with the following individuals:

Loren Anderson, President
Patricia O'Connell Killen, Provost
Steve Starkovich, Acting Provost
Jan Lewis, Associate Provost
Laura Polcyn, Associate Dean for Graduate Studies and Special Academic Programs
Karen McConnell, Director of Assessment
Dave Robbins, Faculty Chair
Deirdre McGoldrick, Data Analyst
Paula Leitz, Associate Professor of Instructional Development and Leadership
Joanne Lisosky, Associate Professor of Communication
Angie Alexander, Dean, Division of Natural Sciences
Doug Oakman, Dean, Division of Humanities
Norris Peterson, Dean, Division of Social Sciences
John Hallam, Acting Dean, School of Arts and Communication
Steve Woolworth, Associate Dean, School of Education and Movement Studies
Terry Miller, Dean, School of Nursing
Catherine Pratt, Associate Dean, School of Business
Jim Albrecht, Chair, English
Craig Fryhle, Chair, Chemistry
Priscilla St. Clair, Chair, Economics
Wendy Shore, Chair, Psychology
Matt Smith, Chair, Biology

RECOMMENDATION ONE

While noting that the institution has clearly identified Integrative Learning Objectives that are widely understood across the campus as shared learning outcomes, the Evaluation Committee did not find published learning objectives for every individual program or degree. The Evaluation Committee recommends that the University develop and publish learning outcomes for all degree and certificate programs. (Standard 2.B.2)

Recommendation 1 was identified as an area where the University did not meet Commission criteria for accreditation. Subsequent to the appointment of a director of assessment in Spring 2008, an audit was conducted of all programs and majors to determine the extent to which learning outcomes were published for each. Several steps were taken to ensure that learning outcomes were published for all majors. As one of the initial steps, the director of assessment developed an Assessment Guidebook to provide assessment principles and guidelines for establishing assessment processes. The director of assessment convened groups of faculty and provided individual consultation to help departments develop meaningful learning outcomes. The culmination of this process was the new Assessment Webpage in May 2009 with learning outcomes for all programs published on this website.

The Assessment Webpage is well organized, easy to use, and readily accessible. It is anticipated that development of the Assessment Webpage will continue in the future and that it will serve as a vehicle for reporting evidence of learning outcomes assessment. Clearly, the University has fully addressed Recommendation 1.

RECOMMENDATION TWO

The Evaluation Committee did not find evidence of systematic and longitudinal assessment of learning outcomes for all programs, and it is not clear that assessment activities consistently lead to the improvement of teaching and learning. The Evaluation Committee recommends (that) the University take immediate steps to assess the achievement of learning outcomes in all of its educational programs and document the use of the results to improve teaching and learning. (Standard 2.B.1, 2.B.2, and Policy 2.2)

Some background information is relevant to establishing the context in which the University is now addressing issues of learning outcomes assessment. The Summary of Accreditation Activity provided by the Commission indicates that educational assessment was the basis for one of the recommendations emanating from the 1998 Full-Scale Evaluation. Apparently, assessment was addressed sporadically and inconsistently over the subsequent ten years until 2008. Clearly, during this time period, a culture that established the value and utility of learning outcomes assessment had not been established. Moreover, anecdotal evidence gathered through interviews suggests that the academic leadership had not taken the necessary steps to foster a strong climate of assessment. Consequently, in 2008 the University faced major challenges with regard to assessment. Based on the assessment audit conducted by the director of assessment in 2008, it became clear that some programs had yet to develop clear and measurable learning outcomes. It was a formidable (perhaps, impossible) challenge to have all departments and programs report assessment evidence and document the use of results for improvement, given the 18 months between the Full-Scale Evaluation in April 2008 and the Focused Interim Visit in October 2009. Although gathering of assessment evidence and use of assessment results has yet to occur for many departments, the University has made substantial progress in addressing all of these assessment issues.

The approach to developing learning outcomes assessment has been deliberate. Several significant activities, discussed in the Focused Interim Report, have occurred since the appointment of a director of assessment, including the following:

- Development of the Assessment Guidebook
- Learning outcomes goals published on Assessment Website for all programs
- Assessment planning and reporting template developed
- Assessment workshops conducted on campus
- Individual consultations offered by the director of assessment
- Long range assessment plan (Periodic Program Review) developed
- General Education Assessment Plan developed
- Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) exam administered Fall 2009
- CLA in the Classroom Regional Academy hosted in October 2009

The groundwork for an effective assessment process has been developed. Nevertheless, implementation of plans is uneven across programs. Some programs, such as Mathematics have implemented assessment processes, collected evidence, and documented how assessment results have been used to inform program planning. Based on the Annual Unit Report, a few departments have not advanced their assessment processes much beyond publishing learning

outcomes. Some of these departments have developed extensive and detailed lists of learning outcomes. Nevertheless, in many cases the measurement of outcomes goals may be problematic. For example, a goal such as "To produce globally aware scientists" may be commendable, but how does one measure the level of attainment of such a goal? Discussions with the director of assessment indicated that issues of measurement are being addressed as programs implement assessment processes. Also, programs have been encouraged to limit the number of outcomes that are assessed during any given academic year. The Periodic Program Review plan establishes an assessment cycle whereby learning outcomes that are assessed change from year to year, ensuring that all goals are assessed over the planning cycle.

A consistent theme that occurred throughout discussions with faculty and administrators was the need for more indirect assessment measures. The University has just begun to use instruments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE). The CLA exam and the CLA in the Classroom tools are being implemented during Fall 2009. Disseminating and using these indirect assessment measures should be a high priority. Collecting and using these data may be enhanced by developing an effective Institutional Research function (Recommendation 4). Several deans and department chairs expressed a desire for uniform alumni data. Although alumni data may be useful, the cost of collecting and maintain such data suggest that obtaining such data should have a lower priority than obtaining data for other indirect measures. For example, collecting exit information from graduating seniors may be an area to consider. Currently, several departments collect such data and put it to good use.

The Focused Interim Report and discussions with faculty and administrators revealed that the University has several enabling factors in place that bode well for the development of an effective and functional assessment system. These factors include the following:

- As described in the Focused Interim Report, the University has established a sound assessment system structure.
- The use of the capstone experience by virtually all programs provides a consistent mechanism for direct assessment of learning outcomes.
- Over the years, the University has integrated general education goals into the departmental assessment process.
- The Annual Unit Report provides an existing mechanism for reporting assessment evidence and documenting how assessment evidence is used for decision-making.
- The chief academic officer is committed to foster an academic environment conducive to assessment.

A considerable amount of work remains as departments implement assessment plans, report assessment evidence, and document how assessment evidence is used in program decision-making. Several individuals interviewed commented that assessment workshops held at the opening of the academic year received considerable interest from faculty and were the most heavily attended workshops. Moreover, without exception, all faculty and administrators interviewed demonstrated a commitment to improving assessment processes at the University. It appears that the University may have turned the corner in terms of establishing an academic culture conducive to an effective assessment system. Dr. Karen McConnell, Director of

Assessment, deserves to be commended for her leadership and persistence in developing the assessment system. Her continued leadership, the strong commitment to assessment from the Provost (and Acting Provost), and the development of an effective institutional research function appear to be the factors necessary to completing the development and implementation of the assessment system. A sound assessment system is essentially in-place. Implementation and execution must now be demonstrated to sustain the process.

RECOMMENDATION: *It is recommended that the University continue to develop and implement systematic assessment of all academic programs and general education. Both direct and indirect assessment evidence should be reported for all academic programs. The use of assessment results for program decision making should be documented.*

RECOMMENDATION THREE

The Evaluation Committee found that with regard to faculty evaluation, the institution's practice was not consistent with its policy. The Evaluation Committee recommends that the University revise its policy and procedures on faculty evaluation to ensure that all faculty members are reviewed within each five-year period of service and that multiple indices are used for evaluation (Standard 4.A.5 and Policy 4.1).

As noted in the **INTRODUCTION**, faculty evaluation was an area in which the University did not meet Commission criteria for accreditation. During the eighteen months since the Full-Scale Evaluation, the University has taken the necessary steps to meet the Commission's criteria. The Focused Interim Report describes the joint effort of the Provost, the Committee on Rank and Tenure, and the Academic Deans' Council in developing a faculty evaluation policy that meets Commission criteria. The new policy was formally approved by the faculty at its April 2009 meeting. The new policy calls for evaluation every fifth year for faculty occupying a faculty rank for more than eight years. The remaining faculty are reviewed on a more frequent basis depending on the rank and status of the faculty member. The new policy has been incorporated into the Faculty Handbook.

Implementation of the new faculty evaluation policy has begun during the current 2009-2010 academic year. A master schedule of reviews has been developed along with steps to be followed by deans and department chairs. A few logistical problems were identified at the beginning of the current academic year, but measures have been taken to address these scheduling issues. Clearly, the Provost and Acting Provost are committed to implementing the new policy during the 2009-2010 academic year.

The Focused Interim Report describes examples of multiple indices of teaching effectiveness. The procedures for implementing and applying these indices are being refined during Fall 2009. The University has adequately addressed the part of Recommendation 3 calling for the use of multiple indices in faculty evaluation.

Two areas of faculty evaluation remain to be addressed. First, a policy for evaluating contingent faculty (visiting faculty, clinical faculty, lecturers, and part-time faculty) is being developed during Fall 2009. Second, the University needs to demonstrate faculty evaluation practice that is consistent with its new policy. Such evidence of consistent practice should be available after the conclusion of the 2009-2010 academic year. Moreover, given the logistics of phasing-in the evaluation of senior faculty, I anticipate that full implementation of the new policy should occur within two years.

RECOMMENDATION: *It is recommended that the University provide documentation that all tenured faculty have been evaluated within the last five years, consistent with the policy on faculty evaluation adopted in April 2009. The University should document that non-tenured tenure-track faculty have been evaluated consistent with the policy on faculty evaluation adopted in April 2009.*

RECOMMENDATION FOUR

Institutional research is necessary and must be integrated and supportive of institutional evaluation and planning. The Evaluation Committee recommends that the University take immediate action to develop an active institutional research program to support assessment and planning (Standard 1.B.6 and 1.B.8).

As mentioned above under **STANDARD TWO**, a functional assessment system is closely tied to an effective institutional research (IR) function. Institutional research, however, is more comprehensive than merely serving the needs of the assessment system. The University has acted in several ways, listed below, in response to Recommendation 4.

- In February 2008, a consultant was retained to conduct an assessment of institutional research.
- A consultant, Deirdre McGoldrick, was retained for the 2008-2009 academic year to assess technological capacity in the Institutional Research office. Ms. McGoldrick was subsequently hired on a permanent basis as the systems and data analyst.
- Consultants were hired to evaluate administrative information and technology services.
- A multi-year strategic plan for the Administrative Information Environment (AIE) division was developed in June 2009.

The above activities have yet to establish a clear direction for institutional research. Much of the discussion of IR appears to have focused on the use of the Banner information system. Even though the Banner system may be central to the ability of IR to gather information, the scope of IR should be somewhat broader. For example, an appropriate role for IR would be to support both direct and indirect methods of academic assessment. Consequently, necessary IR expertise would include understanding of assessment methods and the ability to support the social science-like research activities of conducting surveys and analyzing data.

Many faculty and administrators that were interviewed appear to perceive the IR function as providing a push-button approach to generating relevant information from the Banner system. Achieving this type of functionality would seem to be an ambitious goal, especially given the challenges faced by the University in developing an effective assessment system. In addition, the University faces the challenge of extremely tight resource constraints. Consequently, improvements in IR functionality will undoubtedly require the re-alignment of existing resources with, perhaps, modest additions.

Although more progress to date on the IR front would be desirable, the University appears to be on track in terms of establishing an active and productive IR function. The Focused Interim Report indicates that the Provost initiated conversations with various interested parties during 2008-2009. Given the strong leadership qualities of the Provost, she should be encouraged to continue this leadership role.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Pacific Lutheran University has worked very hard during a relatively short time frame of eighteen months to address the four recommendations of the 2008 Full-Scale Evaluation Report. By publishing learning outcomes for all programs on its Assessment Website, the University appears to meet the Commission's standards related to Recommendation 1. The new policy for faculty evaluation developed in response to Recommendation 3 also appears to meet the Commission's standards for faculty evaluation. Nevertheless, given the concern that the University did not consistently follow its own policy in the past, it is imperative that evidence of following its new policy is offered within the next two years.

The University has achieved a considerable amount of progress in addressing Recommendation 2 on systematic assessment. Completely satisfactory progress in this area requires that assessment processes are implemented for all programs, assessment evidence is reported, and the use of assessment results documented. Given the strong academic leadership of the Provost and the expertise of the Director of Assessment, progress is expected to continue.

In terms of Recommendation 4, the University appears to lack a clear vision regarding institutional research. Some planning has taken place and needs are being addressed. Prioritizing these needs would be useful. Unfortunately, given extremely limited resources, the University cannot simply expand capacity in the IR area without affecting other areas.

The University has demonstrated a strong and concerted effort to address the four recommendations. It is recommended that the Commission does not require Pacific Lutheran University to undergo another Focused Interim Visit on the four areas addressed in this report. Nevertheless, to ensure a sustained and successful effort in addressing assessment and faculty evaluation issues, it is recommended that Pacific Lutheran University submit a written report addressing the following two recommendations. Both of these recommendations entail implementation issues. It is suggested to the Commission that these recommendations be addressed within two years.

RECOMMENDATION 1: *It is recommended that the University continue to develop and implement systematic assessment of all academic programs and general education. Both direct and indirect assessment evidence should be reported for all academic programs. The use of assessment results for program decision making should be documented (Standard 2.B.1, 2.B.3, and Policy 2.2.).*

RECOMMENDATION 2: *It is recommended that the University provide documentation that all tenured faculty have been evaluated within the last five years, consistent with the policy on faculty evaluation adopted in April 2009. The University should document that non-tenured tenure-track faculty have been evaluated consistent with the policy on faculty evaluation adopted in April 2009 (Standard 4.A.5 and Policy 4.1) .*