Accreditation Symposium
Feb. 14, 2014
St. Martin’s University

Recommendations &
Observations

For the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities
Introduction

On February 14, the Pacific Northwest Learning Consortium (PNLC) convened a symposium at St. Martin's University with representatives from ten higher education institutions to discuss mutual issues of concern regarding accreditation, student learning outcomes and the external pressures on higher education to produce results. The goal of the symposium was twofold:

1. Learn from other institutions regarding external and internal conditions, accreditation planning processes and their impact on campus.
2. Create a summary of the salient parts of the discussion for the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities for consideration in its deliberations regarding changes to the standards.

The following institutions, listed alphabetically below, were represented at the symposium:

- Concordia University of Portland
- The College of Idaho
- Evergreen State College
- George Fox University
- Gonzaga University
- Pacific Lutheran University
- University of Puget Sound
- Saint Martin’s University
- Tacoma Community College
- Whitworth University

James Mascenik
John Ottenhoff
Laura Coghlan
Rob Bohall
Ron Large
Dave Veazey
Martin Jackson, Ellen Peters
Sheila Steiner, Joyce Westgard
Charles Crawford
Randy Michaelis, Caroline Simon

The symposium agenda is attached at the end of the document. The document was used only to guide conversation. The dialogue was open ended in nature, giving opportunities for individuals to veer significantly from the previously identified conversation items.

As clarity and consensus was reached during the conversation the group defined together what should be communicated in a report on a particular topic. While the document contains recommendations regarding process improvement for accreditation, PNLC participants unanimously agreed the pressures on the commission are significant and appreciate the respect given to our autonomy and individuality. This report is intended to help our commission continue to reflect upon how we can collaboratively create a process that meets both the needs of the commission and external interests while also assisting institutional improvement in meaningful ways.

The remainder of this document provides summaries of our significant observations and recommendations.
**1. Quantification can lead to lack of meaning**

PNLC participants have experienced variation with evaluation teams regarding the need to provide quantifiable information. Some institutions have provided a great deal of numerical measures that are, in turn, summarized in an attempt to quantify overall institutional performance. At times these institutions have still been given recommendations to better clarify thresholds for performance. Others have provided far less quantifiable information and been given no recommendation.

The group believes the effort to quantify to the degree currently required devolves into a reporting and compliance process that has little, if any, usefulness to the institution. We recognize being accountable through measures that can be communicated to external groups is important for the commission given the pressures being applied by the federal government. We also agree quantifiable measures of performance are important and necessary.

Another reality, however, is that creating multiple measures from individual programs and services across the institution do not paint a picture of overall institutional performance. The parts of the enterprise cannot be sliced into component parts and summed to define the institution.

*Observation:*

*PNLC participants observe that measuring too much and in too much detail create lack of meaning. The result is not a measure of institutional performance; rather, it becomes an exercise in compliance reporting. In addition, evaluation teams do not assess the need for quantifiable indicators evenly creating confusion for institutions leading to distrust of the process.*

**2. Core theme development requires leadership endorsement and mission reflection**

Some institutions have embraced core themes and are visibly communicating them to students, staff and faculty. In essence, creating and discussing core themes sometimes becomes a leadership strategy to define the institution. In most, if not all these cases, the core themes would start with a thorough discussion and refinement of the mission statement. By engaging in a campus-wide conversation of mission with the creation of core themes an objective of the process, the themes become a visible part of defining the institution.

Other institutions have developed core themes in administrative isolation. In these cases, core themes may or may not be expressions of mission. The result is a lack of involvement, ownership and understanding of the core themes across campus.

*Observation:*

*While a simplistic observation, leadership and campus-wide engagement is needed or there is little investment or understanding of core themes. Creating core themes as a byproduct of a larger discussion of mission provides the ingredients for dialogue and reflection that makes the process meaningful.*
3. **Core themes + Strategic Planning = Confusion**

The connection between core themes and strategic planning can sometimes create confusion. Some institutions have aligned core themes with strategic planning. When well aligned, there is consistency in a single message and core themes are understood and embraced. Others have written core themes in a manner that do not lend themselves to alignment with strategic plans.

Are core themes to be a mirror of what the institution is and strategic plans a picture of where the institution aspires to be? Perhaps it is up to institutions to decide and the conversation is of value in and of itself. The question remains as to whether there is an intention to have a core theme vs. strategic plan conversation. If so, is there an idea of how they should connect with each other? Perhaps the commission might provide more clarity to how core themes and strategic plans should relate to each other.

Some strategic plans are written thematically with multiple objectives under each theme. Other strategic plans are a list of specific and actionable objectives and written at a level that cannot connect with the mission oriented nature of core themes. In addition, some core themes are sometimes written in a manner that describes the character of an institution and at other times describes the functions of the enterprise.

*Recommendation:*

*Create clarity with respect to the desired connection or intended lack of connection between strategic plans and core themes.*

4. **Mission fulfillment is not binary**

PNLC participants appreciate the concept of mission fulfillment and the conversation it can, at times, generate. At the same time, evaluation team responses regarding mission fulfillment has differed significantly across our institutions leading to a lack of understanding of the purpose of the exercise. As described in the previous section on quantifying indicators, trying to take our human endeavor and turn it into a single up or down vote on mission fulfillment strikes our group as somewhat pedantic. It simplifies our complex enterprise into a single answer that is not representative of anything meaningful to the institution.

For example, a business needs to make money. Perhaps a business operates efficiently and effectively and would have indicators that would indicate success. These indicators are interesting for the purposes of management but there truly is a yes or no answer to success – did we make a profit?

Higher education is much more complex and a single answer to the question of meeting mission fulfillment simplifies our efforts too drastically. Financially staying in the black is a requirement to being able to accomplish mission; it is not our purpose. Should students graduate at 100%, 80% or 50%, in what timeframe, and from what institution (transfers)? It is reasonable to manage towards such goals
but they do not necessarily represent a fulfillment of mission. At the extreme ends perhaps this is the case but even a 100% graduation rate may not represent fulfillment of mission is students are not learning. In the end, institutions are forced to develop indicators, determine the value of the indicator and then set some arbitrary goal that is somehow supposed to be an authentic measure of mission fulfillment. The tendency will be to pick the value that will lead to a positive result. While such an exercise is of benefit to guide institutional priorities it is too reductionist to be meaningful with respect to something as grand as mission fulfillment.

Recommendation:

Reconsider the language and criteria of mission fulfillment. Perhaps this might be framed as a continuous improvement process rather than a success measure. The high stakes nature of fulfilling mission does not seem reasonable. PNLC participants recommend the commission provide examples of what this should look like- and what it should not look like. We believe it is, at present, arbitrary and determined by the individual interpretations of the evaluation teams leading to inconsistency and confusion.

5. Limit the length of the report; eliminate inconsequential information

PNLC participants applaud the intent of the standards to encourage institutions to develop continuous improvement processes and to use data to inform policies and programs. Likely due to the need for incremental change, historic processes are still in place that do not appear consistent with the new direction of the accreditation process.

Institutions that have been in existence for many years have procedures in place to operate in a legitimate fashion. Responding to each of the standards, particularly in Chapter 2, is a cumbersome task that does not lead to innovative change. Including the basic institutional data form and eligibility requirements seems an unnecessary exercise.

Recommendation:

- Eliminate basic institutional data information
- Eliminate eligibility requirements
- Eliminate or reduce need to respond to every standard, particularly for institutions in good standing
- Create a standardized data format, similar to IPEDS, for institutions to submit data and separate this reporting process from continuous improvement accreditation
- Limit total pages permitted in report – brevity requires more thought than verbosity
  - Limit report length to 20 pages per core theme or some set number
  - Set limits on sections in Chapter 4
- Have institutions assess performance at the level of objectives rather than indicators
6. **Create alternative reaffirmation process guided by institutional change projects**

Other regional accreditors (SACS, HLC for example) have created alternative accreditation processes in which institutions engage in an institutional improvement project. This method is better aligned with the intent of continuous improvement and use of data to demonstrate success.

For institutions applying for initial accreditation, it seems reasonable to respond to all of the standards and perhaps these institutions would go through the existing process. For institutions with a long record of being in good standing, perhaps a separate reporting process could be developed in which information is collected to verify compliance with many of the standards. If such a process were in place, these institutions (the vast majority) might develop clear projects they are engaged in to create meaningful change leading to enhanced student learning.

The plans go through initial approval with justified, clearly articulated and measurable outcomes based on existing data and an explanation of why the plan is aligned with institutional mission and goals. An institutional improvement process would require investment in time and resources leading to meaningful change at each institution and not be able to be done in administrative isolation. It is more aligned with how our institutions already operate and is consistent with the direction of the revised standards.

An additional value of this approach is the inter-institutional learning that results. Evaluation teams analyze a variety of changes and innovative approaches being implemented and take those lessons learned back to their own campuses. The commission publicizes these efforts and holds innovative change conferences in which NWCCU institutions can learn from other’s efforts modelling the values we espouse as institutions of higher learning.

**Recommendation:**

Implement an alternative reaffirmation process in which institutions select a meaningful change initiative aligned with the needs of the campus. The change initiative is deep in nature but not necessarily broad in scope. In this manner it is actionable and not abstract in nature where there is no ownership or clear accountability. Each initiative contains clear and measurable outcomes related to student learning and has existing data to support the rationale for the effort (perhaps the initiative must be related to high impact practices as described by NILOA). In addition, required institutional time and resources are clearly identified. An evaluation team initially approves the plan and later analyzes the results that would lead to reaffirmation.
Accreditation Symposium

Feb. 14, 2014 9 am - 4 pm
St. Martin’s University - Worthington Conference Center (Bldg 9)

1. Core Themes, Objectives, Indicators
*Please bring copies of your core themes, objectives and indicators to share*
By what process were they developed?
What is the conversation regarding strategic planning and core themes?
Has it changed anything?
What has gone well and what has not gone well – Process and Outcomes

2. Mission fulfillment
*Please bring copies of your mission fulfillment rubric/methodology to share*
What is the model each campus is using to create the definition of mission fulfillment?
What is the value of the exercise?

3. Assessment of student learning – Academic and Co-Curricular
*Please bring copies of your templates for department level student learning assessment reports and student evaluation of teaching forms.*
How are annual reports and student evaluations used to enhance student learning / quality teaching?
How are reports used for compliance, promotion and tenure and formative assessment?
What are experiences with on-line evaluation of teaching?
E-portfolio experience?
Who is doing what with co-curricular assessment?

4. Structure of Reports
What formats are institutions using?