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Northwest Association of Schools and of Colleges and Universities

A REGULAR INTERIM REPORT

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A Confidential Report Prepared for the Commission on Colleges and Universities that Represents the Views of the Evaluator
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INTRODUCTION

Accreditation History of Utah State University

Utah State University, one of two public research universities in the state, "integrates teaching, research, extension, and service to meet its unique role as Utah's land-grant university." As such, the University attained initial accreditation in 1924 and has maintained that status to date, taking care to inform the Commission on Colleges and Universities of substantive changes over the years. The last full-scale evaluation occurred in 1997, when the Commission reaffirmed accreditation but requested a focused interim report and evaluation visit in Fall 1999 to address General Recommendation 1 made by the Evaluation Committee (see below, Part A). In 1999, the Commission accepted the report of the evaluator and commended the University for progress in response to General Recommendation 1. This report provides the findings of the evaluator following a regular interim evaluation visit on 15-16 October 2002.

For the regular interim evaluation, the University prepared a report that focused on 1) the progress in response to the four General Recommendations made by the Evaluation Committee in 1997; and 2) the institutional changes that have occurred over the interim within the purview of the Commission's Standards and Policies. This evaluator found the report concise, focused, thorough, and quite useful. Organized to highlight the responses to the recommendations and the institutional changes for overall effectiveness and efficiency, the report contains a number of helpful appendices, including a statement of the University's ten goals and selected performance indicators. In addition, the evaluator had access to the 1997 Evaluation Committee report, the University's 1999 focused self-study and the evaluator's 1999 report, a detailed outline of the University accreditation history, the University General Catalog for 2002-2004, the Fall 2002 Schedule of Classes, and other documents on campus. Finally, University personnel satisfied every request for supplemental information.

The University made appropriate preparations for the visit to the campus, arranging a full schedule of meetings with Trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, and students for discussions relating to institutional performance in the several areas of concern. The ranging discussion helped immensely to inform and educate the evaluator about Utah State University and its people and programs. This evaluator extends his sincere appreciation to the President and everyone involved for making the assignment both productive and enjoyable.

Eligibility Requirements

On the basis of a review of the relevant documentation and evidence in the record, this evaluator found nothing to draw into question the earlier and continuous judgments that Utah State University satisfies the Commission's eligibility requirements.
PART A: RESPONSES TO GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

General Recommendation 1:

While the committee found assessment activities are evolving in a generally positive direction, institutional efforts are uneven and coordination is lacking. Methodologies which assess outcomes rather than inputs, and quality rather than quantity, need to be improved in some cases and implemented in others. The committee recommends, as others have done in the past, that the university meet the requirements of Policy 25, Educational Assessment.

Findings:

As noted by the evaluator following the focused evaluation in 1999, the University has made progress in its assessment efforts and has used assessment data in taking institutional decisions.

Much remains to be done, however, especially since the assessment process is both long-term and intensive. USU’s own assessment plan recognizes this and marks the date 2002 to have better quality outcomes assessment, including design and publication of learning outcomes for every program.

While recognizing the University’s structural changes to coordinate and monitor its assessment efforts, the 1999 evaluator suggested the need for additional personnel to facilitate the necessary range of assessment activities.

The 1997 General Recommendation and the 1999 evaluator report made the same essential point. While Utah State University had made progress with the development and implementation of an assessment plan, much of that progress had focused on other than outcomes measures and assessment per se. Commission Policy 2.2, “Policy on Educational Assessment,” defines the “obligation” of every institution “to evaluate the effectiveness of . . . [its] educational program in terms of the change it brings about in students, and to make improvements in the program dictated by the evaluative process.” In brief, the Commission expects “output evaluations and assessment as well as input measures,” and evidence of institutional changes resulting from the use of that information.

During the years after 1997, the University adopted an assessment policy and plan and assigned responsibility for implementation to a restructured University Assessment Office, consisting of 1.7 FTE, administered by the Dean for Information and Learning Resources. Those assigned to the Office worked with the various Departments and other entities on campus to assure the development of mission statements, program objectives, and assessment tools. In February 2002 in response to the 1999 report and recommendation, the University altered the structure again, merging University Assessment with the Office of Planning and Analysis into the new Office of Analysis, Assessment, and Accreditation, under the oversight of the Vice President for Student
Affairs, with a combined total of 7.5 FTE. The Office prepares and disseminates an annual assessment plan, complete with a set of goals; "generates/coordinates the university’s surveys of its students, faculty, alumni, and other constituents; analyzes, reports and disseminates the outcomes of these measures; administers and maintains the assessment web page; and provides consultation and stimulation to the campus in regard to assessment processes and procedures.” In addition, the Office coordinates the activities related to accreditation and conducts various analyses for the benefit of the campus.

Beginning in 1997 through the Office of Assessment, the University initiated discussions and activities designed to “meet Standard 2.B [on assessment] by 2002,” and stipulated “that as a part of that endeavor departments/units would, by that time, have developed and published their expected learning outcomes for each degree and certificate program (Standard 2.B.2).” For the most part, the Departments/units have adopted mission statements and have identified learning objectives. In addition, many have assessment plans posted on the web, although some remain difficult to access and others lack critical components such as specific outcomes measures. Aside from the datedness of some web postings and the problems with access to some other sites, this evaluator found little in the web postings focused specifically on outcomes assessments as distinct from survey results and curricular analysis, typically an input variable.

For the most part, the assessment tools in use across the campus consist of surveys of students and/or employers and faculty analyses of the results of the surveys in curricular discussions. Very few actual outcomes assessments, whether of general education or education in the major program of study, appear in the record. The University cooperated with a System-wide administration of the CAAP (Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency) to assess the preparedness of students in writing, mathematics, reading, critical thinking, and science reasoning. The students participated on a voluntary but paid basis, and the University has not indicated an intention to continue this form of a general education assessment. Viewed as a pilot, the CAAP administration represented a one-time-only comparison of the preparedness of the participating students with reference to their status as transfer students or students who entered the University as freshmen.

The General Education Committee has conducted syllabus reviews and other analyses of curricula and content coverage to identify areas of weakness or omission. However, these studies have focused primarily on inputs and content or methodological concerns rather than student outcomes, aside from reviews of course grades. In individual instances, faculty members teaching general education courses have conducted some pre- and post-testing to evaluate changes in students as a result of the courses. However, no systematic review of the effect of the general education program—recently revised—has occurred. The Committee took into consideration the results of student surveys, certainly an outcome but not one that credibly measures changes in students, although structured exit interviews that seek to probe student competencies provide an exception to the rule.

In fact, however, the institutional report tends to equate assessment with surveys. The description of “The Survey Program” begins as follows:
The inclusiveness of the Assessment Office’s survey program contributes to the institution’s awareness of assessment activities at the university level and helps contribute to a culture of assessment.

Surveys provide useful information to assist decision making, but surveys rarely if ever assess outcomes.

The Regents discontinued the regular schedule of program reviews during the period leading to and immediately following conversion to the semester calendar but have mandated resumption recently. Some 14 Departments have undergone reviews since resumption, six more will do so during 2002-2003, and all others will still do so during the seven-year schedule. However, the procedures for program review do not appear to require outcomes assessments, but focus instead on facilities, equipment, materials, faculty, curriculum, student surveys, and other input variables rather than outcomes. The reviews typically include survey data concerning employment and employer satisfaction or attendance in graduate or professional programs, and--where applicable--report student performance on professional examinations. But it remains unclear how these latter results relate to institutional decision making.

Some Departments have made more progress than others with outcomes assessment. For example, some--such as English--make use of portfolios to assess changes that occur as a result of educational design and learning objectives. Others--such as Mechanical and Civil Engineering--require candidates for degrees to pass the professional licensure examinations. In addition, some programs--such as Teacher Preparation and Business--have competency or outcomes requirements within their specialized accreditation reviews and must demonstrate linkages between the accreditation reviews and curricular changes. Still others, such as the performing and visual arts, have performance or exhibit requirements, and others have capstone courses and senior papers, design projects or exit examinations. In outcomes assessment, one size certainly does not fit all. Nonetheless, while progress has occurred, it remains uneven across the University. In that regard, a requirement for the inclusion and evaluation of outcomes assessments in the program reviews, combined with mandated memoranda of agreement among appropriate administrators as to who does what to address challenges and identified problems, will advance the assessment effort institutionally without making one size fits all.

The University has also implemented a planning process introduced by the new President and referred to as “compact planning,” defined as “bottom up strategic planning with evaluative components.” The process requires reliance on data for planning and decision making, premising the need to ask appropriate questions and analyze data and other information, and certainly qualitative as well as quantitative evaluation occurs. Compact planning draws on the survey results and the program reviews for information and data. However, the process and its procedures have yet to identify specific outcomes measures and assessment tools.

Some entities, such as the Cooperative Extension Service and Continuing Education, have initiated sophisticated program planning efforts that require the definition of programmatic activities as well as anticipated outcomes. However, insufficient time has elapsed to measure the
impacts in terms of specific changes that have resulted. In addition, the reports sometimes fail to make the distinction between responses to surveys and actual and measurable changes.

Other entities on campus have initiated assessment efforts designed to influence decision making in critical areas. For example, retention studies seek to identify practices in need of change to enhance retention. Analysis of the profile of the entering student cohorts informs the discussions about admission standards and admission decisions. Focus group meetings with students provide relevant information about the quality and responsiveness of the services the University provides.

As mentioned, while these developments and activities indicate progress toward satisfaction of the Commission Standard and Policy concerning assessment, it appears that the University has yet to develop outcomes measures for all programs and gather the results useful to institutional and programmatic decisions (see General Recommendation 1 below).

General Recommendation 2:

Over the past decade, Utah State University has found means of providing financial resources, primarily from grants and contracts and student fees, to support its program in the face of inadequate state funding, particularly funding for operations. Both the 1988 and 1993 evaluation committee reports addressed concerns about the extent to which such non-state appropriated funds must be generated to maintain the quality, scope, and range of the university’s programs and services. The heavy reliance on outside funding appears to have become an institutionalized mode of operation in lieu of an appropriate level of state support. This committee recommends that the university’s planning and budgeting process set forth realistic requirements to achieve the mission and goals of the institution, as a step toward achieving increased state support, particularly of its general operating budgets. The long established reliance upon grant overhead funds and rising student fees reflect on the one hand, an admirable level of achievement and commitment in the absence of state funding, but this reliance is placing USU in an increasingly precarious position.

Findings:

This evaluator concurs with the comment in the University report that “This is a difficult recommendation to respond to.” As those who work in higher education know, state support for public higher education has eroded slowly but inexorably since the late 1970s. Once again, as the institutional response states, “... it might be argued that the successful public university is successful because it has found other ways to increase its budget, given repeated shortfalls of state funding.” In addition, as an analysis of the University budget over the years from FY 1996 to FY 2001 reveals, total revenues grew by 25.5 percent (4.25 percent annually), with state funds increasing by 20.5 percent (3.41 percent annually), contracts and grants by 31.4 percent (5.23 percent annually), and tuition and fee revenue by 25.9 percent (4.31 percent annually). The University notes that “state funds, contracts and grants, tuition and fees, and all other funds
continue to constitute roughly equivalent proportions of the university’s total revenues,” and that Utah State University received higher increases in state appropriations than the national average for the years from FY 1996 to FY 2001. FY 2002 proved a bit more difficult because of revenue problems the state encountered.

Analysis of reliance on research faculty to deliver the basic educational program reveals a slight dependence, hardly sufficient to raise concerns. On the other hand, students at large across the campus benefit from access to research faculty, state-of-the-art equipment, well-furbished laboratories, employment on research projects, and operating funds available because of the successful funded research programs. The State of Utah has found it necessary, as have other states, to reduce higher education funding. In response, the University has increased tuition and targeted the use of a significant portion of the revenue to sustain the academic programs, after consultation with faculty, staff, and students. Nonetheless, tuition at Utah State University remains the lowest within its peer group of research universities.

Most of those who commented about this issue during the campus visit agreed that state support has failed to keep pace with needs and aspirations. However, they also indicated an increased awareness of the sources of funds to support the University and its programs, and expressed their appreciation for the efforts to make the best possible use of available resources. They applauded as well the enhanced campaign of the administration to inform the policy makers and the people of Utah of real needs and the potential returns on investment.

Based on the evidence in the record, this evaluator found the institutional response persuasive that “the university’s revenue picture is stable and this stability is likely to be maintained.” The creative effort to identify new revenue streams as a result of new strategic partnerships has helped the University during difficult economic times and contributed to this stability.

**General Recommendation 3:**

*The committee recommends that, as was recommended ten years ago, Utah State University reexamine and reassess its substantial number of graduate programs that have low enrollments and low graduation rates, in order to assure that these programs are of sufficient size to offer effective curriculum and a rewarding educational experience.*

**Findings:**

During the years from 1998 to 2000, the University conducted a systematic and thorough review of its “graduate programs to determine if these programs: 1) possessed adequate enrollments; 2) retained and graduated sufficient numbers; and 3) offered curricula commensurate to the curricula at peer institutions.” On the basis of this review, the University discontinued 12 master’s programs and mandated reviews for 18 other low-enrollment programs. In addition, the University has implemented an ongoing review process involving external evaluators to assure
quality and responsiveness in the programs, the identification of appropriate responses and by whom to problems, or program discontinuance.

**General Recommendation 4:**

*The committee recommends Utah State University address the dissonance between the university mission statement in its goals to encourage cultural diversity . . . , namely, the objective of Student Affairs to “recruit and retain minority students” . . . , and the actual performance in achieving greater diversity in the student body.*

**Findings:**

In response, the University reassessed its goals in diversity and identified realistic targets to pursue. Specifically, the University will seek to double the number of minority students over the next ten years, while raising the proportion of international students from four to ten percent of the student population. To coordinate the effort, the University appointed a Director of Multi-Cultural Student Services for minority student recruitment and retention, with particular attention to the growing Hispanic community in the region, and reorganized international student recruitment under the supervision of a Director of International Student/Scholars to take advantage of the University’s rather extensive involvement in international development work. In both cases, on-campus programming and the dedication of institutional funds will support the off-campus efforts. As the institutional response concluded, “the university understands that gains in the diversification of its student body will be slow, but recruitment of such ethnic minority and international students (and faculty) is a continuing priority of the institution, particularly since its student population is so unidimensional.” The next regular evaluation will afford an opportunity to evaluate the strategy.
PART B: INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

Standard One: Institutional Mission and Goals, Planning and Effectiveness

The University retains the mission statement approved prior to the last full-scale evaluation, but has revised its goals as a result of the implementation of a new planning process that proceeds from the Department level and requires broad participation. Identified as compact planning, the process began with Department or program priorities and led to the adoption of a series of University-wide initiatives in pursuit of the vision for the University. Stated briefly, the initiatives through discrete and specific activities seek to: 1) “Enhance the reputation of the University for learning, discovery, and engagement;” 2) “Expand and diversify the revenues of the University;” 3) “Adopt new business models that embrace accountability, responsiveness and efficiency, and adopt a budget process responsive to University goals;” 4) “Strengthen the recruitment, retention, graduation and placement of students, and reduce the student-faculty ratio;” 5) “Raise the base level of compensation for faculty and staff to be more competitive with peer institutions, and reward especially outstanding faculty and staff achievements;” 6) “Build a socially and intellectually vibrant campus community, enhanced by the diversity of its faculty, staff, and students;” 7) “Infuse new energy into graduate programs, particularly at the doctoral level;” 8) “Foster new partnerships, both internally and externally;” 9) “Communicate the successes of the University to the world;” and 10) “Launch and complete a successful comprehensive campaign.” The planning process will continue, with anticipated progress reports and revisions as necessary. The next full-scale evaluation will provide the occasion for assessment of the process.

Standard Two: Educational Program and Its Effectiveness

The University has deleted and added programs during the period since the last review in accordance with institutional and Regental procedures (see also the findings in response to General Recommendation 3 above). In addition, two of the existing Colleges underwent restructuring, one resulting in the reorganization of Departments and programs, and the other leading to the elimination of a College through movement of the associated programs and Departments to other Colleges. These organization changes did not result in loss of faculty and enhanced service to students. The changes chronicled in the institutional report appear to have strengthened the University’s overall performance and effectiveness.

The organizational changes, coming as they did during a period of budget reductions, generated concern across campus. Nonetheless, the mature campus response appears positive and discussion continues about further restructuring that will enable the University to improve its responsiveness and efficiency. The administration has indicated clear criteria for any such changes and has taken steps to assure broad consultation prior to any decisions.
An analysis of the University assessments efforts appears above in the response to General Recommendation 1 (also see General Recommendation 1 below).

**Standard Three: Students**

The University has analyzed its admission standards and practices for undergraduate students and hired an external consultant to assist with the development of an enrollment management plan. These actions reflect the rising concern about the profile of students admitted to the University and the high incidence of failure or drop-out of students with inadequate preparation for rigorous academic work. The next full-scale evaluation will offer the occasion to evaluate the success of these efforts.

In addition, see the findings discussed above in response to General Recommendation 4.

**Standard Four: Faculty**

The major development since the full-scale evaluation in 1997 brought the University into full compliance with the Commission policy on faculty evaluation, specifically requiring review of every member of the tenured faculty at least once every five years. The University has long had procedures for the evaluation of non-tenured faculty. In addition, the University surveys faculty opinion periodically and consults the Faculty Senate on issues of concern to the faculty specifically. All groups regret the lack of a salary increase for the current year and the seemingly unending rise in the costs of health care insurance. However, most also agree with the decision to dedicate additional tuition revenue to new faculty positions rather than increased salaries so as to enhance the programs.

**Standard Five: Library and Information Resources**

Over the interim since the full-scale evaluation, the University has expanded access to information in electronic formats and decreased the student/computer ratio in the open access computer laboratories. The request to the state for funds to construct a 220,000 square-foot addition that will consolidate the library into one facility appears to have won strong support, rising to number three--number one for higher education--on the prioritized list of projects for state funding.

**Standard Six: Governance and Administration**

A new President arrived on campus in January 2001 and articulated a new vision for the University. In pursuit of the vision, he also instituted an inclusive and consultative planning process involving all the stakeholders. The faculty, staff, and student groups feel enfranchised in the governance of the University, and take seriously their responsibility to participate. The
University’s Board of Trustees has responded to this invitation for more active involvement in University affairs. Under applicable statute, two appointive lay boards share in the governance of Utah State University: The sixteen-member Utah Board of Regents, with general authority over public higher education in the state, and final governance authority over all public campuses; and the ten-member—eight appointed by the Governor and two ex officio—Utah State University Board of Trustees, with advisory and other authority delegated by the Regents over the Utah State University campus, seldom exercised in the past. The renewed engagement has involved the Trustees actively in the planning and budgeting processes and also energized them as informed advocates for the University.

**Standard Seven: Finance**

As mentioned in the findings outlined above in response to General Recommendation 2, Utah State University has found it necessary to continue to develop alternative revenue streams in order to sustain its programs. The State of Utah has experienced revenue shortfalls, as have other states, and has reduced the appropriation to the University on three occasions within the last eighteen months. Nonetheless, the University budget has continued to increase because of the contributions from tuition, auxiliaries, funded research, technology transfer, and private gifts. The tuition structure at the University includes two tiers, the first consisting of the System-wide increase and the second of a campus-specific increase on a one-time-only basis dedicated to targeted uses after negotiation with the students, faculty, and staff. The current second tier increases are in the second year, with negotiations beginning soon to extend to a third year.

With regard to funded research and technology transfer, an innovative structure linking the University to an arms-length Research Foundation allows the transfer of large funded projects to the Foundation for more effective management but with the involvement of faculty researchers and students until the projects either terminate or reach the commercialization stage. The Research Foundation provides funding for faculty researchers to develop new projects and mature them for transfer at the appropriate time to the Foundation. In addition, the Foundation provides salary and other forms of support to successful faculty researchers and good paying positions for undergraduate and graduate students. This symbiotic relationship protects the University from any down-side risks in the process.

**Standard Eight: Physical Facilities**

The University has completed ten capital development projects totaling nearly $100 million and 15 capital improvement projects for another $10 million over the interim. In addition, six projects involving $37 million continue under construction, with a request pending for a new 220,000 square-foot addition to the Library and the razing of a dysfunctional building. Among the completed projects, the University constructed a new heating plant and tunnel system and has in the planning stages a co-generation facility that will remove some $20 million of deferred maintenance from a long list of needs. Finally, the University has made creative use of its available bonding capacity supported by the overhead revenue from funded research to construct
facilities on its Innovations Campus designed to strengthen its strategic partnerships in the region and the state.

**Standard Nine: Institutional Integrity**

Utah State University has an excellent record of institutional integrity, academic freedom, shared governance, and fair treatment of students. The institution has in place well publicized codes of appropriate conduct for all groups.
CONCLUSION

Commendations

General Commendation 1:

The evaluator commends the University for the development and implementation of a planning and budgeting process inclusive of all stakeholders.

General Commendation 2:

The evaluator commends the University for creative attention to the expansion, improvement, and maintenance of the facilities to provide an attractive, efficient, and supportive learning environment.

General Commendation 3:

The evaluator commends the University for the implementation of an effective program review process.

General Commendation 4:

The evaluator commends the University for its proactive effort in enrollment management.

General Commendation 5:

The evaluator commends the University for the innovative approach linking funded research, technology transfer, and support for faculty and students.

Recommendations

General Recommendation 1:

The evaluator recommends that the University continue the development and refinement of its assessment plan and program to include specific learning outcomes measures for its programs and integrate the results into the institutional planning and decision making processes (Standard Two and Policy 2.2 on Educational Assessment).