Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities

A Focused Interim Report

University of Nevada, Reno

October 26-27, 2010

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Dr. Royce Engstrom, President, University of Montana
Introduction

A focused interim visit was conducted at the University of Nevada, Reno on October 26th and 27th, 2010. This visit was to follow up on Recommendations 1, 2, 4, 7, 9, and 10 from the Fall 2007 Comprehensive Evaluation Report to include Recommendation 1 of the Spring 2009 Focused Interim Evaluation Report. Doug Baker, Provost and Executive Vice President at the University of Idaho, and Royce Engstrom, President at the University of Montana constituted the review team. The University of Nevada, Reno provided a report on each of the extant questions. Subsequently, the team asked for supplemental information on the strategic plan, related metrics, budget information, program reduction communications, college strategic plans, and learning outcomes assessment information.

Dr. Bill Cathey and his able staff organized the visit and provided all needed assistance. The agenda for meetings held and background information used in the review is included here. The visit was well organized and had representative levels of participation from faculty, staff, students, and administrators.

This institution and all of public higher education in the state have undergone significant budget reductions. The University of Nevada, Reno has lost $36.7 million from its budget in the last two years. In spite of those reductions, the university remains vital and has a can-do outlook. Its budget reductions have been strategic, including a number of vertical cuts of less productive programs through a well communicated process.
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Methods used to verify contents of the Institutional Report

The Institutional Report was received by the visiting team members in a timely manner. Upon reading the report, the team asked for and promptly received additional materials. The team was scheduled for a visit that commenced on Sunday evening and continued through early afternoon on Tuesday. The team had scheduled visits with a number of individuals or groups. In some cases, the team asked quite specific questions of clarification, and in others the conversation was more loosely structured, all on the topics reflected by the Recommendations assigned to the team. One meeting involved a conference call with members of University of Nevada – Las Vegas. Minor rearranging of the schedule was quickly accommodated so that the team could probe more deeply into certain issues. The university provided a tour of new campus facilities. The team had adequate time in the evenings and mornings to deliberate and formulate responses. The institution was a gracious and responsive host and everyone interviewed was professional and constructive.

Individuals Interviewed

President Milton Glick
Provost Marc Johnson
Vice Provost William Cathey
Academic Leadership Council (deans, vice provosts, faculty senate representative, assistant vice presidents, and selected directors)
John Mahaffy, Director of University Assessment
Approximately 15 members of the faculty
Bruce Shively, Vice President for Planning, Budget and Analysis and two staff members
Nancy Markee, Director of the University Advising Center and approximately 8 faculty or professional advisors
Approximately 30 graduate and undergraduate students
Approximately 25 staff members
Jannet Vreeland, Vice Provost
Health Science educators and administrators from UNR and UNLV by telephone (Patsy Ruchala, Denise Montcalm, Michael Bowers, Mary Guinan, Maurizio Trevisan from system office)
Recommendations

Recommendation 1. The Committee strongly endorses the President’s recently reconstituted strategic planning initiative and equally strongly recommends that the University ensure that the effort is metrics-driven, truly participatory, and leads to specific institutional and unit plans, which will, in turn, inform the process of resource allocation, and that the process itself be clearly linked to the University’s mission, specific goals, and have metrics of measurement (Standards 1.B, 7.A.2).

The institution has written a comprehensive strategic plan that has been approved through the appropriate governance, including recent approval by the Board of Regents. The plan was written to cover the time frame of 2009-2015. The plan was developed in accordance with the procedures of the Faculty Senate. Those procedures called for the drafting of the plan by central administration, followed by review by faculty, students and administration. Multiple drafts were written and reviewed, satisfying the requirement for a participatory process. Ultimately, a final draft was written and approved. While commenting on the specific content of the strategic plan is beyond the purview of this review team, the plan does address the broad mission of the university as the state’s land grant institution and a doctoral research institution.

The plan is metrics-driven, although this aspect of it is clearly under active development. The university produces a well-publicized “Measuring Success” report card, which tracks a number of “high-level” metrics such as enrollment, retention and graduation rates, research expenditures, etc. The Provost has been working diligently to incorporate more detailed metrics into the strategic plan, although it appears to be early in that effort and that information has not been public as of yet.

The plan has stimulated the construction of academic unit level strategic planning, and essentially all of the major units are engaged in planning at some level. The concept of strategic planning appears to be genuinely endorsed and appreciated by the academic leadership of the institution, and there is enthusiasm for the process. A culture of planning has developed on the campus.

The strategic plan has guided resource allocation, although recent financial developments have resulted in the insertion of an unanticipated program review process. In roughly the same timeframe of strategic plan development, severe budget reductions have been imposed upon the university. In two major reductions, the university has lost $36.7 million of its operating budget, or approximately 13.1%. The first round of reductions was handled in accordance with the overall strategic plan, in that academics was largely protected from reductions. However, the second round required substantial involvement of academics. The Provost developed a program review process with a set of criteria for program evaluation. As a result, several programs were eliminated, class sizes were increased, and significant position reductions (approximately 400) were required. As painful as the process was, it was well-constructed with opportunity for input and appeal before final actions were taken. The President and Provost are to be commended for handling such a difficult situation.
in a well thought-out manner. Additional communication with the faculty and students might have been warranted but overall, there is acceptance on the campus of the results and an appreciation for the approach taken by the administration.

In summary, the standards related to strategic planning have been met, recognizing that planning is always a work in progress.

**Recommendation 2:** The Committee recommends that the University assess the appropriateness of its extensive use of Letters of Appointment (LOA) staff and Graduate Teaching Assistants. (Standard 2.C.7).

Positive movement on this recommendation has been made, perhaps through a combination of deliberate action and the necessity of budget reductions. Significant reductions in LOA appointments have been made with the requirement that permanent faculty adopt a greater share of the teaching. In fact, the student FTE taught by regular, full-time faculty increased by 12.8% from 2008 to 2009 and student FTE taught by tenured faculty increased by 17.2%. (The latter increase resulted from exempting tenured faculty from furloughs imposed on other categories of employees, with the tenured faculty accepting an increased productivity instead). Presently, approximately 60 percent of lower division credit hours and 81% of upper division credit hours are taught by regular faculty.

We do recommend that a greater level of communication be undertaken, with graduate students in particular. There appeared to be a fair amount of misunderstanding of this issue with the group of graduate assistants that spoke to the review team.

The institution is in compliance with Standard 2.C.7.

**Recommendation 4:** Academic Advising - The Committee acknowledges the progress the University has made over the past ten years expanding and improving academic advising. But it also recognizes different expectations of faculty regarding academic counseling versus assistance with course selection and the related inconsistencies in student satisfaction. The Committee recommends the University clearly define what academic advising means to all constituents, more fully identify intended outcomes of advising, better articulate this to faculty and students, and then fully assess how well the outcomes are being met. (Standard 2.C.5 and 3.D.10)

Since the 2007 NWCCU visit, a good deal of work has been done to clarify the objectives of advising and the role of students and advisors in the process. The advising mission statement begun in 2008, and issued in the fall of 2010, lays the foundation for defining what is desired from the advising process. Further, senior administrators have been clear about the need to improve student retention and graduation which is linked to good advising. As of 2007, advising has been required for all freshmen. After the students first year, advising requirements and processes vary
from college to college with some units having central advising staff and others relying on faculty. Some students expressed concern about the uneven quality of advising within majors.

Currently, some data is collected on satisfaction with advising in graduating student, alumni, and NSSE surveys. There is also some assessment done in a few departments that interview graduating students; however, there is no systemic assessment of advising that is used to identify the sources of students' concerns which could be used to improve advising policy and practices. For example, data collection might include student focus groups in colleges, survey assessments of student satisfaction with advisors, or direct measures of such things as scheduling errors, retention, or time-to-degree within program.

A few programs are already undertaking such assessment activities (e.g., Biochemistry and Engineering and may provide models for other units to consider. Some departments also require mandatory advising for all students. This naturally occurring experiment may offer comparative data to illustrate the relative cost and effectiveness of such policies.

With the recent closing of the career center, career counseling has been decentralized to the college or department level. Some areas may not be able to take on the additional activity. This transition is in process and will need further work to be effectively implemented across the university. Again, the effectiveness of this system should be studied and improved over time.

There are a number of resources available for students centrally (e.g., tri-fold student resource guide) and in some departments (e.g., FAQ's in Biochemistry); however, students do not have access to such material for all majors.

There is central advising for students with undeclared majors. The central advising staff is dedicated and has worked hard to improve advising across the university. The annual advising conference, advisors listserv, and the Mapworks system for first-year students are all examples of support systems from this office. The Course Concierge also appears to be a useful resource for students with difficult course scheduling problems.

The university is in compliance with the first part of this recommendation dealing with clarifying what advising means and identifying outcomes of advising, but it has not yet articulated this to all faculty and students or assessed its impacts.

**Recommendation 7:** The Committee recommends that the Board of Regents engage in a comprehensive planning exercise regarding the future of health sciences education within the University System and the respective roles of UNR and UNLV and thereby further distinguish the missions of the respective institutions. (Standard 1.A.1 and 6.B.5)
The Health Sciences Education Missions appear to be well defined. The universities face a complex environment with many extant health profession needs across the state. These needs are most acute in rural areas. There are overlapping missions for some of the health profession programs, but these are in areas where there is significant employer demand for graduates as well as strong student demand.

It appears that there is good dialog between deans and faculty at the two universities. Similarly, the presidents, provosts, and chancellor's staff work collaboratively and have a newly established coordinating committee. The chancellor's office appears to play a facilitating role between the two universities and other state schools. We encourage the new coordinating committee to play an active role in programmatic decisions, public private partnerships, and garnering additional resources.

This fall UNR and UNLV opened joint graduate doctoral programs-focused on public health and nurse practitioners that were developed through extensive collaborations during a very challenging fiscal period. Some logistical start up issues remain that will needed to be sorted out relative to registration across the two schools. We commend the participants for their collaborative efforts to create the joint doctoral programs.

The university is in compliance with this standard.

**Recommendation 9:** Noting that financial uncertainty can readily lead to program instability, the Committee recommends that the University ensure appropriate staffing of LOA’s, graduate assistants, and support of staff across the institution, and that the process by which this is achieved is clearly delineated and observed. (Standards 2.A.1, 3.D.6, and 7.B. 5).

At the time of the original NWCCU visit in 2007, the visiting team expressed concern over staffing levels. The appropriate use of LOA’s and graduate assistants was addressed in the section on Recommendation 2 above (there was some redundancy in the visiting team’s recommendations). However, the general issue of staffing is a real concern. Since the 2007 visit, budget reductions have resulted in the loss (already occurred or planned) of approximately 400 positions across the university in various personnel categories. This loss is occurring coincidentally with a substantial increase in student enrollment (approximately 500 FTE in the current year.) Consequently, the concern about staffing levels is more serious now than in 2007. For example, the student-to-faculty ratio is reported currently as 22:1, which is already somewhat on the high side for public research universities. Additional faculty line decreases will increase the ratio. Increased faculty productivity in the areas of teaching has resulted from modest overall increases in class size and putting faculty members into courses that were previously taught by LOA personnel. Such actions are positive in the sense of increased efficiency and greater access for students to the regular faculty. The institution must be, and is, attentive to the potential for a decrease in faculty productivity in others areas of faculty responsibility, namely research and service. Beyond the
faculty, staff decreases will increase the burden on those remaining. Among the faculty, staff, and administration, there are signs of exhaustion.

The institution has done its best to minimize the impact of personnel reductions. For example, when budget cuts were made, they were done in a "vertical" mode rather than across the board, so as to retain the integrity of programming. The students passed a $25 fee to permit the restoration of free tutoring services and the Math and Writing Centers. A significant increase in tuition, along with healthy enrollments, generated revenue that partially offset the decrease in appropriated money.

The staffing situation, combined with the threat of additional appropriations challenges on the horizon, require that Standards 2.A.1, 3.D.6 and 7.B.5 continue to be monitored. A recommendation below will address the staffing and budgeting concern.

**Recommendation 10:** The Committee recommends that the University establish a transparent and comprehensive process to address the institution’s space needs and related issues. (Standard 8.C.1, 2, 3, and 4).

A transparent and comprehensive space allocation process has been in place at the university for many years. It is well-defined and information about the process for making requests is readily available on the web site or through the Provost’s Office. A Space Allocation Committee meets monthly and receives requests at any meeting, communicated to the Committee through a standard and readily available form. The Committee deliberates on projects large and small. The Committee has the authority to make decisions on projects up to a certain level, whereas major projects necessarily require conversation with the administration. In the past, there may have been some confusion about “signature authority” on requests, resulting in the occasional project coming forward without the knowledge of the appropriate supervisor, but Vice Provost Vreeland has corrected that problem. Overall, the process appears to be working well.

The university has made quite impressive recent progress on increasing both the amount and quality of space on the campus. Since the 2007 review, several new or renovated buildings have opened. The new Knowledge Center (an intriguing name for the library) is a large, state-of-the-art library, well equipped with technology for students and a robotic book retrieval system. The Knowledge Center was in heavy use at the time of the team’s visit. Likewise, a new Student Union opened within the past two years, creating a highly useful and architecturally interesting addition to the campus. The Knowledge Center and the Student Union have extended the active footprint of the campus significantly to the north. A new Math/Science Center, which we only observed from the outside, has provided a substantial increase in classrooms and modern teaching laboratories. It improved both the amount and quality of space that is needed for today’s instruction in the sciences. A major addition of research space resulted from the construction of the Center for Molecular Medicine. The University Inn was converted into a residence hall to accommodate increasing numbers of students. All in all, these new buildings constitute a dramatic improvement to the campus.
The institution is in compliance with Standard 8.C.1, 2, 3, and 4.

Recommendation 1 from Spring 2009 Focused Interim Report:

1. The process of establishing both a culture and the details of assessment is developmental, and UNR is well along the developmental continuum. Still, there is more work to do. Most especially, the institution needs to find a way to maintain its commitment to a faculty-driven assessment process while still bringing greater uniformity to the assessment planning and reporting process. This includes greater clarity about and adherence to what constitutes student learning outcomes and performance indicators, greater advocacy for socially validated assessment measures, and greater transparency about assessment data. (Standard 2.B.2)

A number of actions have been taken to enhance the culture and practice of assessment. President Glick has called for continued faculty driven assessment. There is a well established assessment office with knowledgeable staff who are well respected across campus. They have worked hard to build trust and develop assessment skills across the university. They hold an annual assessment conference. Each department has an assessment coordinator. New department chairs undergo assessment training; however, active support from incumbent chairs and colleges is uneven.

The General Education (Core) program appears to be moving from course to program-level assessment, a positive and necessary step. There has also been an attempt at assessing student services programs. In addition, the office conducts graduating student, alumni, NSSE, and VSA surveys. The office also critiques departmental assessment plans and provides developmental feedback.

The strength of these various programs appears to be on data collection and analysis. Some colleges, particularly in the professional schools, are using this information to improve student learning; however, the assessment loop closing activities are uneven. Further, there seemed to be some uncertainty among the faculty interviewed about whether the focus of assessment should be at the student, course, or program level.

The weakness to the current structure appears to be in terms of the faculty systematically using the information to affect curricular, co-curricular, or pedagogy improvements. Such programmatic improvements would fit well with the university's emphasis on student recruitment and retention, and may be particularly important as faculty are asked to take on the teaching of more students with a smaller work force following the budget reductions.

The university is in compliance with the first part of this recommendation regarding collecting assessment data, but needs continued improvement in the use of that data to improve student learning.
Commendations:

1. The institution is commended on the way it has handled the substantial financial hardship imposed upon it. The substantial budget reductions were addressed first by preserving the academic mission of the institution, and then through a careful and interactive deliberation resulting in vertical cuts of academic programming. The process was ultimately driven by strategic directions and was conducted in a manner that minimized negative impact and that had the respect of the campus.

2. The institution is commended on the new buildings constructed in recent years. The new student union, the Knowledge Center, the math/science center, and the Center for Molecular Medicine were large investments during difficult times, and they contributed in important ways to the vitality of the campus and to the learning and research environment at the university.

3. Commendation; The University of Nevada – Reno and the University of Nevada Las Vegas have taken on the difficult task of initiating joint doctoral programs focused on public health and nurse practitioners. Developing these programs across the schools was a complex undertaking that will serve significant extant needs in Nevada during a time of fiscal reduction. While there is more work to do to efficiently and effectively implement the programs, we commend the universities for their collaborative work on these new degrees.

Recommendations:

1. At the time of the visit in 2007, concern was expressed by the review team regarding staffing levels (Recommendation 9). The situation has worsened with the loss of approximately 400 positions of various types. Further budget reductions will threaten the ability of the institution to meet its mission effectively because of both staffing and operational challenges. The visiting team recommends restoration of state investment commensurate with mission and expectations. (Standards 2.A.1, 3.D.6, 7.B.5)