

Mid-Cycle Peer-Evaluation Report

for



evergreen

The Evergreen State College

Olympia, Washington

Visit conducted virtually on October 21-22, 2021

*A confidential report of findings prepared for the
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities*

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Introduction

This report analyzes the continued compliance of The Evergreen State College (Evergreen) with the Commission’s Standards during its Mid-Cycle Review, focusing on Evergreen’s progression on assessing mission fulfillment, student achievement, programmatic assessment, and moving forward. Evergreen’s most recent *Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability* (Y7¹) evaluation resulted in four recommendations, and two of those four were satisfied in the *2020 Ad Hoc Evaluation Report*. This Mid-Cycle Review addresses the two remaining recommendations.

The evaluators would like to thank Evergreen for their provisions and hospitality during the virtual visit. Special appreciation goes to Dr. David McAvity, Provost and Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO); Abir Biswas, Academic Dean and Lead Mid-Cycle Report Writer; Rhonda Woods, Administrative Assistant to the Provost; and Julie Slone, Executive Associate to the Provost, for their assistance in preparing for the visit, scheduling, and providing the team with additional resources.

Assessment of Materials

The team received hyperlinked, electronic copies of Evergreen’s *Mid-Cycle Accreditation Report* in the Commission’s box.com application on August 9, 2021. The team chair and the ALO communicated via email, planning for the virtual visit and other pre-visit matters. Detailed documentation that was correctly linked to additional support materials in the cloud helped to ensure a full and smooth review.

Evergreen has developed an updated master plan and strategic initiatives in two key documents: *Six Expectations of an Evergreen Graduate* and the *Strategic Plan 2020-2023: Fostering growth, equity, and resilience for our students and for Washington*. Both documents signal campus-wide engagement from key groups (faculty, staff, students, community, alumni). In 2018, the college embarked on a planning process called “Evergreen Renews” to deepen its commitment to student success and to stabilize a decade-long decrease in enrollment. Continuing this work in 2019, Evergreen embarked on a progression of collaborative processes to plan the college’s future from “Blue Sky” conversations to a smaller set of “Big Bets” that informed a “New Academic Directions” conceptual plan. In early 2020, Evergreen embarked on a campus climate survey and the development of its tribal relations plan, aimed at cultivating student growth, equity, and resilience.

On Thursday, October 21, and Friday, October 22, 2021, the evaluation team met with roughly sixty people in several different groups representing students, staff, faculty, trustees, and administration. Information gathered from these interviews was clear, and evaluators were able to verify statements in the *Mid-Cycle Accreditation Report* through these multiple meetings.

¹ The term “Y7” will be used in this document to reference both the former Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability visit and the current/future Evaluation of Institutional Effectiveness visit.

Mission Fulfillment

In the self-study, evaluators found evidence of work completed and in progress, identifying issues and solutions to three main areas.

- Aligning student career goals, talents, identities, and diverse perspectives with academic success and personal development.
- Expanding support for the community, region, state, and nation “during an unprecedented period of social and economic turbulence.”
- Serving a wide range of students through enhanced and expanded services to achieve the vision of “contributing fully to the larger society”.

Evergreen provides overview and links to data, evidence of regular institutional analysis, evaluation and reflection on current information and trends. Evergreen participates in the 29-member comparison group, the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges. Evergreen also includes its regional 4-year state institutions (Western Washington University, Eastern Washington University, and Central Washington University) and considers available IPEDS data.

Student Achievement

Evergreen uses student achievement measures for graduation, retention, persistence, and post-graduation success. Further, Evergreen data is disaggregated by sex, Washington state residency status, ethnicity, traditional/non-traditional age, veteran status, disability status, first-generation status, Pell status, and socio-economic status for student sub-populations ($n > 10$). Post-graduation success data are derived from internal Evergreen alumni surveys and are disaggregated for student sub-populations ($n > 10$).

There is evidence that Evergreen uses internal and comparative data to inform decisions regarding student success with foci on identifying and closing equity gaps and identifying and reducing barriers to academic success for students from underserved communities.

Programmatic Assessment

Academic coursework at Evergreen is generally fluid in that faculty are required to be multi-disciplinary instructors, teaming up with their colleagues to create a “program,” a series of educational interdisciplinary courses taught by a team. These “programs”² last anywhere from one quarter to one year, and they appear to each be unique. Students work with faculty to navigate an educational experience during their time at the college. Evergreen uses variations of holistic, qualitative narrative as a grading practice; and as a result, quantitative assessment at academic levels is not standardized or consistent across all courses or “programs.” This evaluative process has been successfully used at Evergreen since its inception in 1971, and mechanisms have been devised to account for effective “crosswalks” for transfer students, both

² Because Evergreen gives new definitions to standard terms, a glossary for future external evaluators may be helpful.

those entering and those transferring from Evergreen. For the *Mid-Cycle Accreditation Report*, Evergreen provided programmatic assessment of one non-instructional, non-academic program (*Six Expectations of an Evergreen Graduate*) and two academic instructional programs (*Greener Foundations*, and the *Native Pathways Program* (NPP)) that connect to institutional initiatives to increase enrollment and retain students.

Six Expectations of an Evergreen Graduate addresses program assessment and faculty training which will result in “student-desired transparency.” There are goals for faculty to incorporate the Six Expectations in their syllabi to unify the college’s approach to program and direct assessment of student evaluation and to provide students a more evaluative and coordinated process across the curriculum. Specific goals include broad participation of faculty and Institutional Research³ personnel for training in 2022 to close the loop by using direct assessments of student learning. There are plans to make this process iterative and foundational in connecting student learning data to instruction, curriculum development, and advising in support of student success. Evergreen anticipates this approach will assist in tracking and improving retention of first-year students. The college believes this approach will improve student advising and the student experience, resulting in improved retention and consequent graduation rates.

Greener Foundations represents a credit-based foundational course for first-time first year students, and it acknowledges “holistic curricular and co-curricular supports needed for first-year students.” Given the demographics of the incoming students, Evergreen adopted this initiative as a means of introducing new students to college in general and Evergreen in particular. There is a review plan designed to assess the program’s effectiveness and use data to inform revisions and improvement. As noted on page 21 of the report, “Of those who participated in Greener Foundations, 94% of students were retained from fall 2020 to spring 2021; in contrast, only 47% of students who did not participate in Greener Foundations continued to be enrolled at Evergreen through spring 2021.”

The *Native Pathways Program* (NPP) was implemented in 2017, a revisioning of prior program serving indigenous students. NPP’s mission is to “promote lifelong Indigenous scholarship by placing value on cultural and traditional ways of knowing, working with Indigenous research methodologies, and expanding indigeneity through academia.” Evergreen locates instruction at the Olympia and Tacoma campuses, the Quinault Reservation, and the Peninsula Community College’s Longhouse. NPP is offered in hybrid and remote learning modalities. Assessment is primarily based on student achievement data, survey-based feedback, student-led talking circles, feedback from NPP Student Governance officers, and tribal community events and panels. This student-based program connects with the Six Expectations initiative mentioned earlier and the college’s commitment to promoting “lifelong Indigenous scholarship.”

Each of these programs broadly represent efforts to continuously improve retention, access and equity, and curricular alignment with Evergreen’s mission goals.

³ A few meetings discussed the loss of the Institutional Research Director, who moved from the position into the finance department. As of October 21, 2021, there have been two failed searches, and Evergreen is planning a third search in the near future for a replacement. This position will be key to helping showcase both student learning and achievement of enrollment targets for Y7.

Moving Forward

The college provided detailed explanations of efforts and initiatives, current and ongoing and planned, as it prepares for the *Year Seven Evaluation of Institutional Effectiveness Report*. Though there is reference to additional planning, the three from the previous page represent a common theme aimed at improving enrollment, improving retention, and providing clarity for students navigating an Evergreen experience. The *Mid-Cycle Accreditation Report* is candid in its assessment of the issues at hand (continued declining enrollment and consequent financial concerns for short-term health and long-term sustainability). The evaluators noted this same candor in interviews when discussing staffing, retirement buy-outs, and faculty replacement processes. The president is interim through 2023, and other key members of leadership are either interim or recently hired. The college recognizes the need for future hiring of key administrative, operational (e.g., the IR lead), and instructional positions in the foreseeable future. The trustees (who have deep ties to the local Washington state legislature) noted that resources will be provided.

Despite these challenges, evaluators were impressed with the air of optimism and commitment found in the documents provided and from interviews. The college understands its position and is working toward improvement.

Previous Recommendations

As noted in the discussion below, the team delved into the remaining recommendations from the Fall 2018 *Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability Report* (i.e., 2018 Y7 Report). Recommendation 3 focuses on enrollment management for financial stability and sustainability. Recommendation 4 focuses on documented decision-making structures.

Recommendation 3

The Commission recommended “that The Evergreen State College develop a realistic multi-year enrollment management plan to ensure short term financial health and long-term financial stability and sustainability (2020 Standard 2.E.2).” This recommendation was continued following a Spring 2020 Ad Hoc Report.

A list of the document’s initiatives was included on page 33 of the *Mid-Cycle Accreditation Report*, and initiatives involve obtaining new students (16 of 26, 61.5%) and institutional reputation (6 of 26, 23.1%) in addition to retention efforts (4 of 26, 15.4%). To address reduced revenue due to declining enrollment, the college has developed enrollment management plans, culminating in a document known as “New Academic Directions.” A discussion with the Chief Financial Officer and Chief Administration Officer confirmed that proposed initiatives include a “break-even analysis” (also referred to in the documents as a pro forma) prior to being sent to the institution’s board for approval. The dates of the planning events range from 2021 to beyond 2023. To date, very few of the listed initiatives have gone through this analysis. One such draft analysis provided to the team showed a final break-even point in the third year of implementation, but the cost of the initiative over five years was in the red (a total expense to the institution rather than a revenue generator in the first five years). Many of the items on the list

will take capital to effect (e.g., Initiative 23 is an Institutional Name Change, described in detail on page 12 of the “New Academic Directions” document and in short on page 27 of the *Mid-Cycle Accreditation Report*. Though creating the initiatives and various plans represent broad and inclusive input (*New Strategic Plan 2020-2023I*), there is a concern with the implementation timing of the many initiatives in producing the “short term financial health and long-term financial stability and sustainability.”

Evaluators reviewed a publicly available document entitled *New Directions for Evergreen Strategic Enrollment Plan 2021-2026* ([https://www.evergreen.edu/sites/default/files/2021-08/New Directions for Evergreen SEP August 2021.pdf](https://www.evergreen.edu/sites/default/files/2021-08/New%20Directions%20for%20Evergreen%20SEP%20August%202021.pdf)). This document, coupled with the recent IPEDS data that showcase 2,116 students in Fall 2021 on a plan of 1,940 (+9.1%--though still a year-over-year decrease of 165 students or -7.2%), may represent positive outcomes for the future. The college recognizes the challenges in the report:

Fall 2020 (and projected Fall 2021) enrollment and the impacts of the pandemic make it difficult to know if the college has reached a point of stability in new student enrollment that it can grow from. We know we are not the only college facing uncertainty and changes in enrollment due to the pandemic, but the pandemic has been confounding our enrollment recovery planning. (p. 5)

Further positive indicators include the data that shows fall numbers for graduate students and other non-traditional students are coming to the institution faster than projected. Though the plan appears to lack full marketing support at this point, it provides a clear roadmap for Evergreen.

Enrollments have continued to decline since the *2018 Y7 Report*, and based on current IPEDS numbers, it appears that enrollment is, at best, flat. Tuition accounts for a major revenue stream, and its decline impacts staffing levels, program continuations, and early retirements. With the four-phase generative process (*Mid-Cycle Accreditation Report*, pp. 30-33), Evergreen has created a series of twenty-six initiatives to improve enrollments as a foundation for securing short- and long-term financial sustainability; however, many of those plans are not yet implemented. Though designed with broad input from various voices across the college, many plans are set to be implemented from now to beyond 2024. Evergreen anticipates many of these initiatives will have been approved by the board and implemented to produce increased student numbers in advance of the *2024 Policies, Regulations, and Financial Review* (PRFR).

There is ample evidence the college has thoughtfully developed a phased plan to address this recommendation. As of the visit, evaluators believe the institution’s future enrollments are poised to be favorable. However, the next few years leading to the PRFR review are critical.

Recommendation 4

The Commission recommended “that The Evergreen State College’s decision-making structures and processes be documented and publicly available and include provisions for the consideration of the views of faculty, staff, administrators, and students on matters in which each has a direct and reasonable interest (2020 Standard 2.A.4).” This recommendation was continued following a Spring 2020 Ad Hoc Report.

Much attention has been given to communication on the campus. A new position of Internal Communications Liaison and a list of measures taken (see *Mid-Cycle Accreditation Report*, p. 37) demonstrate the breadth of information that now flows in each direction at the institution.

With the focus on communicating and the attention given to both dissemination and listening strategies contained in the document and discussed at many of the meetings, the team found evidence that the college has made significant progress in addressing this recommendation by improving its outward-facing website and engaging various members from the student body, faculty, and staff in key decision-making and advisory committees. There is evidence that various views are solicited through open meetings and surveys, and evaluators suggest the campus continue this good work by addressing communication channels with its faculty and student leaders.

Summary

In 2017, The Evergreen State College was embroiled in controversy. The COVID-19 Pandemic hit the world in spring of 2020. Since then, upper administration has changed with former President Bridges stepping down in 2021 and Interim President John Carmichael in place through 2023 while the college conducts a search for its next president. Most of the students who were present in 2017 have graduated, and today's Evergreen is different from the Evergreen of four years ago. Student numbers have yet to fully stabilize in their negative trend, but the numbers for the fall 2021 came back higher than planned (over 9%).

The Evergreen State College hopes to achieve sustainability through planned changes for the college including a new name, new "degree offerings" (or paths), and the development of pipelines of professional/non-traditional applicants. *Greener Foundations* (which showcased high retention numbers for students who completed the sequence), the intentional progress for diversity, equity, and inclusion, improved and clarified communications across campus, and the new enrollment plan that includes targets for future years all indicate Evergreen is on a pathway to future sustainability.