

Year One Peer-Evaluation Report

The Evergreen State College

Olympia, Washington

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

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Introduction

In March 2010, member institutions of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) were notified that the changes to the accreditation standards and cycle had been accepted. At that time, Evergreen State College was notified that their seven-year-cycle would begin with a Year One Report in Fall 2011. This report was submitted by the institution in September, 2011 and reviewed by a panel of three evaluators in October, 2011.

Assessment of the Institution's Self-Evaluation Report and Support Materials

The Evergreen State College Year One Self-Evaluation Report describes the college accurately as a liberal arts public college, nationally known for its interdisciplinary emphasis. The report is absent any supporting materials (other than the catalog), but contained within the report is the summary of its approach to liberal arts comprised of Five Foci and Six Expectations of an Evergreen Graduate. Evergreen does not grade students using traditional letter grades, rather a narrative transcript is completed. Given the centrality of this transcript to the assessment process, a more detailed description and/or exemplars of the transcript would have been useful to the peer evaluators.

Topics Addressed as an Addendum

A Comprehensive Evaluation completed in 2008 led to two recommendations, to which Evergreen responded. A progress report was submitted in October 2010.

Prior Recommendation One

The Committee recommends that The Evergreen State College develop a more streamlined, systematic method of collecting curricular and co-curricular assessment data. Attention to analysis, storage, and wide sharing of the data will better inform the college's teaching, learning and program-planning practices. Though the college has demonstrated advances in assessment and has collected large amounts of valuable information, it would benefit from more clarity and greater accessibility of this information.

According to an excerpt from the report of October 2010, Evergreen has increased its capability to collect and assess institutional data and improved its mechanisms for disseminating and integrating these data. The Institutional Research and Assessment Office now provides regular reports and one-time reports, as requested, which are used for planning and policy development.

Prior Recommendation Two

The Committee recommends that The Evergreen State College strengthen the teaching and documentation of the natural sciences, mathematics and fine arts as parts of a substantial and coherent program of general education. The college has made progress in the documentation of general education since the previous accreditation visit and has implemented a program entitled "The Six Expectations of an Evergreen Graduate." General education is well documented, especially in the humanities and social sciences and in critical thinking, writing and speaking. Though some progress has occurred in fine arts, science and math, more focused teaching and clearly embedded curriculum is required to fulfill these areas.

The report indicates that Evergreen developed the Six Expectations of an Evergreen Graduate and has been working over the past two years to design a system that ensures that students meet these expectations, but without introducing the common distribution requirements used at many colleges. The present solution is to improve advising and require "iterative student reflection essays," which should provide evidence for students' broad general education, as well as motivate them to seek those academic experiences. The implementation of these steps is still new and it is difficult to assess the success of each strategy.

Eligibility

The Year One Self-Evaluation Report indicates that the board of trustees approved the college's revised mission statement on April 28, 2011. Core themes were developed concurrently and finalized by the Accreditation Steering Committee in May of 2011. The board of trustees was advised of those core themes as required. The report indicates the authority under which The Evergreen State College operates and offers degrees, governed by a board of trustees appointed by the governor under Washington state law. The Evergreen State College satisfies NWCCU Eligibility Requirements 2 and 3.

Mission, Core Themes, and Expectations

Standard 1.A Mission

The Mission Statement was developed beginning in spring 2010, with approval by the board of trustees in April 2011. It emphasizes innovation, interdisciplinary learning, and students' reflection on their learning. In addition, the statement underscores Evergreen's commitment to social justice, diversity, the environment, and service. The efforts of The Evergreen State College in relation to mission articulation and ongoing review appear to be appropriate and comprehensive, ensuring linkages between the college's mission statement and its curriculum through the Core Themes.

The college's work in developing a common understanding of its mission and Core Themes provides the foundation for planning and budgeting to direct the college's resources toward mission fulfillment. The governance of the institution reflects its "egalitarian, inclusive, community-based approach" as well as its Core Themes. Evergreen has developed "The Six Expectations of an Evergreen Graduate" to promote a broad, liberal arts education without the restrictions potentially created by specific curricular requirements. This set of expectations flows from and, if reached, supports the values identified in the Mission Statement. The dilemma for the college is how to inculcate these values without introducing a host of requirements. In addition, while objectives and indicators are provided for each Core Theme (as described below), it is not always clear what successful mission fulfillment will look like.

Standard 1.B Core Themes

The Core Themes originate in the Mission Statement and include (1) Integrated, interdisciplinary learning; (2) Individuals engaged in community; (3) Environmental stewardship and social justice; (4) and Diversity and equity. True to its traditions, these are both aspirational and ground the education and values Evergreen seeks to imbue in its graduates. The college clearly understands the aspirational quality of its aims. Each Core Theme is matched with three or four objectives that stem from the Core Theme. The indicators of achievement have been honed to a few, typically transcript evaluation, self-report data from the National Survey of Student Engagement, alumni surveys, and administrative data.

For Core Theme 1 (Integrated, interdisciplinary learning), the objectives include integrative, interdisciplinary learning, multiple modes of thinking, and breadth and depth of learning. The rationale for each is clear: a difficulty for Evergreen is ensuring that undergraduates take full advantage of the offerings, in order to gain a thorough multidisciplinary understanding of key issues. The indicators selected to measure students' learning include transcript reviews and a new "deep learning scale" under

development by the National Survey of Student Engagement. With respect to transcript review, no information was provided that allows the reader to determine how those reviews are conducted. The NSSE scale is not yet available.

Core Theme 2 (individuals engaged in community) stresses active and collaborative learning, the hallmark of Evergreen’s approach, as well as communication skills, the ability to articulate and assume responsibility for one’s own work, and the ability to link theory and practice. The first will be assessed through transcript review and by self-report data generated on the NSSE. In addition, an alumni survey will ask former students whether they are satisfied with Evergreen’s contribution to their ability to collaborate and function as a member of a diverse community. Objectives 2, 3, and 4 will be assessed again through transcript review, an alumni survey, and administrative data (i.e., the number of students who complete a summative self-evaluation statement at graduation). The administrative data will yield objective, quantifiable measures. The transcript evaluation is not fully described.

Core Theme 3 (environmental stewardship and social justice) leads to three objectives: (1) environmentally sustainable operations, (2) environmental and social justice curriculum, and (3) awareness of sustainability and social justice beyond the curriculum. The indicators for Objective 1 are straightforward—measurements of greenhouse gas emissions, campus waste, and proportion of food expenditures from local/organic food sources, designed to model environmental stewardship. Objective 2 is measured by assessing the focus on sustainability in the curriculum, alumni satisfaction with Evergreen’s contribution to their understanding of the interrelatedness of society and environment, and the incidence of sustainability as a learning outcome in coursework. Objective 3 is measured by the number of students and/or student organizations that are involved in attempts at sustainability and social justice. Each of these provides counts or percentages that can be followed over time.

Core Theme 4 (diversity and equity) is also critical to mission fulfillment. Evergreen strongly promotes diversity in its public face. The objectives include (1) learning across significant differences, (2) supportive community, and (3) student access and success. The first two objectives are measured primarily by self-report (NSSE, alumni survey, student experience survey). Administrative data (IPEDS, percentage of students, faculty and staff with disabilities and veterans) will be used as indicators for both Objectives 2 and 3. The administrative data are easily collected and analyzed.

Summary

The Self-Evaluation Report from The Evergreen State College documents that the college has reflected on its mission statement, recognized core themes that define its mission, and provided potential indicators of achievement against which the institution can measure its progress toward mission fulfillment.

Commendations and Recommendations

Commendations

1. The panel commends the college for maintaining its high aspirations reflected in the Five Foci and Six Expectations of an Evergreen Graduate. This steadfastness to principle is remarkable and admirable, especially in the current political and social climate.

Recommendations

1. It will be difficult to determine whether mission fulfillment has been realized with the current core theme targets of improve and maintain. The panel recommends that the college develop and assign more specific designations of an acceptable level of performance for each indicator under each Core Theme, articulating in specific terms for each indicator what successful mission fulfillment looks like (Standards 1.A.2 and 1.B.2).
2. The information provided in the Year One report does not make it clear how analysis of the student transcripts will provide objective evidence to assess mission fulfillment. The panel recommends that the college develop or adopt direct assessment tools as indicators for assessing progress toward each objective for each Core Theme (Standard 1.B.2).