

University of the West
Response to the WASC Special Visit Team Report
December 21, 2012

Submitted by

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UWest Mission

*Provide a whole-person education
in a context informed by Buddhist wisdom and values*

*Facilitate cultural understanding and appreciation
between East and West*

In compiling this response, UWest has disseminated the team report among all faculty and staff, the board of trustees, and the student government, and invited each one to provide feedback to the team's findings. Such contributions are included in what follows. To ensure accessibility and transparency, the team report, this response and the subsequent WASC Commission Action Letter are being published on the university web site.

University of the West (UWest) was happy to welcome the special visit team to our campus from October 15 to 17, 2012. The team members, led by team chair Dr. Frank Ellsworth, were professional and personable, and clearly had the best interests of UWest at heart. Their commitment to helping UWest grow and thrive through the critical lens of the reaffirmation of accreditation process was evident. UWest was gratified to find in Dr. Ellsworth as well as Drs. Nancy Lecourt, Robert Allison, and Mike Lee, individuals who share our values of peace, compassion, harmony, responsibility, and excellence. Dr. Michael Whyte, the WASC associate guiding the special visit, also impressed us with his profound knowledge of accreditation and his dedication to values-driven education. We commend the Commission for putting together such a high-quality team of caring professionals who clearly grasped UWest's unique mission and character.

We are pleased the special visit team considered UWest's special visit report clear, articulate, convenient, complete, and evidence-based. In their own report following the special visit, the team acknowledged many of the positive changes the university implemented between 2010 and 2012. The general tone of the team report was gratifying to our faculty and staff. The phrases it uses – e.g., “extensive and strong positive efforts,” (p.8) “remarkable change,” (p. 11) “continually and significantly increased,” (p. 14) “commendable progress,” (p. 18) “high levels of energy and commitment,” (p. 19) “clearly in evidence” (p. 20) – reflect the pride we have taken in making positive changes in the past several years. This kind of feedback legitimizes and reinforces our efforts and will help us sustain our improvement initiatives as we go forward toward the EER. We feel that the special visit team's recommendations are appropriate and extraordinarily helpful, and we intend to address them and other concerns in preparation for the EER.

UWest appreciates the team's observation of the “extensive and strong positive efforts made by the UWest community in response to WASC concerns regarding mission.” (p. 8) We have diligently sought to clarify and communicate our mission and identity not merely to satisfy WASC, but also to make UWest a stronger institution. Through this reevaluation of our founding purpose, we have been able to realign student learning outcomes in concrete ways with the mission of the university. Not only are measurable learning outcomes now in effect at all levels (institutional, program, course, and co-curricular), but they have helped create a tradition of ongoing process improvement as UWest continually reevaluates our ability to meet those outcomes.

Since the October special visit, the Mission and Identity Committee (MIC) has continued to meet on a biweekly basis. The committee is currently focusing on mission and institutional learning outcome (ILO) assessment using annual targeted campus-wide surveys. The MIC also eagerly awaits evaluation of the first results of comprehensive ILO assessment via the TaskStream system in January. The committee will make recommendations to improve outcomes as needed. The MIC remains a permanent committee with a rotating membership of diverse faculty, staff, administrators, and students. In time, it hopes to become a model for how to define and enact a mission at small, private colleges.

The board of trustees was able to schedule their fourth annual on-campus meeting to coincide with the special visit. UWest trustees were glad to have the opportunity to meet and interact with the WASC team members. As the team report states, "The visiting team observed a remarkable change in the composition and activity level of the board of trustees," (p. 11) following the expansion of the board in 2011. The visiting team found the enlarged board to be "engaged, supportive of UWest's mission, and committed to responsibly discharging its fiduciary responsibility." (p. 11) The board of trustees takes their role to oversee and guide UWest very seriously. Their next on-campus meeting will take place on January 25, 2013, at which time they will review the auditors' report and the first draft of the 2013/14 budget.

UWest and the board of trustees agree that "a clear evaluation process [for the President] needs to be developed and completed in a timely manner." (p. 12) Since the October special visit, the board of trustees has conducted an extensive conference call with Dr. Steve Morgan, former president of the University of La Verne, who has previously consulted UWest in matters of board restructuring and in preparation for the special visit. During that call, Dr. Morgan answered trustees' questions regarding presidential evaluation processes and advised the board on an appropriate and sustainable process for UWest. The board is currently developing the appropriate tools and timeline and plans to complete the evaluation of President C.S. Wu in the 2012/2013 academic year.

UWest has a highly committed administration and was happy that "the visiting team observed an enhanced level of stability [in leadership] during the past two years." (p. 12) Over one year ago, UWest significantly revamped our strategic planning process, resulting in four strategic priorities.¹ Each of these strategic priorities was further detailed in separate planning documents², three of which were complete at the time of the team's visit. The fourth strategic priority, financial growth, is to be addressed through the creation and implementation of a UWest development program. In accordance with that intention the university administration, with the encouragement of the board of trustees, has moved forward since the special visit to reify that plan. A Development Committee has been created, chaired by Dr. Arthur Peterson and including as members President Wu, Dean Howe, CFO Bill Chen, and Dean Karam. Additional faculty, staff and student members will be added as the committee's work progresses.

Development Committee issues have been discussed at each of the past four President's Cabinet meetings with the immediate agenda centering in (a) creating a University Case Statement, (b) identifying potential supporters among our seven "publics," (c) organizing a series of "fund raising events such as a golf tournament, etc., (d) preparation of "position papers" aimed at particular "targets of opportunity" such as "endowed" or "supported" professorships. The Development Committee will meet weekly either separately or in conjunction with the President's Cabinet meetings.

UWest agrees with the need to "develop a strategic budget with key and reasoned drivers and assumptions that support the strategic plan of the institution." (p. 20) UWest is now completing the strategic planning and tying together all four strategic priorities. In particular, we are developing plans to

¹ 1: Increase Enrollment, 2: Improve Communication, 3: Grow Academically, and 4: Grow Financially

² The UWest Action Report of June 2012, Enrollment Management Plan of July 2012, Communications Report of April 2012, and Academic Plan of August 2012.

provide for staffing and support needs as enrollments grow. One of our goals is to demonstrate at EER how our budgeting decisions are informed by academic and co-curricular program review.

UWest has made important changes to its budgeting process. Our new CFO, Dr. Bill Chen, kicked off the 2013/14 budget planning shortly after the special visit. The new process starts earlier in the year and includes more cycles of feedback between department heads and administration. It is part of an effort to “improve campus communication in areas such as resource allocation, budgeting processes, and internal transparency in decision-making.” (p. 20) The process has been deliberately designed to give executive management more opportunity to listen carefully to faculty and staff, communicate effectively, and ensure all constituents understand the components of budget decisions. We were happy the visiting team noted that “decision-making structures are clearly described ... in place and appeared to be working.” (p. 13) We anticipate the new decision-making procedures implemented into this year’s budget process will likewise be successful.

Finally, there have been some changes to the executive management team. First, Mr. Jeffrey Lin resigned as Chief Operations Officer, and Mr. Ricky Tan has been promoted into the position of director of General Services. Second, Ms. Vanessa Karam, a faculty member since 2000 and General Education Coordinator since 2009, has accepted the post of Dean of Student Affairs. UWest conducted a global search for this position, and Ms. Karam emerged as the most outstanding candidate. Dr. Arthur Peterson stepped down from this position, but remains with UWest as Special Advisor to the President, a role he filled prior to his time as Dean. As noted above, Dr. Peterson is now devoting his time to fundraising and development activities, in addition to acting as special advisor on the President’s Cabinet. Ms. Karam continues in the role of Accreditation Liaison Officer. Finally, Dr. Bill Chen, a long-standing member of the university community, who is sensitive to faculty interests as well as academic quality through his former role as the chair of the Department of Business Administration, has settled into his new position as Chief Financial Officer.

UWest continues to take steps to ensure that “recent enrollment growth [will] be supported by appropriate growth in staff and student support programs.” (p. 20) Many new staff members joined UWest in the months before the special visit, and several have joined since the team departed, including a new enrollment recruiter, facilities assistant, purchasing assistant, and several additional adjunct faculty. Importantly, UWest has recently completed a national search and has hired Dr. Janice Gore as our new general education coordinator effective January 14, 2013, a position formerly held by Vanessa Karam. Promotions and reassignments have also enabled the university to competently fill the positions of HR manager and IT manager/coordinator. The President has also authorized the hiring of a live-in residential life coordinator to take place as soon as possible in 2013. UWest is also currently conducting a search for a career services assistant, information technology assistant, and dining hall chef. These hires are largely possible because, as the team noted, “financial resources have increased significantly over the past five years.” (p. 14)

The special visit team is legitimately concerned about UWest’s ability to keep up with our enrollment growth and provide for both the academic and co-curricular needs of our students. As part of our ongoing strategic planning processes, UWest is developing a timeline for “strategic decisions

about the need for support staff and services,” (p. 20) as recommended in the team report³. Our marketing department manages a healthy advertising budget in order to recruit domestic students, and our enrollment team continues to create and nurture connections with foreign higher educational institutions to recruit international students. Because the Lotus Scholarship (introduced in fall 2012) has proven to be a very effective tool for recruiting new students, we have designated this scholarship as a special budget project in the 2013-14 academic year. UWest will also continue to hire faculty and staff and improve campus facilities according to student enrollment growth in order to provide sufficient support and services to our students. Enhanced curriculum and academic support services are continually designed and implemented to improve our retention rates.

As the team noted, in the past two years UWest has been able to focus our resources and hire new full-time faculty to support our academic programs. The implementation of a new assessment system and software will ensure UWest is well prepared for the 2014 Educational Effectiveness Review. UWest has begun to prepare for the EER by selecting appropriate report themes and developing research questions and methodologies to investigate those themes. We expect to complete this phase of preparation by February 2013 and then move into the related research and data collection.

The visiting team was impressed by the number and quality of recent faculty hires and stated that their addition “has enhanced the rigor of the university’s existing academic programs.” (p. 17) At the same time, we agree wholeheartedly that UWest needs to continue its development of faculty policies, pay and benefits to improve retention and attract future high quality applicants. UWest fully intends to “continue its trajectory of growth and improvement in this area, especially in regard to support for faculty research in support of its graduate programs.” (p. 18). In the 2012-13 academic year, UWest offered faculty the opportunity to apply for a total of \$5,000 in institutional research grants. We are proposing increases in the 2013-2014 budget to both the annual faculty professional development fund for each faculty member and the annual fund available to the Faculty Research Committee to allocate to faculty for quality research proposals. UWest also provides transportation and accommodation support to all full-time faculty who present papers at academic conferences or seminars. Plans are also being implemented to increase sick days and vacation time and to raise the university’s still meager 401k fund matching.

One of the ways UWest is working to ensure quality academic programs is via comprehensive student learning outcomes assessment. Improved learning outcomes that better reflect the UWest mission were developed at the institutional, program, course, and co-curricular levels. UWest has implemented a new university-wide software system (TaskStream) in order to measure these outcomes. We are gratified that “the team found that UWest has made commendable progress in this area and may be justifiably proud of the assessment infrastructure that is now in place.” (p. 18) After a test run in spring 2012 that assessed a dozen courses taught by full-time faculty, fall 2012 was the first semester during which every course offered was assessed for learning outcomes. These results are currently being compiled, and the various university constituents are prepared to review the TaskStream summary reports in January. These reports will be used in the academic program review process. A number of co-

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curricular programs are being assessed using the same mission-based criteria and TaskStream technology.

In short, UWest has worked hard and accomplished much in a short period of time. As a young university, we necessarily face some major challenges, not the least of which is a daunting learning curve. We are grateful to have had the special visit last semester so that we could gain the perspective and advice of outside experts. It seems that our efforts have stood us in good stead as evidenced by the team's finding that

UWest addressed each of the identified issues appropriately, including comparisons to peer institutions and consultation with experts from other institutions, and provided considerable supporting evidence in each area. The university analyzed the evidence effectively and provided appropriate conclusions and evaluated its own actions steps frankly and sufficiently. (pp. 6-7)

It is our every intention to continue this trend. Already with 70 new applications for the coming spring semester and 41 newly admitted students in fall 2012 (up 35% from the same time last year), UWest is well on its way to reaching its enrollment goals and growing into a model institution.

The reaffirmation of accreditation process has been critical to this growth and improvement. UWest is indebted to WASC for the quality of the most recent visiting team and that team's subsequent questions and recommendations. We are in agreement with all of them and will diligently strive to see them implemented and integrated into standard university operations well ahead of the EER visit. It is our hope that the Commission will see the advances UWest has clearly made and give their approval for an EER visit in fall 2014. We look forward to greeting WASC's EER team and continuing this tradition of feedback and improvement.

Sincerely,

Dr. C. S. Wu
President

Vanessa Karam
Accreditation Liaison Officer
Dean of Student Affairs