

REPORT OF THE WASC SPECIAL VISIT TEAM

To University of the West

October 14-17, 2012

Team Roster

Frank L. Ellsworth, Team Chair, Former President, Art Center College of Design

Nancy H. Lecourt, Assistant Chair, Vice President for Academic Administration, Pacific
Union College

Robert P. Allison, Former Vice President for Business and Finance, Vanguard University
of Southern California

Ming Tung (Mike) Lee, Interim Chief Financial Officer, California State University,
Sacramento

Michael M. Whyte, WASC Visit Liaison, Provost Emeritus, Azusa Pacific University

The team evaluated the institution under the WASC Standards of Accreditation and prepared this report containing its collective evaluation for consideration and action by the institution and by the Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities. The formal action concerning the institution's status is taken by the Commission and is described in a letter from the Commission to the institution. This report and the Commission letter are made available to the public by publication on the WASC website.

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SECTION I
OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

A. Description of Institution and Visit

University of the West (UWest) is a private, nonprofit, non-sectarian, co-educational institution of higher education offering undergraduate, graduate, certificate, and continuing education programs, located in Rosemead, California. Originally founded as Hsi Lai University in 1990 in Hacienda Heights, California, the campus was moved to the current location in 1996 and its name changed to University of the West in 2004. The university has no off-campus sites and offers no distance education programs.

UWest is one of four universities (two in Taiwan, one in Australia, and UWest in the United States) sponsored by the Fo Guang Shan (“Buddha’s Light Mountain”) Buddhist Order of Taiwan. The four universities “combine Buddhist teaching and practice with academic disciplines and grant a variety of degrees,” according to the UWest website.

Although UWest identifies itself as non-sectarian and admits students regardless of religious affiliation, the University’s mission is steeped in its history and tradition. It commits itself to:

- Provide a “whole person” education in a context informed by Buddhist wisdom and values; and
- Facilitate cultural understanding and appreciation between East and West.

The University offers programs in religious studies and Buddhism as well as in business, psychology, and English: four bachelor's degrees, five master's degrees, and one doctoral degree, as follows:

- B.A. in Business Administration, English, General Studies, Psychology
- M.A. in Psychology, Religious Studies
- M.B.A.
- Executive M.B.A.
- M.Div. in Buddhist Chaplaincy
- Ph.D. in Religious Studies.

In addition to these degree programs, the University also offers several certificates “designed for students who are not interested in a baccalaureate degree but want to be more knowledgeable about the field” (*UWest Catalog* p.53).

UWest is a small university with a total headcount of 315 in fall 2012. The faculty consists of sixteen full-time faculty, twelve of whom hold doctoral degrees, and 35 part-time instructors, totaling 28 FTE faculty as of fall 2012. UWest has granted 189 degrees since 2007.

The University applied for accreditation from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) and attained eligibility in 1998. It was granted WASC candidacy in 2002. In February 2006, UWest secured Initial Accreditation by WASC. Later in 2006, the University submitted substantive change applications to WASC proposing several additional degree programs. Consequently, two new programs have been added—an M.A. in Psychology approved in 2007 and M.Div. in Buddhist Chaplaincy approved in 2008.

In June 2009 the university submitted an Institutional Proposal and a Capacity and Preparatory Report (CPR) in fall of 2010 for a WASC Site Visit in December of that year. In February 2011 the Commission acted to receive the CPR, to continue accreditation, to reschedule the Educational Effectiveness Review (EER) from spring 2012 to fall 2014, and to schedule a Special Visit for fall 2012 (the subject of this report).

The issues to be addressed by the Special Visit are as follows: mission clarification and communication problems; Board of Trustees issues; leadership qualifications; resources; academic curriculum issues; faculty policies and procedures; assessment infrastructure.

No off-site programs, special follow-up visits related to substantive change, or compliance audits were conducted as part of this visit.

B. Quality of the Special Visit Report and Supporting Evidence.

The report provided for the Special Visit was presented clearly and articulately, with the areas to be addressed conveniently presented and the materials organized and accessible to the team. The entire university community, including faculty and students, was active in serving on committees, submitting evidence or data, providing feedback, and answering surveys. The UWest Academic Senate was involved in studying issues involving the curriculum, policies relating to faculty, and assessment. The Board of Trustees increased the number of yearly meetings to address concerns about governance and structure, as well as the responsibilities of the Board. 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.

C. Description of the Team Review Process

Each team member engaged in an independent review of the UWest Report for the Special Visit and all materials provided by WASC regarding previous visits, including the 2011 Commission letter. The Special Visit team chair assigned areas of focus to each team member based on his or her areas of expertise. During the conference call the team reviewed the seven issues, discussed the report and logistics for the visit, and identified areas of strength and remaining questions.

The team met the first evening of the visit to review the evidence and develop appropriate lines of inquiry based on the evidence. During the visit, the team reviewed evidence and conducted interviews with the president, the executive cabinet, other key individuals, all major committees, as well as groups of faculty, staff, students, and alumni to provide additional evidence and verification of the materials reviewed.

SECTION II. TEAM ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUES

A. Mission

In its letter of March 7, 2011, the Commission requested that UWest clarify its mission, “to ensure that all constituents understand it and that it provides the foundation for institutional planning and decision making,” further noting that the mission should be broadly publicized and understood among university constituents.

Clarification, communication, and actualization best characterize the extensive and strong positive efforts made by the UWest community in response to WASC concerns regarding mission. The university has articulated a vision and a set of values, as follows:

- Mission: “to provide a whole-person education in the context of Buddhist wisdom and values; to facilitate cultural understanding and appreciation between East and West;”
- Values: Peace, Harmony, Responsibility, Compassion, and Excellence.

This mission is reflected in the student learning outcomes (SLOs) and in the way the university is managed and conducts its business. Faculty and students are “living the mission” and serve as models for passing on these priorities to all members of the community. A *Guide for Living the Mission* has been created and is used for communication of the mission, values, and priorities. The Buddhist Order does not have any influence over academic curriculum, faculty governance, or university operations (CFRs 1.1, 1.6, 1.7, 1.9, 4.1).

Immediately following the last WASC visit, UWest conducted a “Mission and Identity Survey” to learn what faculty, staff, and students knew about the mission and how they perceived their identity. The Mission and Identity Committee (MIC) was created—composed of staff, faculty, and students—and has met weekly or bi-weekly since. The MIC has created and implemented numerous policies and actions. Several will be noted here. A “Communication Report” was approved by the President’s Cabinet. The report contains a number of concrete suggestions: improved shared governance, greater transparency, enhanced communication, better accountability and consistency in decision-making, community building, and executive support for UWest’s leadership team. The

team found evidence that all of these recommendations have been acted on and are evident in communications, new policies, and daily actions of members of the community and in committee actions. They are also evident in long-term strategic planning efforts. The implementation of these recommendations is being monitored by the MIC and the Executive Committee (CFRs 1.1, 1.6, 1.7, 1.9, 4.1).

The MIC held a faculty and staff workshop to explore the mission, identity, and student outcomes as well as examining other small institutions with comparable missions. The results were Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILOs). Following approval of the ILOs, the MIC worked with each academic program to develop Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs), and then worked with the University Wide Assessment Council (UWAC) to make certain the outcomes were measureable and evidence based. The extensive time put into these efforts is evident in many ways. Workshops were held and materials prepared to help faculty create course learning outcomes (CLOs). The implementation is now in the second semester. Co-curricular offerings also developed measureable learning outcomes that are assessable via the TaskStream system. The mission, ILOs, and PLOs are published in the *Academic Catalog*. Bold and creative Mission, Values, and ILO posters are now present throughout the campus. The MIC has also worked with the Admissions Office, Student Life, Student Government, and other organizations to integrate mission and values-oriented content into Orientation. A mandatory Values Workshop for faculty and staff—and new faculty and adjuncts—was held in fall 2012 to communicate the mission and values and to discuss and reflect on how the mission and values could be integrated in their departments and daily work (CFRs 1.1, 1.6, 1.7, 1.9, 4.1).

The MIC has begun the process of evaluation of mission-related activities. Several are noted here. A second *Mission and Identity Survey* was done as a follow up to the one done the prior year. Both surveys indicate that the two things valued by faculty, students, staff are the mission and values. A *Graduate Survey* reveals that 85.7% of respondents felt they received a whole person education and 92.9% felt they learned about Eastern and Western cultures. Course evaluations over the past four semesters (1,600) indicate that mission-related factors are no more influential than other factors. Instructors who receive high marks in mission-related questions are highly likely to receive high marks in all areas and vice versa. An *Alumni Survey* indicates that 61.9% agree that “whole person education” has shaped their lives and 59.5% utilize their understanding of Eastern and Western culture in their personal and professional life. UWest has been regularly surveying employees in *Employee Satisfaction Surveys*. Although employees understand the mission and values, and practice the mission in their work, some staff have a negative perception of the leadership’s ability to enact the mission. Many want better communications from the leadership. They report higher satisfaction with supervisors, departments, and the university as a whole when communication is effective (CFRs 1.1, 1.6, 1.7; 1.9, 4.1).

The MIC is now a permanent committee and has a lengthy agenda for topics to be explored and implemented in the months ahead. A priority is to continue assessments of the current programs and make adjustments as needed (CFR 4.1).

B. Board of Trustees

WASC expects boards to be independent, to have authority to exercise oversight over institutional integrity, policies, and operations, and to evaluate the president. Among the

2010 CPR visiting team findings that led to this concern are the fact that the board met only twice a year and that its meetings were not often held at the university's campus or even in the region. The Commission urged the board to engage in appropriate development activities and to expand its membership to include more members with the knowledge and experience required to govern an accredited American institution of higher education, including expertise in finances, academic affairs, and planning (CFRs 1.3, 3.9).

The visiting team observed a remarkable change in the composition and activity level of the Board of Trustees, from what was described by the 2010 CPR visiting team. The CPR visiting team found a Board of Trustees that was comprised primarily of monastics from the sponsoring order and which met infrequently, most often in Taiwan, rather than on campus. Within seven months of the Commission Action Letter of March 7, 2011, the Board of Trustees had elected new members, bringing the total number of trustees to fifteen, with a majority not from the sponsoring order. Since the first meeting in October of 2011, the UWest Board of Trustees has met five times, always on campus. From the evidence provided by the minutes of meetings, and both formal and informal meetings held with the trustees, the team concluded that the board was engaged, supportive of UWest's mission, and committed to responsibly discharging its fiduciary responsibility.

A review of the minutes of the Board of Trustees provided evidence that the board is actively engaged in the fulfillment of the UWest mission. Active discussions were held regarding strategic planning, budgets, by laws of the corporation, committee structure,

audits, and financial results. At each meeting, non-monastics comprised the majority of participants.

In the fall of 2011, the UWest Board of Trustees engaged a respected consultant, and former university president, to help with board development activities. He was also asked to redesign the board committee structure to comply with WASC policies. The consultant reported that the entire board, both laity and monastics, were fully engaged and eager to not only learn, but also comply with well-established board governance activities and best practices (CFR 3.10).

At the October 2011 meeting, the Board of Trustees acted to form additional committees. Each committee now fully conforms to the WASC policy statement on independent boards (CFR 3.10).

The Board of Trustees has not yet completed its evaluation of the UWest President, although the process has begun and the president has submitted his own self-evaluation. The visiting team believes that a clear evaluation process needs to be developed and completed in a timely manner. UWest should consider engaging a consultant to assist the president and the Board of Trustees in team building and strategic planning (CFR 3.10).

C. Leadership

UWest experienced significant turnover in leadership in the five years leading up to the appointment of the current president. Four different presidents served the institution during that period. Likewise, other positions also appeared to have experienced significant turnover. However, the visiting team observed an enhanced level of stability during the past two years. Since the CPR visit, key positions have been filled and searches are

progressing. For example, two years ago the president also served as the CFO. A separate CFO was appointed immediately after the WASC December 2010 visit, in response to the recommendation to split the roles. The new CFO's resume is distinguished, and the visiting team found him knowledgeable and prepared for the task. A search committee has also made a recommendation to the president to fill the other vacant senior level position, Dean of Student Affairs. The visiting team was impressed by the senior team that the President has assembled, but did note that the team was relatively new to the institution, and that stable leadership will serve the institution well (CFR 3.3).

Job descriptions now exist for all senior officer positions, as well as for almost all other employees. Resumes were provided for all senior level officials and all individuals appeared to have sufficient educational background and experience to fulfill the positions they occupy (CFR 3.3).

Decision-making structures are clearly described through handbooks, policy statements, and organizational charts. The visiting team observed that the structures described in the UWest Special Visit Report were in place and appeared to be working. For example, curricular decisions are reviewed by the Academic Policy and Curriculum Committee, and decisions regarding curricular issues are discussed and approved there. A budget committee, populated by senior officers and the chair of the academic senate, receives and recommends the annual budget to the president, who sends it to the board for adoption.

D. Resources

Another concern raised in the WASC Commission Action Letter of March 2011 is related to the adequacy of UWest's resources to ensure sustainability of its programs and student success. As indicated in the letter, "the CPR visit team found that UWest has very limited resources and relies heavily on contributions from members of several Buddhist temples and foundations." The team also raised concerns about stability and the ability for the institution to sustain its operations and support the achievement of its educational objectives. The Commission further stated that, "UWest must invest additional resources to achieve its priority objectives by making substantial investments in student life, student services, academic programs, additional qualified faculty, faculty training and development, program staffing, and enrollment services."

Financial resources have increased significantly over the past five years, with net assets increasing from \$16.7M in 2007 to 25.8M in 2012. During the same time period unrestricted net assets increased from \$10.2M to \$17.0M; temporarily restricted net assets increased from \$.75M to \$3.9M; permanently restricted assets increased from \$5.7M to \$6.7M. Investment assets, including both permanently restricted and unrestricted assets, have grown from \$4.6 to \$9.4M. Due to these significant increases, UWest's key financial ratios have improved as well. For example, the primary reserve ratio now is 2.13, meaning it could continue operations for over two years, without additional revenue (CFR 3.5).

Cash has increased remarkably from a low of \$1.6M in 2008 to \$7.8M in 2012. Following a significant loss in FY 2007-8, UWest has continually and significantly increased net assets and cash each year. Although the university's revenue continues to rely

heavily on private donations from the Buddhist temple, more revenues have been generated from the increased enrollment over the last two years. The board and the university administration also plan to diversify its funding sources by exploring opportunities for individual giving and for foundation and government grants, as well as non-credit and certificate programs (CFR 3.5).

Since the 2010 visit, significant resources have been added to the budget, especially in the areas of faculty staffing, student services, and campus facilities and infrastructure. For example, six new full-time faculty positions have been created: assistant chair of the department of religious studies, an additional faculty position in psychology, an additional full-time faculty position in Buddhist chaplaincy (previously part-time), two additional faculty positions in business administration, and a new full-time position in general education (coordinator/faculty; previously part-time). There have also been three new faculty hires: chair of religious studies, an English faculty member, and an ESL lead instructor. Many more faculty positions are planned to coincide with the growing student enrollment. Total faculty salaries increased from \$634,850 in 2011-12, to approximately \$850,000 in 2012-13. Operations and maintenance plant expenditures increased from approximately \$83,000 to almost \$840,000 in 2012-13 (CFRs 3.3, 3.5).

Enrollment has increased significantly during the past two years, and most notably in the fall of 2012. This increase has brought additional resources, but has also brought additional workload to the staff and faculty of the institution. Furthermore, domestic student enrollments increased by 40%, many from lower income families. Shifting student demographics have affected the workload of the financial aid office, and the institution

may not have adequately addressed the impact of these changing demographics. The institution is officially planning to grow by fifty students each year through 2017; however, actual enrollment growth for the past two years has exceeded the planned growth. Planned enrollment growth should be synchronized with enrollment operations to ensure proper support for student retention and success. The institution's strategic plan does call for an increase to 600 students by 2017. However, the visiting team did not find a pro forma financial plan that matched the newly forecast institutional revenues with the institutional expenses required to support the anticipated growth. The new CFO of two weeks expressed the need to revise the existing plan. The visiting team had confidence that the revision would be completed but also recognized that it should already have been in place. The anticipated process will assist in the communication with the UWest community as to what additional resources they can expect to accommodate the growth (CFR 3.5).

E. Academics

The WASC Commission Action Letter raised the concern that the university offered so many programs for so few students, resulting in inappropriate overlap of coursework at different levels. The Commission urged UWest to develop sound policies concerning faculty, in keeping with the WASC Standards, and to address the questions about the extensive array of offerings and the implications of this model for instructional level, coherence of study, academic integrity, and faculty staffing and roles (CFRs 3.1-3.4, 3.11).

The visiting team observed that UWest had suspended several undergraduate programs: B.A.s in history, philosophy, Chinese, and religious studies. This action allowed the University to focus its resources on a smaller number of program offerings. Plans to

expand program offerings were also put on hold until enrollment becomes more stable. The additional faculty hiring over the last two years has enhanced the rigor of the University's existing academic programs.

The overlap of graduate and undergraduate coursework has been eliminated in all departments by fall 2012 as a result of extensive discussions among the Executive Cabinet, Academic Policy and Curriculum Committee, University-wide Assessment Council, and the Dean of Academic Affairs.

F. **Faculty**

The Commission recommended that UWest adopt and implement “fair and equitable faculty policies and procedures concerning qualifications, hiring procedures, workload, retention and advancement, scholarship and creative activity, and professional development” (CFRs 2.1, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4).

The team found that UWest has recently revised the Faculty Handbook, developed a tenure and promotion policy, adjusted faculty workloads and required office hours, and put policies in place to improve faculty retention by modestly increasing salaries and beginning to offer a retirement benefit. These efforts are embryonic and the team recommends that the institution continue to develop faculty compensation components. The Institution has also developed detailed guidelines for faculty hiring, including a step-by-step outline for search committees, and a new Faculty Recruitment Policy describing qualifications and other criteria for suitable candidates (CFRs 2.1, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3).

UWest has developed a “teacher/scholar/servant leader” model of faculty engagement; the faculty are surveyed annually on their contributions in these three areas. The most

recent survey found that the majority of full-time faculty is engaged in research and publication, and the team saw a sample of faculty publications. Finally, UWest has developed an impressive website bringing together helpful resources to support the faculty in teaching, scholarship, and service, and has increased funding for research and begun a series of workshops on topics such as intercultural understanding, contemplative education, and the use of TaskStream for assessment. The team recommends that the institution continue its trajectory of growth and improvement in this area, especially in regard to support for faculty research in support of its graduate programs (CFRs 2.8, 2.9, 3.4).

G. Assessment

The Commission requested “development of the infrastructure for assessment of student learning, including measurable learning outcomes at the course, program, and institution level; assessment plans that include direct methods for assessing student learning and tools that promote good assessment practices; and development of the faculty’s capacity to assess and improve student learning. Refinement of general education outcomes is also expected” (CFRs 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 2.7, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7, 4.8).

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, including an aligned system of assessable learning outcomes at all levels and embedded assessments, with rubrics, being used throughout. The Institution has adopted the TaskStream system, a demonstration of which showed that Institutional Research is now collecting data from across the academic program (CFRs 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6).

UWest is now ready to begin to examine the data that is being collected through their system and to make improvements to the curriculum and to student support services as appropriate, “closing the loop” on their data. Faculty seem to have accepted the TaskStream system, after appropriate questions regarding academic freedom, and are beginning to see the potential benefits of aligned outcomes and clear, actionable data regarding student learning (CFRs 4.7, 4.8).

In the area of general education, outcomes are in place and aligned with mission. All GE courses, where appropriate, are applying the same or similar outcomes and rubrics, especially in regard to foundational skills and practices, thus encouraging consistency of measurement. In addition, UWest is working to incorporate whole-person education into the general education courses in innovative ways that should enhance its “brand” as a unique institution (CFR 2.2).

The team came away from its interviews with faculty at UWest confident that assessment is well underway, program review is understood and valued, and the institution will be ready for the Educational Effectiveness Review in fall 2014 (CFR 2.7).

SECTION III. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The team commends UWest for the following:

- The enthusiasm of staff, students, faculty, trustees, and alumni for the mission; high levels of energy and commitment were clearly evident in interactions with the visiting team at all levels.
- The quality of the Report that was prepared; materials were clear and readable, well organized, and complete. The team appreciated the ability to navigate easily among the exhibits.

- The progress in hiring new faculty and staff; the number of new faculty has increased dramatically, enhancing the academic program in several departments, while new staff members have provided support in key areas.
- The creation of learning outcomes at all levels; institutional, program, and course learning outcomes have been provided and clearly aligned to provide a clear picture to students of their path for learning.
- The addition of new, committed, engaged board members; the team was favorably impressed by that new members bring both energy and expertise to the board while expressing respect and appreciation for longer-term trustees.
- The creation of an assessment infrastructure; the use of TaskStream by faculty and students has created an impressive system to monitor student learning at all levels and provide a basis for making curricular changes as needed.
- The community-wide work done to clarify the mission and values of institution; the mission is now clearly in evidence throughout the entire campus.

The team recommends the following:

- That administration develop a strategic budget with key and reasoned drivers and assumptions that support the strategic plan of the institution; such a plan will carry the University forward as enrollments grow and staffing and support needs increase (CFRs 4.1, 4.2, 4.3).
- That administration continue to improve campus communication in areas such as resource allocation, budgeting processes, and internal transparency in decision-making; the ability of senior management to listen carefully to faculty and staff, and to communicate in more effective ways, will be crucial to future success (CFRs 1.8, 3.8, 4.1).
- That recent enrollment growth be supported by appropriate growth in staff and student support programs; strategic decisions about the need for support staff and services should be implemented with all due speed (CFR 3.1).
- That the UWest Board of Trustees establish a clear presidential evaluation process and complete the process in a timely manner; such a process should be completed before the next accreditation visit (CFR 3.9).
- That administration continue to recruit and retain qualified administrators to support the mission of the institution for the long term; stability in senior leadership will be a must for continued success (CFR 3.10).