

SACSCOC Off-Site Committee Report – Senate 12/11/14

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Every 10 years, each university in the Southern region must submit a request for reaffirmation of accreditation by SACSCOC.

Other than the obvious “seal of quality,” a university must be regionally accredited for students to be eligible for Federal Financial Aid.

There are three stages in the process:

1. Offsite review of Compliance Certification Website (submitted September 2014, reviewed November 2014)
2. Onsite Visit (April 2015) – review any compliance issues noted by offsite committee and the institution’s Quality Enhancement Plan
3. Commission Review (December 2015)

The first stage (off-site review) has just been completed. This requires that we demonstrate compliance with over 90 Principles of Compliance, with comprehensive supporting documentation. There are 15 Core Requirements (the “2”s) and 11 Federal Requirements (the “4”s) – a university MUST PASS all these to be reaffirmed. The other 70 or so are “Comprehensive Standards” (the “3”s), which go into deeper detail on many of the same elements.

My own assessment at the outset was that WKU was already compliant with all the Principles, with appropriate policies, procedures, programs, practices, planning and assessments in place. However, demonstrating this convincingly to a team of outside reviewers still requires a massive amount of explanation and supporting documentation. The SACSCOC Leadership Team and scores of individuals on various committees worked diligently for many months assembling the Compliance Report.

The final “push” occurred this past summer, with a huge amount of final review and editing work during July and August, leading to submission of

the report a whole week early on September 3. WKU's Compliance Report is a website (wku.edu/sacscoc2015) that equates to over 400 printed pages, with nearly 5000 links to supporting documentation.

Results

Preliminary findings by the off-site committee reported to SACSCOC and in turn to President Ransdell and SACSCOC Liaison Rich Miller just prior to Thanksgiving show that WKU was found compliant with all 26 Core and Federal Requirements, and with all but 4 Comprehensive Standards. This, I assure you, is a very impressive result.

These four areas cited relate to the following:

1. Samples of actual staff evaluations were not provided. (This was intentional, since our report was published on an open-access website. Redacted evaluations for selected staff will be made available to the on-site committee.);
2. While appropriate qualifications for library personnel were provided, the committee requested corresponding position descriptions;
3. While a wide array of Student Learning Outcomes were addressed; we were requested to disaggregate these Learning Outcomes across campuses and instructional delivery formats;
4. Comprehensive Standard 3.7.1 relates to faculty credentials for every course taught throughout the academic year. This is a very common area cited; in fact, last year all institutions seeking SACSCOC reaffirmation were found to be less than fully compliant with this Principle during the off-site reviews. In our case, questions were raised concerning faculty credentials for 22 courses, representing less than half a percent of all courses taught during the 2013-14 academic year. Three of our six colleges had

no credentialing issues, and one college had only one course for which further information was requested.

I'd now like to spend a few minutes highlighting some of the Committee's Preliminary Findings, which I think are a resounding testament to the strength of our university and of its faculty, staff, and students.

- All sections related to the role and scope of the BOR were found to be in compliance and, in some cases, “particularly well-documented.”
- The committee commented that “Western Kentucky University’s organizational structure is well-documented” and further noted that “the university’s academic and administrative employees have the background and capabilities needed to perform their duties successfully as institutional leaders.”
- The committee found that WKU’s academic support services have expected outcomes that are regularly assessed, and that improvements are made based on those data.
- The report noted that no management letter was issued in association with the institution’s most recent financial audit for FY 2014, because “the audit did not disclose any significant internal control weaknesses.”
- The report noted that the institutional assessment process is tied to a “clear mission statement that addresses its areas of focus, is specific to the institution, appropriate to higher education, and is published,” and noted that the revised mission statement had been approved by the BOR in 2013. They noted that “recent revisions to the mission statement [had] improved alignment with the university’s strategic plan,” and that “multiple points of resource assessment and prioritization allow WKU to balance aspirational goals against financial realities based on data.” I’d like to acknowledge the hard

work of the AC, the CAD, and the University Senate for many important conversations and resulting actions on matters relating to the development and assessment of strategic priorities.

- The report favorably noted WKU's "clearly articulated Policy on Policies which describes processes and responsibilities for the review and approval of policies across the university" and "ensures that principles of good educational practices are incorporated." Again, I'd like to acknowledge the cooperation of the University Senate in developing the comprehensive set of policies that provide robust structure yet desired flexibility to the university's operations, particularly in the academic arena. The committee also noted that WKU allocates time at New Faculty Orientation for a presentation about University policies, and the Faculty Handbook in particular, by the chair of the University Senate.
- The report noted that WKU's academic programs meet or exceed the minimum SACSCOC requirements and that they demonstrate the necessary expectations of progressively higher rigor. It further commented that there were "clearly articulated processes for review and approval of academic programs at departmental, college and university level by faculty bodies; by university administration; and by external stakeholders where required or appropriate," including "documentation and minutes of committee meetings at all levels" from departments to the Board of Regents. I'd like to acknowledge the work of literally hundreds of faculty on the college curriculum committees, on the University Curriculum Committee, on the Graduate Council, and on the University Senate for their painstaking attention to ensuring that WKU's academic programs are all worthy of the institution's high standards and ideals, and that they stay up to date with the evolving state of knowledge in their disciplines.
- The committee noted favorably that WKU's new General Education program – the Colonnade program – had learning outcomes that

were based on the national LEAP standards observed by the American Association of Colleges & Universities. I'd like to acknowledge the years of hard work by the General Education Task Force and the Senate Colonnade Implementation Committee in assembling such an outstanding General Education program, one that has also lent itself very nicely to the institution's new "Evidence & Argument" Quality Enhancement Plan.

- The report stated that WKU's continuing education, outreach and service programs are consistent with the institution's mission to "provide lifelong learning opportunities for all of its constituents and to enrich the quality of life for those within its reach." It also noted that a robust technology training program is available to all members of the university community. I'd like to acknowledge the diligent work of the DELO and IT divisions in maintaining such a high degree of effectiveness of WKU's course offerings in such a rapidly changing arena of technology and consumer expectations, and our faculty that contribute so very meaningfully to WKU's mission of educational outreach.
- The report noted several ways in which WKU Libraries ensures that "[l]ibrary collections, resources, facilities, services and staff are, across the board, not only adequate and sufficient, but also, in many instances, notable" and that "the Libraries' locations, hours and access, demonstrate the Libraries' sensitivity to its user population."
- Last but by no means least, the committee report noted that WKU "evaluates success with respect to student achievement consistent with its mission" to "prepare students of all backgrounds to be productive, engaged, and socially responsible citizen-leaders of a global society."
- It also noted that the student Code of Conduct clearly outlines the responsibilities of students as well as the due process afforded to

students and that the Division of Student Affairs has “qualified professional and support staff, with appropriate education or experience in the student affairs area, as well as significant years of experience within their area of service.”

- Data from the Office of Training and Research at SACSCOC shows that the average number of noncompliance issues cited in an off-site SACSCOC committee report is 19.4, with a standard deviation of 7.8. The very low number of principles cited for further review thus places WKU in the top few percent of institutions within the region. In a teleconference with President Ransdell and members of the Leadership Team, SACSCOC Vice President Robin Hoffman called it “one of the better Compliance Certification reports in my experience” and an “outstanding accomplishment.”
- So, kudos to the hundreds of people, and that includes everyone in this room, who contributed to this report. I know it was hard work, but I believe that the results we obtained are a just reward for that hard work. Thank you for providing your transcripts, your course syllabi (with the extra parts for the 400G sections!), your course and program assessments, your curricula vitarum, your degree field memos, your revised degree field memos,, and your Digital Measures reports. Thank you all for your time and commitment in the classroom and in the committee meetings. And thank you for the intellect, insight, and plain hard work that you bring to our academic mission and for your dedication to ensuring that WKU remains not just accredited, but very respectably so.

We now have until early March to prepare and submit a focused report on the four remaining items, finalize the development of the “Evidence & Argument” Quality Enhancement Plan, and await the arrival of the on-site review committee in April. In view of the results so far, I’m looking forward to it.