

Summary of the NCA Self-Study 2004-2005: “Meeting Challenges and Advancing Quality”

The NCA Self-Study has been a major undertaking for Westminster College, involving over two years of work and including all constituencies of the College. As we complete the written document and the self-study process, it is essential that we not only provide assurance of our accomplishments over the past ten years, but also demonstrate that we are both progressive in our approach to planning and fully able to meet our goals in the future. In addition, the purpose of the process is not simply reaccreditation, but also to create a vibrant document that will be used by the College to move forward.

“Meeting Challenges and Advancing Quality” opens with an overview of the self-study process. After outlining the goals of the self-study (Preface) and presenting a history of the College (Chapter 1), the document responds to the concerns of the 1994 Evaluation Team (Chapter 2). The greater part of the document (Chapters 3-7) contains a thorough discussion of the five criteria NCA has set forth as defining a quality institution.

Criterion 1, “Mission and Integrity”: *The organization operates with integrity to ensure the fulfillment of its mission through structures and processes that involve the board, administration, faculty, staff and students.*

In the discussion of this criterion, we emphasize the value of the mission documents (which include the mission, vision, and educational goals) in determining the character and direction of the College. We define the extent to which these documents clearly articulate the commitments of the College, in addition to how well the documents are understood and supported by various constituencies. We also explore ways the mission documents recognize the diversity of its constituencies and develop structures that promote both leadership and collaborative efforts among these constituencies. Finally, we examine the College’s commitment to upholding and protecting its integrity. Some examples of evidence found in this chapter are the revision of the statements of mission, vision, and educational goals and the development of a new general education program based on these revisions.

Criterion 2, “Preparing for the Future”: *The organization’s allocation of resources and its processes for evaluation and planning demonstrate its capacity to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of education, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.*

Our discussion in this chapter first considers the College’s ability to anticipate and act upon societal and economic trends shaping our future. It also examines our current resource base in order to determine how well it supports and will continue to support high-quality educational programs. This criterion is concerned with the extent to which assessment practices lead to strategies for continuous improvement. Finally, we link planning processes back to the college mission statement as we discuss how planning both aligns with and fulfills the mission. To demonstrate that we have been preparing

well for the future, we cite our ability to increase in enrollment to over 850 students as well as the successful capital campaign, which has allowed us to operate with a balanced budget and has enabled us to achieve many of the accomplishments discussed in the self-study.

Criterion 3, “Student Learning and Effective Teaching”: *The organization provides evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness that demonstrates it is fulfilling its educational mission.*

At the heart of Criterion 3 is the necessity of the College to value and support teaching and learning. Therefore, in the development of this criterion, we seek to demonstrate that the College creates effective learning environments and that its resources provide adequate support for effective teaching. In addition, this chapter explains the need to articulate clearly the College’s goals for student learning so that effective assessment can take place, and it gives an overview of how we are developing a thorough assessment program. In discussing Criterion 3, we focused both on facilities that advance student learning--such as addition of the Hazel Wing of the library and the new construction of the Coulter Science Center--and new programs, such as the development of new majors and minors and our continued progress on the assessment program.

Criterion 4, “Acquisition, Discovery, and Application of Knowledge”: *The organization promotes a life of learning for its faculty, administration, staff, and students by fostering and supporting inquiry, creativity, practice, and social responsibility in ways consistent with its mission.*

Criterion 4 explores the extent to which the College demonstrates that it values a life of learning for all college constituents, not simply for students. In exploring this issue, we delineate ways the College encourages intellectual inquiry and responsible use of knowledge. In addition, this criterion demonstrates the ability of the College to prepare students for living and working in a global, diverse, and technological society. Examples of evidence include the establishment of the Faculty Mentoring Program and the Center for Teaching Excellence.

Criterion 5, “Engagement and Service”: *As called for by its mission, the organization identifies its constituencies and serves them in ways both value.*

Finally, the chapter devoted to Criterion 5 discusses how the College engages with its constituencies, learns from them, and serves their needs. It examines the College’s level of commitment to its constituencies, especially in its response to those that depend on it for service. This chapter also seeks to prove that both internal and external constituencies value the services the College provides. Strong examples of evidence in this chapter are the Center for Leadership and Service, which has strengthened ties between the College and the community, and the success of the WAVE program, which has resulted in hundreds of alumni connecting with the College through service.

In addition to highlighting the achievements of the past decade, the self-study also helped us to identify many areas that continue to need improvement, particularly in relation to teaching and assessment of learning. Each of the main chapters concludes with a list of recommendations, all of which the College will use in further discussions of planning for the future. From these lists, the following recommendations, which are discussed in the concluding chapter (Chapter 8), have been identified as having greatest priority:

1. Improve the operational definition of “academic reputation” utilized in Westminster’s strategic plan;
2. Formalize a plan for reviewing the missions documents on a regular basis;
3. Implement a pay scale for faculty commensurate with peer institutions;
4. Minimize the use of adjuncts, even as our student body grows;
5. Reduce the service load on faculty and add needed support staff, thereby increasing time for professional development and teaching;
6. Revamp faculty evaluation in a way that accurately assesses development and rewards progress;
7. Increase funding for faculty development, particularly support for travel;
8. Continue development of the assessment program, particularly to ensure systematic use of data to evaluate and improve programs;
9. Develop more effective learning environments, including pedagogies, materials, and advising systems that take into account differences in learning styles;
10. Improve teaching and learning about diversity by enhancing curriculum and by creating on and off campus learning opportunities;
11. Increase endowment so that more resources are available to improve the quality of academic programs and support student development;
12. Support collaboration with external groups and explore the formation or strengthening of partnerships;
13. Formalize the planning process so that it engages more constituencies particularly assuring that the faculty should develop a planning body to facilitate their input;
14. Discuss the meaning of being a liberal arts college and articulate any distinctive ways in which Westminster delivers a liberating educational experience.

Throughout the process of conducting the self-study, and particularly now as it comes to completion, the College has and will continue to examine its strengths and weaknesses, to explore ways of growing and improving, and to take the necessary steps to become a stronger institution that will thrive in the future.