

# **Evaluation of Institutional Effectiveness (Year 7)**

## **Peer-Evaluation Report**

**Whitman College**

**Walla Walla, Washington**

**April 15-17, 2024**

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

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## **I. Introduction**

Whitman College, founded in 1882, is a private liberal arts institution in Walla Walla, Washington with an approximate enrollment of 1500 undergraduates. The school recently revamped its approach to mission fulfillment, replacing its longstanding core themes with high level objectives linked more intentionally to its strategic planning process. The Whitman community is using this opportunity to reframe its model for continuous improvement, including but not limited to revising student learning outcomes (SLOs), budgetary processes, and its strategic plan. From April 15-17, 2024, a four-person peer evaluation team conducted a Year Seven Evaluation of Institutional Effectiveness (EIE) visit in response to the institution's self-evaluation report of February 16, 2024. The comprehensive visit covered Standard 1, as well as additional information on Standard 2 stemming from the Year Six PRFR review. Importantly, there were no recommendations outstanding.

## **II. Assessment of Self-Evaluation and Support Materials**

The institution generated a 52-page EIE report, which included addenda clarifying questions raised during the Year Six PRFR visit. Overall, the self-report was appropriate in both breadth and depth. The institution's ALO is to be commended for thoughtful and thorough communication, both in the months before the site visit and throughout the team's stay. It was evident that many faculty, staff, and administrators had collaborated effectively to produce the report. The self-study was accompanied by several exhibits, including relevant institutional data, handbooks, and additional relevant information. All ancillary materials were carefully linked to key portions of the report's narrative, and every effort was made to accommodate last minute requests for supplemental materials. Team members noted that the timing of the visit coincided with the institution's change in approach for two key areas: student advising and assessment of student learning. While there was evidence the latter had sustained much of its momentum from the existing framework, it was not possible for the team to determine whether the new approach to academic advising had gained meaningful traction.

## **III. Visit Summary**

Over the course of its 3-day visit the evaluation team attended more than 25 meetings, interviewing a representative cross-section of institutional employees, including senior administrators (president, cabinet members, deans, and associate deans), trustees, program leaders/directors, and institutional research personnel; faculty, student support and advising personnel; library, human resources, and facilities personnel; and campus staff. Each evaluator had a robust meeting schedule spanning a variety of topics pertaining to Standard 1. Follow-up meetings were conducted where necessary, and all lines of inquiry were pursued until the team was satisfied that the material contained in the evaluation report had been clarified and verified.

#### IV. Topics Addressed as an Addendum to the Self-Evaluation Report

There were no recommendations outstanding and the institution responded to all three standards identified by the Spring 2023 PRFR as needing improvement (2.G.5, 2.G.6, 2.G.7)

#### V. Standard 1: Student Success and Institutional Mission and Effectiveness

##### a. Standard 1.A: Institutional Mission

##### i. 1.A.1

*1.A.1 The institution's mission statement defines its broad educational purposes and its commitment to student learning and achievement.*

The institution's mission statement emphasizes a rigorous liberal arts education, one that allows students to develop their capacities for leading ethical and meaningful lives of purpose, identifying Whitman as a scholarly community dedicated to student learning locally, regionally, and globally. In June 2023, the institution's Board approved six strategic themes designed to bridge the mission statement more directly to Whitman's strategic planning processes going forward.

##### b. Standard 1.B: Improving Institutional Effectiveness

##### i. 1.B.1

*1.B.1 The institution demonstrates a continuous process to assess institutional effectiveness, including student learning and achievement and support services. The institution uses an ongoing and systematic evaluation and planning process to inform and refine its effectiveness, assign resources, and improve student learning and achievement.*

The site visit team reviewed evidence of a nascent framework for tracking continuous improvement across the institution. For the most part, use of assessment data – in particular as regards improvements to student learning and achievement – has been uneven and inconsistent during the last review period. As noted previously, the present EIE visit coincided with a change by the institution in its strategic planning processes, making it challenging for the review team to establish whether the current model of continuous improvement will, or can be adapted to accommodate useful assessment efforts already in place, or whether more significant modifications are necessary for accommodating what will (ultimately) need to be broadest-possible participation across campus. Concerning existing practices for informing continuous improvement, the review team noted meaningful distinctions between the levels of formative and summative assessment being used to track student learning, achievement, and support services. In terms of data flow, the review team hosted several conversations where it became evident that useful information, readily available through IR, was not being mobilized. This was especially prevalent with respect to academic program-level data. While there were certainly standout examples provided (CHEM and MATH), over the course of the last

review period, the majority of academic programs have provided little in the way of actionable evidence for demonstrating the kind of ongoing and systematic assessment practices needed to informing the institution's model for continuous improvement.

Compliment: The review team observed examples of formalized assessment that informed diversity, equity, inclusiveness, and access (DEIA) practices within the Academic Resource Center, Career Coaching, Intercultural Center, CARE Team, Student Orientation, STEM Hub and others. The review team heard examples of appreciation for these services from students and faculty.

Concern: The practice of assessing SLOs remains variable and with limited coordination, particularly as a campus strategic plan is in development. Upon arrival of its new provost, Whitman is encouraged to finalize strategic planning efforts and formalize expectations across functional units to assess learning with a more coordinated emphasis on improvements as means for informing and refining institutional effectiveness and assigning resources.

ii. 1.B.2

*1.B.2 The institution sets and articulates meaningful goals, objectives, and indicators of its goals to define mission fulfillment and to improve its effectiveness in the context of and in comparison with regional and national peer institutions.*

Whitman College has a robust mission statement. The institution has moved away from its 2020 core themes and is in the process of establishing strategic plan objectives, which at the time of the site visit were not yet fully implemented. As part of its existing framework for mission fulfillment and institutional effectiveness, Whitman maintains a well-established cohort of regional and national peer institutions for purposes of ongoing comparison.

Compliment: Whitman College IR Office did provide analysis of retention, graduation, and other descriptive attributes of performance relative to their regional and national peers (e.g. IR-produced in house - institutional reporting, NSSE, HERI-CSS, Keeling & Associates, etc.). The review team was also provided with examples of intention to improve Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging outcomes overall and in the context of peer comparisons (NACCC and NSSE reporting). The review team applauds Whitman College for completing a campus climate survey and working towards improvements in DEIA within this context.

Concern: The Office of Institutional Research does not appear well-integrated with the campus administration in support of providing holistic/comparative decision support relative to this standard.

iii. 1.B.3

*1.B.3 The institution provides evidence that its planning process is inclusive and offers opportunities for comment by appropriate constituencies, allocates necessary resources, and leads to improvement of institutional effectiveness.*

The institution is in the process of completing its strategic plan and this effort appears to be informed by the campus community. The President’s Budget Advisory Committee is actively involved. Three projects have been identified to improve institutional effectiveness (career coaching, meeting unmet student financial need and improving the first-year seminar course). The review team heard from several constituents (students, faculty and some staff) that these initiatives were welcomed and supported the mission of Whitman College.

Compliment: The committee noted examples of inclusiveness within the institutional decision-making framework that allowed for input from faculty and students regarding the allocation of resources.

Concern: The committee did not observe many examples of staff involvement in matters specifically associated with improvement of institutional effectiveness, particularly within a shared governance framework.

iv. 1.B.4

*1.B.4 The institution monitors its internal and external environments to identify current and emerging patterns, trends, and expectations. Through its governance system it considers such findings to assess its strategic position, define its future direction, and review and revise, as necessary, its mission, planning, intended outcomes of its programs and services, and indicators of achievement of its goals.*

The review team was provided with several different examples by various offices and individuals who monitor current and emerging patterns, trends, and expectations of internal and external environments. Examples centered on student behavior, student engagement, student academic performance, and student retention and competition. Owing to the institution not having completed its strategic plan, the review team observed fewer examples of mission, planning, and indicators of achievement of strategic goals.

c. Standard 1.C: Student Learning

i. 1.C.1

*1.C.1 The institution offers programs with appropriate content and rigor that are consistent with its mission, culminate in achievement of clearly identified SLOs that lead to collegiate-level degrees, certificates, or credentials and include designators consistent with program content in recognized fields of study.*

A combination of the Course Catalog, the institution’s Self-Evaluation Report materials, and follow-up interviews throughout the site visit indicate the institution demonstrates intentional and appropriate content and rigor when creating its programs of study. SLOs at the course level are consistent with institutional mission and provided for each program of study.

ii. 1.C.2

*1.C.2 The institution awards credit, degrees, certificates, or credentials for programs that are based upon student learning and learning outcomes that offer an appropriate breadth, depth, sequencing, and synthesis of learning.*

Course credit and degrees are awarded based on learning outcomes established for every course in a student's program, each of which reflects the necessary breadth and sequencing deemed appropriate by the institution.

iii. 1.C.3

*1.C.3 The institution identifies and publishes expected program and degree learning outcomes for all degrees, certificates, and credentials. Information on expected SLOs for all courses is provided to enrolled students.*

Whitman appropriately publishes expected program "learning goals" for its degree programs, both within its Course Catalog (by program) and on the institution's website. Expected SLOs for course level outcomes are provided on individual syllabi.

iv. 1.C.4

*1.C.4 The institution's admission and completion or graduation requirements are clearly defined, widely published, and easily accessible to students and the public.*

Admissions requirements are clearly delineated, published, and accessible. However, extensive searches by the visiting team, both of the Course Catalog and institutional website, did not result in a clearly defined, published description of graduation requirements made easily accessible to both students and the public. The Course Catalog and website make reference to various component requirements (e.g., descriptions of majors, descriptions of general education requirements), but not a complete and clearly labeled set of requirements to fully inform the total number of credits required for degree completion. During interviews, individuals explained that Admissions, academic staff and faculty advisors communicate requirements during various events and conversations (e.g., recruitment, orientation, academic advising), but these efforts fall short of meeting the standard.

Concern: The institution's graduation requirements are not clearly and consistently articulated, widely published, nor easily accessible to the public.

v. 1.C.5

*1.C.5 The institution engages in an effective system of assessment to evaluate the quality of learning in its programs. The institution recognizes the central role of faculty to establish curricula, assess student learning, and improve instructional programs.*

The institution provided meaningful evidence underscoring the central role of faculty to establish curricula, assess student learning, and improve instructional programs. Conversations with faculty, staff and administrators indicate that, at Whitman, the faculty



are solely responsible for establishing curricula, assessing student learning, and steering improvement of academic programs. The institution's EIE report provided examples of learning assessment, including pre-post differences within writing courses, informative assessments from Chemistry, and the Math department's impactful assessment of fast-tracking less-prepared students directly into calculus. Assessment reporting templates and summary reports generated out of the Institutional Research Office show that some degree of learning assessment activity is happening in all programs, and that approximately 70-80% of all teaching faculty submit reports.

Upon request, the institution provided evidence of supplemental program-level annual reports dating to 2019, suggesting continuous assessment activity over time, including faculty reflections on how their results were leading them to consider improvements. Although produced on an annual basis, these reports provided no summative reporting to close out three-year cycles or to establish trend lines. Conversations confirmed the institution's approach to learning assessment invites a particularly high degree of faculty autonomy in setting benchmarks for what constitutes appropriate levels of summative performance by students in a given department's program learning outcomes, as relevant to senior assessments. Moreover, departments decide what percentage of students ought to meet their own determined benchmarks. For example, one department may meet its expectations for summative SLOs if 75% of seniors are scored at 75% on the scale they utilize; another might meet its expectations if 100% of seniors score at 67%; another if 80% achieve a performance equivalent to a grade of "B" or better; another if a percentage is determined to perform "adequately." At least one department also described themselves as changing the expected benchmark year to year to adjust to differences across student cohorts. While it may be that a small department with a small number of seniors in any given year has a strong sense of what annual assessment numbers mean to their program, it is not possible to determine how a summary-level view could provide meaningful data to inform a broader view of student achievement at Whitman (i.e., allowing faculty to engage in productive conversations across programs about how well students, overall, are achieving program learning outcomes).

A second question is whether Whitman's documentation solely of "senior assessments" provides a sufficient basis to ensure effective assessment of program learning outcomes as they are delivered across four-year degrees. Some departments have formal curriculum maps which document where each learning outcome is scaffolded in the program curriculum, at least providing a basis for cross-referencing learning from the summative back to developmental stages; other departments describe being informally aware of how core requirements in the major scaffold the building blocks. Faculty disclosed that curriculum mapping is not a universal practice at Whitman, and evaluators could not see an infrastructure for ensuring that program learning outcomes (as opposed to course learning outcomes) could be systematically and effectively assessed across the four years of a curriculum.

Concern: It is difficult to know how faculty are able to interpret results meaningfully and consistently within and across departments when there are differing standards of measurement used by each department, or even by individual faculty members within a department or program.

Concern: Documented program learning outcomes assessment is conducted solely at the senior assessment level, without clearly articulated processes for how those senior assessments correlate with developments at earlier phases in the curriculum in a way that could inform improvements.

vi. 1.C.6

*1.C.6 Consistent with its mission, the institution establishes and assesses, across all associate and bachelor level programs or within a General Education curriculum, institutional learning outcomes and/or core competencies. Examples of such learning outcomes and competencies include, but are not limited to, effective communication skills, global awareness, cultural sensitivity, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and logical thinking, problem solving, and/or information literacy.*

The institution's Course Catalog and website demonstrate its General Education (GE) framework has clearly defined learning outcomes. Annual assessment templates are distributed to faculty for reporting results for one GE outcome per year. Documentation provided by the institution demonstrated particularly impressive attention to assessing writing across First-Year Seminars and Academic Writing. The distribution requirement component of the GE framework follows a disciplinary-domain distribution model, with the assessment basis for each kind of course following Whitman's disciplinary model of allowing each department member to identify appropriate assignments, define and set assessment benchmarks, and determine the percentage of students that ought to meet those benchmarks in each relevant course that they teach. Similar to the concerns raised for major program learning assessment, the evaluation team found it difficult to determine how individualized benchmarking led to meaningful aggregated results.

The visiting team appreciates that faculty are now redesigning the GE program. Preparatory materials demonstrate care in defining learning outcomes for the newly-approved program set to be implemented in 2024-25. However, the draft model of what may become the annual faculty assessment reporting template for the new program anticipates the same individualized approach, inviting individual faculty to define individualized performance levels and success rates. As the institution continues its development process, the evaluation team encourages faculty to provide a persuasive rationale for how the approach can produce meaningful data that lead to authentic insights into collective student achievement of general education learning goals.

Concern: While course-based general education assessment is well documented, assessment methodologies do not lead to meaningful results at an aggregated level.

vii. 1.C.7

*1.C.7 The institution uses the results of its assessment efforts to inform academic and learning-support planning and practices to continuously improve SLOs.*

Several excellent examples of assessment efforts used to inform learning-support planning and practices were provided, including some directly relevant to improving SLOs

at the department and academic program level (e.g., Chemistry and Math). The EIE self-study and site visit conversations confirmed that more learning support areas (Center for Writing and Speaking and the Academic Resource Center) are beginning to plan for assessment. Overall, the evaluation team regarded the use of assessment for informing academic and learning-support planning and practices as emerging. It is clear that Whitman has made real progress in its efforts toward continuous improvement in SLOs since its last re-accreditation, and with that progress comes a stronger basis for being able to use assessment to improve. An annual summary of department assessment activities is compiled by the Institutional Research department and shared by the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in various venues. Opportunities are available to learn more about departmental assessment results, but the degree to which the information is accessed and applied across departments and other areas leading to learning support is unclear.

viii. 1.C.8

*1.C.8 Transfer credit and credit for prior learning is accepted according to clearly defined, widely published, and easily accessible policies that provide adequate safeguards to ensure academic quality. In accepting transfer credit, the receiving institution ensures that such credit accepted is appropriate for its programs and comparable in nature, content, academic rigor, and quality.*

The catalog and website clearly explain transfer credit and credit for prior learning policies (with the latter limited to AP and IB work). Whitman has established clear boundaries around the kind of transfer credit that it accepts as appropriate for its programs and comparable in nature to the credit it awards.

ix. 1.C.9

*1.C.9 The institution's graduate programs are consistent with its mission, are in keeping with the expectations of its respective disciplines and professions, and are described through nomenclature that is appropriate to the levels of graduate and professional degrees offered. The graduate programs differ from undergraduate programs by requiring, among other things, greater: depth of study; demands on student intellectual or creative capacities; knowledge of the literature of the field; and ongoing student engagement in research, scholarship, creative expression, and/or relevant professional practice.*

The institution offers no graduate programs.

d. Standard 1.D: Student Achievement

i. 1.D.1

*1.D.1 Consistent with its mission, the institution recruits and admits students with the potential to benefit from its educational programs. It orients students to ensure they understand the requirements related to their programs of study and receive timely, useful, and accurate information and advice about relevant academic requirements, including graduation and transfer policies.*

Whitman is a selective institution and recruitment outcomes are carefully aligned with the potential for students to benefit from its educational programs. The institution would benefit from clearer articulation of graduation requirements on its webpage.

Compliment: The Summer Fly-In Program was created to generate improvements with diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging outcomes for incoming students. The review team was impressed by Whitman's innovative efforts.

ii. 1.D.2

*1.D.2 Consistent with its mission and in the context of and in comparison with regional and national peer institutions, the institution establishes and shares widely a set of indicators for student achievement including, but not limited to, persistence, completion, retention, and postgraduation success. Such indicators of student achievement should be disaggregated by race, ethnicity, age, gender, socioeconomic status, first generation college student, and any other institutionally meaningful categories that may help promote student achievement and close barriers to academic excellence and success (equity gaps).*

The institutional factbook provides expected and useful information. Data is disaggregated to provide insights on differences between retention and graduation rates both at Whitman and with peer comparators. Leveraging the Institutional Research Office for additional reporting (both summative and formative) has the potential to help bolster student achievement outcomes - particularly to close equity gaps -associated with the standard.

iii. 1.D.3

*1.D.3 The institution's disaggregated indicators of student achievement should be widely published and available on the institution's website. Such disaggregated indicators should be aligned with meaningful, institutionally identified indicators benchmarked against indicators for peer institutions at the regional and national levels and be used for continuous improvement to inform planning, decision making, and allocation of resources.*

Examples of longitudinal quantitative measures of student achievement were found in Whitman's Fact Book. Comparisons to peer institutions are also present in the document. The review team received and reviewed several examples concerning the organization of allocating resources, planning, and decision-making associated with these data.

iv. 1.D.4

*1.D.4 The institution's processes and methodologies for collecting and analyzing indicators of student achievement are transparent and are used to inform and*

*implement strategies and allocate resources to mitigate perceived gaps in achievement and equity.*

Whitman's processes and methodologies include the use of well-normed national survey instruments (NSSE, HERI, NACCC) and data (HEDS) to inform its strategies and allocate resources. Notably, the institution enlisted the services of an outside firm (Keeling & Associates) to bolster its ongoing efforts towards ensuring a vibrant campus community. Whitman acknowledges that students of color do not persist at the same levels as their white peers, and that students of color report lower levels of mattering, affirmation, and a sense of belonging. Given these data, Whitman is making significant investments to support diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging efforts on its campus.

## **VI. Standard 2: Governance, Resources, and Capacity**

### **g. Standard 2.G: Student Support Resources**

#### **i. 2.G.5**

*2.G.5 Students receiving financial assistance are informed of any repayment obligations. The institution regularly monitors its student loan programs and publicizes the institution's loan default rate on its website.*

The institution provided evidence that the cohort default rate is now published on the Whitman website and will be updated on an annual basis.

#### **ii. 2.G.6**

*2.G.6 The institution designs, maintains, and evaluates a systematic and effective program of academic advisement to support student development and success. Personnel responsible for advising students are knowledgeable of the curriculum, program and graduation requirements, and are adequately prepared to successfully fulfill their responsibilities. Advising requirements and responsibilities of advisors are defined, published, and made available to students.*

Considerable work has been undertaken by Whitman's Academic Advising Committee to formulate a mission statement, SLOs, expectations for advisors, and a draft assessment framework for formal academic advising (pre-major and major). The visiting team interviewed students, faculty and staff – as well as administrators whose roles include oversight of academic advising – to establish that, although not yet fully implemented, the infrastructure for replacing the former advising framework is in place and will begin generating meaningful data for continuous improvement beginning AY 24-25 in time for the institution's Mid-Cycle review.

#### **iii. 2.G.7**

*2.G.7 The institution maintains an effective identity verification process for students enrolled in distance education courses and programs to establish that the student enrolled in such a course or program is the same person whose*

*achievements are evaluated and credentialed. The institution ensures that the identity verification process for distance education students protects student privacy and that students are informed, in writing at the time of enrollment, of current and projected charges associated with the identity verification process.*

The institution clarified for the site visit team it does not offer distance education courses or programs and provided an updated statement to that effect in its EIE report in response to the PRFR finding (i.e., “Not applicable.”)

## **VII. Summary**

The evaluation team observed a student-centered, innovative, rigorous academic environment at Whitman College. There is a high degree of passion for, and dedication to the institution among its students, faculty, staff, administration, and trustees. Whitman has a long and rich history as a key contributor to the Walla Walla area and there is enthusiasm across campus for growing that connection, as evidenced by several new initiatives for enriching community engagement.

## **VIII. Commendations and Recommendations**

### **a. Commendations**

Commendation 1: The peer evaluation team commends the institution for its innovative initiatives such as +French and the Fly-In program.

Commendation 2: The peer evaluation team commends the institution for its broad and deep commitment to equity and inclusion across campus.

Commendation 3: The peer evaluation team commends the institution for its intentional facilitation of significant investments in: meeting 100% of student need, career coaching, and First-Year seminar.

### **b. Recommendations**

Recommendation 1: The peer evaluation team recommends that the institution clearly define, widely publish, and make easily accessible to students and the public its graduation requirements. (1.C.4)

Recommendation 2: The peer evaluation team recommends that the institution continue improving its system of assessment to be effective in evaluating the quality of learning in its programs. (1.C.5)

Recommendation 3: The peer evaluation team recommends that the institution demonstrate systematic evaluation and planning processes to inform and refine its effectiveness and assign resources in support of student learning and achievement. (1.B.1)