

Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana

Sonny Ramaswamy
President

Likely there's no one who has not uttered the phrase, "*time flies when you're having fun.*" Webster's Dictionary states that the term "*time flies*" originated during the late 18th Century and is derived from the Latin "*tempus fugit*".

Some studies suggest elation generated by the active pursuit of a goal gives us the perception of time passing quickly. I am certain my colleagues—staff and commissioners—will vouch that this past year has whizzed by, as we have pursued a number of goals.

A few days ago, during a conversation with friends, I reflected that it feels like I have been part of NWCCU for years, considering the multiple things we have focused on and accomplished, some of which I want to share here as a "state of the commission" stock-taking.

The passion and can-do attitude of NWCCU's staff and commissioners has been critical for the phenomenal progress we have made during the last almost year. And, what is being done now will set the Commission on the path of supporting excellence in education, single-mindedly focused on student success for years to come at our family of institutions.

The year started with news from the United States Department of Education (USDE) the NWCCU's recognition was renewed for five years—thanks to the efforts of Marlene Moore, staff, and some commissioners.

Surveys, Town Hall conversations, discussions, and brainstorming sessions—at several of our institutions, along with meetings with boards and other oversight entities in AK, BC, ID, MT, NV, OR, UT, WA—during the last 18 months plus has offered us the insights and foundation to forge ahead, including defining the strategic path for the Commission. We heard from many of the need to streamline and make less burdensome the accreditation processes, for greater engagement and better, more frequent communications, the need for training and workshops, additional support for efforts on campuses to promote student success, help with data collection and analytics, and myriad other issues. We have taken such input to heart and embarked on a series of internal and external efforts to address the same.

In thinking of greater engagement and better communications, we challenged ourselves to come up with a planned approach to defining communications, i.e., the what, the why, the where, the when, and the to whom. In answering these questions, we realized there's not just a one size-fits-all approach, i.e., we needed a multi-media, multi-modal approach. The result is that we hope to create a continuously updated and secure web portal, device agnostic and curated to provide critical and timely data and information, which celebrates the accomplishments of our family of institutions and serves as an entrée: for the public, students, stakeholders, institutions, commissioners, evaluators, accreditation liaison officers (ALOs), and other interested parties. Additionally, we created *The Beacon*, a quarterly newsletter to inform

and to celebrate. We continue to use blogs, email, and other approaches to keep our institutions informed.

We articulated going paperless, being data/technology driven, improving security, and focused on continuous process improvement of internal processes and delivery of services. We have engaged with companies such as SalesForce, Presence, Box, Expensify, and others to improve services, while containing costs. I know these have not gone without growing pains, but thanks in large measure to the willingness of our institutional partners, ALOs, evaluators, and commissioners, we have overcome most initial challenges. Even so, we continue to engage with our stakeholders to continuously improve our processes and services.

Completely revising our bylaws, policies, and procedures has been yet another priority, which, thanks to our staff and commissioners is almost complete and will be deployed starting September 1, 2019. Similarly, we have created handbooks on personnel and procedures, aligned with Washington state law, to provide certainty to staff.

For the first time ever, NWCCU undertook an external audit and, except for one management issue, which has been addressed, we received a clean bill of health, thanks to the excellent work of staff and commissioners providing oversight. As a result, and in combination with oversight provided by Board committees, we have built excellent internal controls. The Commission's finances are sound; the work of our staff and the support and advice of our commissioners has been critical to achieve the same.

The Commission is undertaking an analysis of how we assess charges for various items and actions and also the institutional dues structure, which we hope is completed over the next several months. Ultimately, our vision is to reduce the costs attributable to accreditation.

In light of recent national conversations around standards and bright lines, and in accordance with USDE regulations and NWCCU Bylaws, we are undertaking a cycle of review and revision of Eligibility Requirements ("ERs"), Policies, Standards of Accreditation ("Standards"), and the processes by which we evaluate, monitor, and support our family of institutions. Based on significant public comment and input, and with the help of our commissioners, the Standards have been iteratively revised over the last nine months to focus on the most critical elements of accreditation: student achievement and success. The revised Standards and processes, which we expect to bring to a vote by the 160+ institutions in August 2019, are expected to be deployed January 1, 2020. The draft Standards recognize the importance of achievement gaps between different groups and require institutions to demonstrably reduce achievement gaps and promote equity. Therefore, the new Standards will require institutions to collect and share data on retention, graduation, completion, and other critical information disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, race, and Pell eligibility. These efforts are supported by NWCCU's continued work around collecting and sharing meaningful data, along with comparative analytics and visualization tools on secure institutional portals. It will help NWCCU focus on institutions needing help to improve in the area of student outcomes, while also allowing opportunity for innovations and experimentation on educational approaches, including competency-based education, micro-credentialing, stackable credentialing, and other approaches, to promote

student success and achievement. Incidentally, we expect the streamlined Standards and procedures will result in significant cost savings to the institutions.

We expect that ultimately, we will have a process that is focused on the additive value of accreditation, i.e., improving student success and guiding institutional conversations and decision-making around learning and achievement.

To facilitate ongoing efforts of our institutions we are convening the best from around our region and our nation to create and offer year-round webinars, workshops, best practices, and learning academies to promote student success and to bridge equity gaps and improve retention, completion, and attainment. For example, we have launched a mentored, experiential learning platform, *Academy for Retention, Completion, and Student Success*, to support institutions and faculty in their efforts to promote retention, completion, and the use of data and analytics to create and deploy interventions that can drive positive institutional results. A second effort, *Catalyzing Student Success*, is focused exclusively on minority serving institutions and will offer a series of workshops conducted by experts on data collection and analytics, faculty development, fundraising, grant writing, and other relevant areas to promote student success.

Last November, we held our one-day annual meeting with almost 300 people in attendance and we received kudos for the quality and timeliness of the presentations. This year, the annual meeting is being morphed into a three-day annual conference, November 20-22, focused on Student Success, with special workshops and training sessions followed by a plenary session with exceptional speakers and topics and keynotes and panel discussions. The annual conference will also feature a number of luncheons, including the awards luncheon (see below), and receptions. This issue of *The Beacon* has a preliminary annual conference program. I hope you'll save the dates and join us.

Finally, NWCCU has created an award, *The Beacon Award*, to recognize institutions that have developed and deployed efforts to measurably improve student success and achievement, and which can be replicated at other institutions. I hope that as you read this issue of *The Beacon*, you are getting your nominations packets ready. The inaugural award winners will be named and recognized at the 2019 Annual Conference in Seattle, WA. The winners are expected to make a presentation at the conference, submit articles to NWCCU's newsletter, and mentor other institutions.

This is just a sampling of the good things happening at the Commission. By all measures, I daresay this has been a good year.

As I reflect on the Commission's accomplishments this year, I am reminded of two sayings in Wolof, which I often heard during my travels in West Africa: "*it takes a village ...*" and "*you plant a sapling to provide shade to people who come behind you.*" The involvement of our staff and commissioners and the vast array of stakeholders who provided input have been critical; and the outcomes will have long-lasting impacts.