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Spring 2020 Peer-Evaluation Visit, Chair

I kept waiting for it to get postponed. In fall 2019 I had agreed to chair an evaluation of institutional effectiveness (EIE) visit to Cascadia College in Bothell, Washington. But by the time our visit materials arrived in early March, the odds of the visit happening appeared slim. A nursing home in Seattle, just a few miles from the college, was the national epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak. The University of Washington, which shares a campus location with Cascadia, announced that it was moving all courses online, and Cascadia quickly followed suit. Things were changing so rapidly that I just did not see how the visit could possibly go forward.

Looking back, I am pleased to report that I was wrong. Not only was our team able to “visit” Cascadia (albeit virtually) during our assigned dates in April 2020, but by all accounts, the experience was a success for the college, the evaluation team, and the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU).

How did we successfully move from a planned face-to-face evaluation to a virtual visit? We got there because of the support, coordination, and flexibility shown by everyone involved, and through a joint commitment to planning. Those of you who have taught courses fully online know that planning is 90% of the battle. Unlike face-to-face classes where it is possible (though not necessarily advisable) to stay “one day ahead” of the students, it seems that everything in online classes must be planned out before activating the course on that first day. It is just so much more difficult to pivot on the fly in an online setting. This recognition of planning as the lynchpin to success was critical in our move to a virtual visit.

NWCCU immediately stepped up by providing evaluators with access to the technology (Zoom and Box.com) needed to coordinate the visit, along with training and guidance related to these new technologies and processes. Once the meeting schedule between the evaluators and the campus representatives was finalized, NWCCU staff set up a dizzying array of simultaneous Zoom meetings that proceeded almost flawlessly during the visit. Most of all, NWCCU staff provided clear and timely direction, along with an appropriate level of compassion during a stressful evaluation process conducted amidst a crisis.

I was blessed with an excellent evaluation team that was willing to put up with my constant emails and requests for Zoom planning meetings. I needed to be much more engaged with the team prior to the visit than I normally am, knowing that we would never be sitting in a room together where we could tie up loose ends or address items that might have fallen through the cracks. We met more often, and for longer sessions, than we normally would have prior to the actual visit. And I cannot stress how wonderful my fellow evaluators were, as they were simultaneously dealing with the emerging COVID-19 crisis on their own campuses. They were patient, flexible, and professional, even though their lives had also been turned upside down.

The final component to the successful virtual visit was, of course, the college itself. President Eric Murray, Vice President Kerry Levett, and the rest of the Cascadia family had been preparing for months to host the evaluation team and to show off all of the great things the college was accomplishing. They were looking forward to the valuable feedback they would receive from the peer evaluation process. They had even taken the initiative to adopt the new 2020 Evaluation Standards. They were ready. And then, we

were not coming. Their reaction could have been anything but the “can do” attitude that they showed. Rather than complaining that everything was stacked against them, they dove in and asked how they could make the best of a less than ideal situation. Cascadia doubled down to ensure that their employees were comfortable with the Zoom environment and understood proper etiquette during evaluation meetings. They took extra steps to ensure that hyperlinks were accessible and that evaluators could virtually access the resources they needed. And they never stopped asking what they could do to make the visit process more successful. Even when they got thrown curveballs in the days leading up to the visit, they did not flinch.

Was it “just as good” as a face-to-face visit? Honestly, no. I know the team and I missed the benefit of getting to experience the beautiful Cascadia College setting, and missed getting to meet faculty, staff, and students face-to-face. We also missed getting to work with each other face-to-face in the team room and at team dinners during the visit, where lots of rich discussions often take place. It was challenging for team members to pretend they were “away” on a visit when they were actually sitting in their houses and were therefore much more accessible to the daily needs of their own campuses. And there are certainly standards, like the evaluation of facilities, that are a challenge to assess remotely.

But a virtual visit was the right thing to do given the circumstances. I am happy the visit went ahead. NWCCU has a lot to be proud of looking back on how visits were held this spring, as do the other colleges and evaluation teams from spring 2020. It took the combined efforts of all three to make our visit a success. If any one of these three groups had failed to perform as they did, the visit could have easily been a waste of time at best, and a disaster at worst. Thankfully, each worked together and fulfilled the needs of all involved, despite doing so in a whole new way.