

Cascadia College

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We began preparing for our year 7 visit 18 months before our scheduled time in April 2020. Even though our draft report was outlined and initial evidence collected, Cascadia decided to shift to the new more streamlined standards when the draft was proposed in January 2019. We accepted some level of risk and messiness while boldly moving forward.

Part of the messiness is that we were caught in the early transition of the new standards and new review process. The expectations for written reports have also changed, limiting institutions to roughly 50 pages per standard. As a result, three variables influenced how we structured our narrative reports: 1) We accepted we did not have time to fully operationalize all of the new standards, such as identifying peer institutions for comparison, 2) we were transitioning to a new enterprise records system immediately after our visit resulting in all our data links to our dashboards breaking, and 3) we are in the process of implementing Guided Pathways which is challenging us to rethink how we do many things. To be transparent with the peer-review team and the Commission, we structured our reports with 3 components to respond to each standard: what we did, what we learned, and what we are planning. The planning section allowed us to account for the confounding variables impeding a more rapid transition for meeting all of the new standards. This format seemed to help the peer-reviewers understand our contextual position.

We submitted our two narratives the first week of March which coincided with the Commission's spring conference. Everything changed that week. As the conference was wrapping up, I received a text notification that our emergency operations center was being activated. I quickly packed up my computer, bid farewell to my colleagues, and returned to campus. This was the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis for our community.

The shift was on and we all began adapting to our new realities. Shortly, I received an email from our intrepid liaison, Pam Goad, indicating that spring visits would be remote and details would follow. This was expected, given our college resides directly in the middle of the known cases in Washington at the time.

We pulled together our Accreditation Steering Team to plan for this change of modality. Our goals were to create a seamless experience for the peer-review team while translating our college culture to the reviewers. We identified issues, ideas, and challenges to replicate the traditional experience where possible while modifying for a remote delivery.

One challenge during the pre-visit and visit for us, Cascadia and our peer-reviewers, was that our attentions were split as we were dealing with our own COVID-19 crises on our campuses throughout the region. As we were all dealing with a mounting uncertainty at that time grace and flexibility became hallmarks of our visit.

We thought deeply about how to attend to the needs of our peer evaluators in the remote setting. For example, we knew “big room” meetings would be a management challenge. We developed a practice for managing meetings of more than 9 people by having teams of “room managers” and greeters assigned to each Zoom meeting. The greeter’s function was to kick off the meetings by facilitating introductions between the college staff and the peer reviewers. They also provided gentle reminders about Zoom room etiquette which we had previously shared out college wide through email and an all college prep meeting the week before. Room managers were tasked with three essential functions: 1) ensure technology was working, and reaching out to tech support as needed, 2) monitor chat (essential as part of the conversation and as supplemental evidence collection), and 3) manage the “hand raise” function in Zoom. These functional roles were designed to allow the peer-reviewers to focus on content gathering rather than trying to manage the virtual meeting.

A second challenge was that comfort with remote meeting technology varied for each person. Our Board of Trustee representatives kicked-off the visit with our Chair, Chris Bragg. In addition to a content prep meeting, our executive assistant to the President provided technology assistance ensuring the Trustees were comfortable in this new environment. Another executive assistant was tasked with supporting the peer-review team and the evolving schedule. This role involved two essential functions: 1) coordinate with our Information Services staff when peer-reviewers had issues, and 2) create and update meeting invites with NWCCU generated Zoom links. Regular communication played an essential role with the technology and the Zoom meeting schedule. After the end of each day’s meetings, Chris and I met via Zoom to follow up on requests and issues from the day, and review the schedule for the upcoming day. These conversations provided the college the ability to rapidly respond to our peer-review team’s requests.

We are all learning and doing things in new ways this year. This crisis allows us to enter into the everyday experience of our students who are constantly learning, not just facts, theories, and applications, but how to navigate campus, find parking, figure out expectations for each class, arrange child or elder care, and complete the FASFA. As we shift and pivot daily as teachers, learners, and leaders, we are reminded that learning is hard and requires an enormous amount energy. As a learning college, Cascadia had the opportunity to learn how to do an effective, albeit different, year 7 peer-review visit. We are grateful for the support provided by NWCCU and the fortitude of our peer-reviewers to learn with us.