

“The Power of Peers”

Les Steele, Ph.D.
Senior Vice President, NWCCU

NWCCU has just wrapped up our spring 2019 evaluation visits. These included twenty-four Mission Fulfillment, Mid-Cycle, Interim Candidacy and Ad Hoc visits. We sent visitors to campuses in three of our seven member states and Canada. In order to do these visits, we invited over 190 trained peer evaluators in order to send out a total of 120.

We are grateful for our peer evaluators and for the power of peers. Peer evaluators are the core of what makes U.S. and Canadian higher education among the best in the world. They are the trained professionals who seek to assure that students are learning, succeeding and achieving. They are thoughtful educators on their own campuses and trained as evaluators for NWCCU. They give a great deal of time and preparation to the evaluation work while maintaining heavy workloads on their own campuses.

For those of you yet to participate as an evaluator, here is a brief narrative of how the peer-evaluation process works.

Between six and eight weeks before a campus visit the institution being evaluated sends a completed “Self-Evaluation Report” to the Commission and to the evaluators assigned to their visit. The evaluators begin immersing themselves in these materials for the next several weeks. They will also participate in conference calls with the other members of the evaluation committee. They will review the complete report and (in particular) material related to the area they are reviewing. They will identify persons and groups on the campus that they will visit to verify what is in the report.

Once the time arrives for them to converge on the campuses, the evaluators arrive on location at a hotel designated for the visit one day before the campus visit begins. The evaluation team will spend the afternoon and evening together fine-tuning the visit schedule and focusing on areas they want to pursue more fully with the institution.

And then it begins. Typically, the campus visit starts around 7:30 am and the evaluators do not leave campus until 6:00 pm. For a Mission Fulfillment visit this will be two full days on campus. In the evening, they have dinner and return to their rooms to continue to read, write and analyze. And, evaluators will continue to manage work on their own campuses.

On the final day of these visits, evaluators will come to consensus on an overall set of commendations and recommendations for the institution. They will also complete the draft of their portion of the “PeerEvaluation” report to give to the evaluation committee chair on that day. It is an intense experience.

When they leave they are almost done with their assignments - but not quite. The chair of the committee will complete a draft of the report and send it to the committee members for their review. Once this is done the evaluators have completed their work for the evaluation visit.

NWCCU does not take for granted the time and effort these peer evaluators provide to come alongside our member institutions to assist and forward their work for students.

NWCCU does know, though, that most of the evaluators want to continue to offer their time and expertise for accreditation. Many report these evaluation visits as being among the best professional development experiences they can have.

There are skeptics in politics and the media who do not think peer evaluation contributes to the improvement of student learning, success and achievement. They characterize peer evaluation as a "good old persons" group who just say nice things about each other. For those who contribute to higher education and research, we know that peer evaluation is rigorous and serious. In my 18 years of involvement in higher education accreditation, I have not seen one politician or media writer fully observe the process.

There is power in peer evaluation. And that power is in the hands of all of the members of NWCCU, and, in particular, that cadre of professionals who give generously of their time, experience and expertise. We are grateful, we thank them, and we encourage everyone to appreciate all that our system of higher education accreditation brings to higher education.