

To: Members of the Western Illinois University Board of Trustees
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From: Joe Rives, Vice President, Quad Cities, Planning and Technology

Date: July 20, 2012

Re: July 2012 Strategic Plan Update

Achieving and maintaining institutional accreditation is a key priority in *Higher Values in Higher Education* as a measure of quality and a prerequisite for the administration of federal financial aid. The Higher Learning Commission-North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (the Commission) is the University's regional accrediting agency and Western Illinois University is accredited through academic year 2020-2021. However, there are immediate changes to the accreditation process that become effective September 1, 2012.

Therefore, this month's *Strategic Plan Update* summarizes changes to the Commission's accreditation processes that were approved by its governing board in June 2012 for implementation at the start of academic year 2012-2013.

Background

In the previous accreditation model, Western Illinois University maintained membership in the Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality (PEAQ). The PEAQ process used institutional self-study and external review to determine university accreditation status. Western completed its last self-study between fall 2007 and fall 2010, hosted the on-site visit in February 2011, and received a ten-year reaffirmation of accreditation, lasting through academic year 2020-2021.

New Process

This PEAQ process has been replaced with the Pathways program, which contains two alternatives. The Standard Pathway requires two self-studies and two on-site comprehensive evaluations during the 10-year accreditation cycle. The Open Pathway includes one on-line assurance review, one comprehensive evaluation, and the advancement of a quality initiative during the 10-year accreditation cycle.

Because Western Illinois University has a proven history of achieving maximal accreditation status and there are no Commission conditions on the University's accreditation status, we will be able to apply for the Open Pathway. The Open Pathway has five components (defined below) that require annual submissions, and culminate in a four-year review, multi-year quality initiative, and on-site accreditation visit.

1. **Electronic Repository.** Items that are required to be annually submitted to the Commission's repository include the University's audited financial statements, budget and expenditure reports, mission and planning documents (e.g., *Higher Values in Higher Education*, *Campus Master Plans*), governance documents (charter, bylaws, university organizational chart), contractual and consortium agreements related to academic programs, third party comment notices, and federal compliance materials.

2. Assurance Materials. For each Criterion, the University will provide:

- A Criterion introduction.
- An articulation of how each Core Component within the Criterion is met, including a statement of future plans with regard to the Core Component, and, if applicable, an explanation of circumstances that call for improvement, support future improvement, or constrain improvement/threaten the University's ability to sustain the Core Component
- A statement regarding any additional ways in which the university fulfills the Criterion that are not otherwise covered in the statements on the Core Components, including any gaps in achievement and future plans with regard to the Criterion.

The Assurance Materials also contain links to materials in the University's Evidence File that has two sections. In section one, the Commission provides recent comprehensive evaluation and interim reports, a trend summary from *Institutional Update* submissions, copies of official actions and correspondence, public comments, and any other information it deems necessary. In section two, the University uploads its evidentiary materials that, together with its Assurance Argument, demonstrate meeting the Criteria for Accreditation. Preparation of Assurance Materials is assumed to be an annual process.

3. Assurance Review. In year four of the accreditation cycle, Commission Peer Evaluators (PEs) complete an on-line Assurance Review. Using materials provided in the University's Assurance Argument and Evidence File, the PEs conduct a consensus review to determine if the University is meeting all federal compliance and accreditation requirements.

4. Quality Initiative. Between years five and nine of the accreditation cycle, the University proposes and completes a Quality Initiative (QI) that focuses on institutional innovation and improvement. The timeframe to initiate the QI is flexible to accommodate the amount of time necessary to complete the initiative.

The choice of a QI topic is also flexible and designed to best suit institutional needs. Examples of QIs suggested by the Commission include updating the institutional strategic plan, enhancing assessment of student learning processes, implementing comprehensive partnership programs with community colleges, or engaging in Commission-sponsored or endorsed programs (e.g., the Foundations of Excellence program offered by the Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education or the Liberal Education and America's Promise Initiative offered by the Association of American Colleges and Universities).

5. On-Site Comprehensive Evaluation. In year ten of the accreditation cycle, the University hosts an on-site comprehensive evaluation. Peer Evaluators will determine if the University continues to meet the criteria for accreditation, federal compliance requirements, and they will conduct a branch campus review of Western Illinois University-Quad Cities. The on-site evaluation has been streamlined from two and a half days to one and a half. During the on-site evaluation, members of the team meet with the university's leadership and board; those involved in preparing the Assurance Argument and the Evidence File; students, faculty, and staff in open sessions; key individuals and groups, including governance groups and assessment committees.

Summary and Next Steps

This *Strategic Plan Update* focused on new accreditation processes required by the Higher Learning Commission-North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. As shown in the table below, and indicated by X's in the table cells, there is new annual reporting and a new format that includes a four-year Assurance Review, completion of a Quality Initiative, and an on-site Comprehensive Evaluation. All 1,900 institutions accredited by the Commission are being transitioned into the Pathways program and Western joins as a "Year 2" institution to keep its accreditation on a ten-year cycle.

Academic Year Reporting and Process Requirements Associated with New Commission Accreditation Processes					
<u>Academic Year</u>	<u>Electronic Repository</u>	<u>Assurance Materials</u>	<u>Assurance Review</u>	<u>Quality Initiative</u>	<u>On-Site Evaluation</u>
2011-2012 (Year 1)					
2012-2013 (Year 2)	X	X			
2013-2014 (Year 3)	X	X			
2014-2015 (Year 4)	X	X	X		
2015-2016 (Year 5)	X	X		X	
2016-2017 (Year 6)	X	X		X	
2017-2018 (Year 7)	X	X		X	
2018-2019 (Year 8)	X	X		X	
2019-2020 (Year 9)	X	X		X	
2020-2021 (Year 10)	X	X			X

Associated with the new reporting and process requirements are new accreditation criteria (to be enacted January 1, 2013) and new federal compliance requirements. These, coupled with a discussion of how the University will address the new accreditation reporting requirements, will be presented in your August 2012 Strategic Plan Update.

If you have any questions regarding the materials presented in this month's update, and/or feedback regarding the continued successful implementation of Higher Values in Higher Education, please contact me.

cc: President Thomas CSEC Pres. Rupert Associate Provost Neumann
 Provost Hawkinson COAP President Grimm Associate Provost Parsons
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