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BGD/SJA

### Summary of CAIR Special Interest Group at WASC-ARC 2011

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Materials. The following materials were distributed before, during and after the meeting (all available on the WASC website, Handbook Revision section, except as noted:

<http://wascsenior.org/handbook> )

- Using Student Success Measures in the WASC Accreditation Process: Exploring Some Alternatives (not on website) – Peter Ewell Paper #1
- Lumina Degree Qualifications Profile
- Setting Benchmarking Standards for Baccalaureate Outcomes: Some Alternatives for CFR2.2 (not on website) – Peter Ewell Paper #2
- The Oral Communication VALUE Rubric (not on website) –Supplement to Peter Ewell Paper #2
- Redesigning WASC: Summary of Task Force Findings and Recommendations
- Redesigning WASC: Summary of Concept Papers
- Graduation Rates: Do Students' Academic Program Choices Make a Difference? (not on WASC website – link now available on CAIR's site)
- Predicting Graduation Rates: A Study of Land Grant, Research I and AAU Universities (not on WASC website – link now available on CAIR site)
- Values and Outcomes Statement
- Summary of Commission Actions for the Handbook Process
- NCHEMS Survey: Executive Summary

*NOTE: Peter Ewell's DRAFT papers #1 and #2 are currently not available for release to CAIR members who did not attend the SIG, but are likely to be made available at a later date*

Overview of the Handbook Revision Process. To meet external requirements of the Department of Education and to be responsive to issues raised by institutions in the region, WASC has embarked upon a review of its Standards of Accreditation, related policies, and institutional review process. This review will culminate in a new and significantly revised *Handbook of Accreditation*. The Handbook revision process is being overseen by a Steering Committee composed of Commission members and institutional representatives from within the western region. Several Task Forces are working on different aspects of the revision. The projected adoption date for a new Handbook is November 2013.

Role of CAIR and PacAIR in Handbook Revision. WASC would like to involve CAIR and PacAIR in the Handbook revision process, particularly in two areas: retention and graduation rates (what is to be reported, how it is to be reported, external benchmarks, etc.); and learning outcomes/core competencies (what is to be reported, how it is to be reported, external benchmarks, etc.). CAIR and Pac will work with WASC to set up a mechanism for IR input such as an Advisory Committee or Working Groups.

Retention/Graduation Rates. The group raised a number of questions and issues.

*Definitions:*

- Should rates include both undergraduate and graduate student data or just undergraduate? – Response from Graduation Rate Task Force Member attending SIG was that Graduate student rates WOULD be included, but had not yet been discussed by the Task Force in any detail.
- How do you define a student?
- How do you define a cohort institution? What variables should go into identifying a cohort (for benchmarking purposes), such as yield rate, demographic characteristics of students, size of institution, nature of institution, faculty-student ratio, etc.?

*Benchmarking:*

- What is an appropriate way to benchmark?
  - o Should each institution select its own peers (and will they be current or aspirational peers)?
  - o Should groups of like institutions work together to create appropriate benchmarks?
  - o Should an institution use as a benchmark its own expected graduation rate (based on some type of regression analysis/predictive model)—how is an institution doing relative to the students it has? This requires institutions to have technical expertise to undertake these studies. *Concern expressed about the smallest institutions with WASC being able to do this. However, concerns about ability to undertake such analyses could be lessened if a third party calculated the “expected rates” based on data supplied by the institution.*
  - o Should an institution benchmark against national norms (though these studies are old and may be out of date)?
  - o Wouldn't it be better to look at graduation rates by academic programs, not by institutions? Benchmarking against specific academic programs may be easier and more meaningful than benchmarking against an institution as a whole. – *Concern with this approach is that majors of many students are unknown at entrance to the institution.*
- What do other accrediting agencies and organizations use for benchmarks (e.g., other regional agencies or professional associations)?
- Where will benchmarking data come from? IPEDS only collects data in a particular way (no transfer student data, for example). CalPass has limited participation by institutions in the region and is voluntary. A central system data management

system would be helpful so that everyone can use it.

- Can HERI's new Degree Attainment Tool be helpful in identifying expected graduation rates?

*Disaggregation:*

- How will the changes in race and ethnicity adopted by OMB affect how WASC gathers and reports disaggregated retention/graduation data?
- What variables, beyond race/ethnicity, should be used to disaggregate data and how will these data be collected? For example:
  - o age at entry (which can affect graduation rates and can be asked on an admission application). May be an important factor for "graduate" graduation and retention rates.
  - o number of hours worked (which can affect graduation rates but is not readily obtainable)
  - o income level (can't use self-report; Pell is a proxy but not all Pell eligible students receive Pell grants)
  - o in-state vs. out of state
  - o country of residence (looking beyond non-resident alien to examine graduation rates by country of origin)

*Standards:*

- What is "too low" for a graduation rate? What is an acceptable level? Who decides and how is that set?

*Conceptual Issues:*

- How will retention/graduation rates take into account "purposeful failures," that is, students who spend two years at an institution, realize they want to major Engineering and then transfer because their current institution doesn't offer Engineering? Issue also applies to institutions that engage in formal 3+2 year Engineering programs that involve transfer between two institutions.
- Should graduation rates also include "extended" graduation rates such as those reported by the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) which use the National Student Clearinghouse to include those who entered at one institution but graduate from another in the first institution's rate.
- Will public reporting of a number obscure an institution's efforts to make sense of and understand their graduation rates, whatever they might be?
- Does the approach to looking at retention/graduation rates have to be "one size fits

all?” Could there be different templates for different audiences/purposes? This is a complicated area that could benefit from nuanced portrayal.

- Are higher graduation rates better? Will emphasis on a number lead to institutions changing their admissions procedures to become more selective, pushing people out the door, relaxing standards, and the like? And isn't it more important to focus on what students actually learn? Large numbers of students could graduate yet learn nothing.
- Will graduation rates become too prominent to the exclusion of other data and information about an institution?

#### *Logistical Issues:*

- Will institutions in the region have the capability to gather, analyze, interpret overall and disaggregated retention/graduation data? Given the budget problems, IR offices are being cut. Even when offices aren't being cut, the IR unit may not have the statistical and technical expertise to undertake such studies.
- Will WASC allow enough lead time to thoughtfully look at these issues and arrive at reasonable solutions or will the pressure lead to a shortened timeline and work against thoughtful, considered deliberations?

General Concerns about Retention and Graduation Rates. In the past WASC focused on a culture of evidence and IR units helped institutions to understand their graduation rates and what could be done to improve those rates. The uniqueness of institutions was recognized and acknowledged. The focus was on improving an individual institution. Now WASC is making decisions about what are appropriate graduation rates comparatively across institutions. This represents a significant shift in WASC focus.

In addition, the focus on graduation rates can have unintended effects. It becomes high stakes. A new *US News and World Report* ranking could emerge based on graduation rates. People will learn how to game the graduation rate system, just like they have learned how to game the ranking system.

Why have graduation rates emerged as so important? The intense interest is a result of concerns about repayment of student loans. It turns out that students who graduate are more likely to pay back their loans. No one has looked to see if graduation rates are related to learning—only to loan repayment. The focus on graduation rates has not been initiated by an academic process yet colleges and universities will now have to figure out ways to report these rates in meaningful ways.

Lumina Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP). Time was limited for discussion of this topic. Also, the Peter Ewell paper #2, *Setting Benchmarks...*, was not available to the group prior to the SIG meeting. The group noted that it is hard to have comparability across institutions. The group also noted that use of common rubrics could be helpful here.

WASC- CAIR/PacAIR Relationship. The group expressed interest in working with WASC on

the revision of the Handbook. IR could help with definitions (such as “what is a student”), broaden the discussion (how to bring in learning, in any discussions of graduation rates), provide technical and statistical insights, and so on. There was some sentiment in the group that IR has not been adequately consulted as the Task Forces are doing their work and that the input of the IR group is critical.