

Campus Engagement on Educational Excellence Cel Johnson & Beth Dobkin

Background

Accreditation of colleges and universities is a voluntary review process established to provide assurance of a basic level of quality for the U.S. Congress and the U.S. Department of Education. USD was first accredited in 1949 and has been reviewed by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) at ten-year intervals to reaffirm its accreditation. These reviews have required an intensive institutional self-study followed by a review team visit. USD's last accreditation visit occurred in October of 2000, with accreditation reaffirmed by WASC in March 2001.

Since then, WASC has substantially revised the reaffirmation process to focus more on educational effectiveness in the context of the institution's mission. WASC has replaced the single self-study and site visit with an institutional proposal, a preparatory review, and an educational effectiveness review that extend over a period of approximately four years. In May 2008, USD will submit an institutional proposal focused on one or more broadly defined themes involving educational effectiveness. The proposal affords us the opportunity to affirm the university's mission and values, engage the campus community in articulating institutional priorities, and enhance our ability to make informed decisions about improvement.

Gathering Information

In spring of 2007, the WASC Steering Committee¹ conducted a series of faculty, student, administrator, and staff focus group interviews to gather information for a university-wide survey that would inform the themes in USD's Institutional Proposal. Participants were asked to share their understanding of educational excellence at USD and steps we must take to achieve it by answering five questions:

1. What does it mean for USD to be a distinguished educational institution?
2. What does it mean for USD to be a distinctive educational institution?
3. What should define educational excellence at USD?
4. What part does participatory decision-making play in achieving educational excellence?
5. Are there other issues/goals/topics that should be explored in the context of the WASC accreditation process?

From the responses these questions, the Steering Committee identified qualities of educational excellence that are particularly important at USD. In April, the entire campus community was invited to participate in a brief, online survey to rank related groups of statements according to perceived priority of addressing them in the near future.

Over 1000 members of the university community participated in the survey, and over half of the respondents (562) were students. An additional 166 administrators, 101 undergraduate faculty, 25 graduate faculty, 28 adjunct faculty, 111 staff, and 12 trustees participated. Response rates for each group are difficult to determine because broadcast e-mail was used to announce the survey, and we are uncertain how many of those messages actually reached the target audiences. Rough estimates for response rates based on size of target populations with USD e-mail are: students, 8 percent; faculty, 33 percent; staff, 22 percent; administrators, 36 percent; and trustees, 33 percent.

The survey yielded valuable information to inform the development of themes because, despite some notable differences in priorities among the groups, there was remarkable consistency throughout the survey in respondents' top choices. For this issue of USD Trends, we present a very simple analysis drawn from a wealth of data. For the statements presented under each of the five focus group questions, we identify those ranked first in importance by at least 100 respondents, with graphs indicating participation by constituent group. Despite its simplicity, this analysis quickly shows what qualities of educational excellence were deemed most important in each of the five areas. Either of us would be happy to discuss these results in more detail.

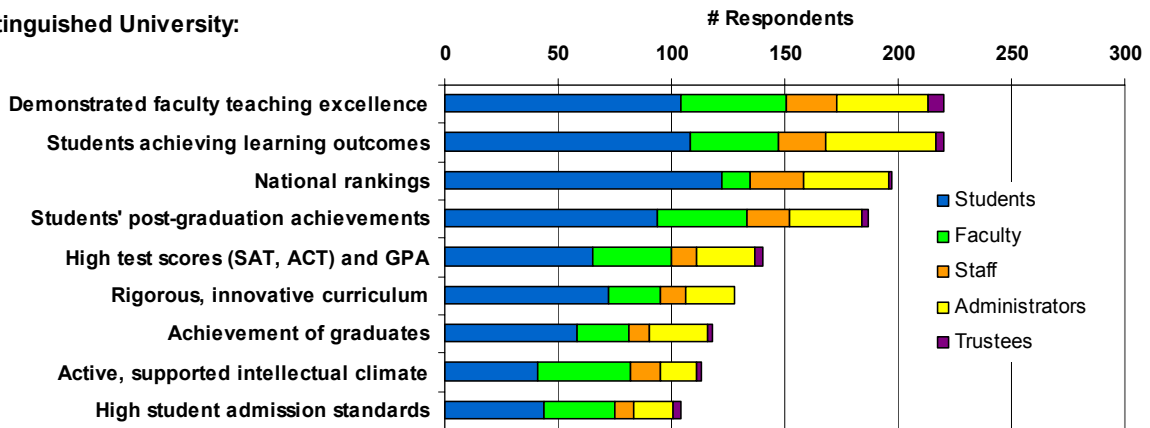
A Distinguished Educational Institution

In the first section of the survey, respondents were asked to rank-order collections of statements in the following three areas according to their importance for helping USD become more distinguished:

- Increase the recognition of USD's academic quality and reputation
- Increase the recognition of the quality and reputation of USD's faculty
- Increase the student quality and reputation

Of these three areas, respondents ranked academic quality and reputation as most important for defining a distinguished institution. Of the 23 statements listed within all three areas, nine were ranked first in importance by over 100 respondents.

A Distinguished University:



“Teaching excellence” and “student learning outcomes” tied for first place in defining a distinguished university, with 220 first-place rankings and a reasonable amount of agreement among constituent groups. Students considered national rankings more important than did faculty, and faculty were more concerned with intellectual climate.

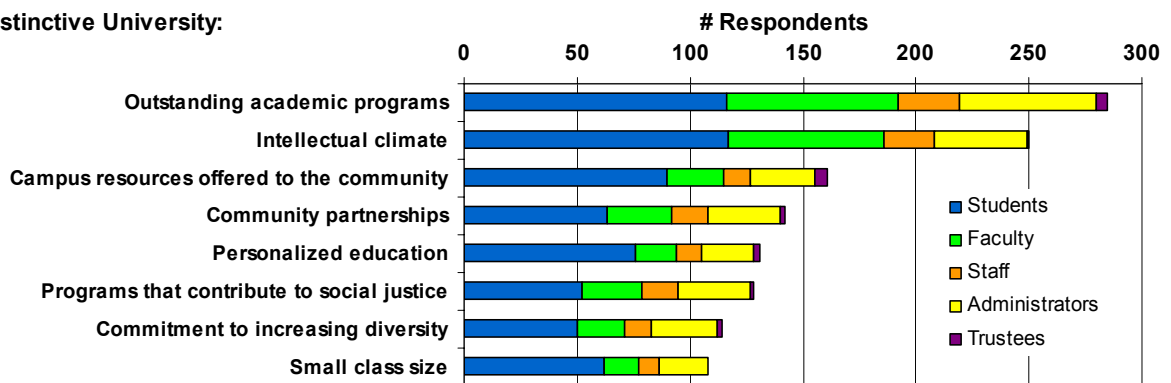
A Distinctive Educational Institution

The second section contained statements from the focus groups about what actions are most important to make USD more distinctive. Survey respondents were asked to rank statements in the following three areas:

- USD’s institutional identity
- USD’s community identity
- USD’s academic identity

Of these three areas, respondents ranked academic identity as most important in making USD more distinctive. Of the 26 statements within all three areas, eight were ranked first in importance by over 100 respondents.

A Distinctive University:



The first two items clearly stood out from the rest. “Outstanding academic programs” was ranked first by 285 respondents, and “intellectual climate” by 250. Response patterns were similar for these two items across constituent groups, with administrators and trustees favoring outstanding academic programs.

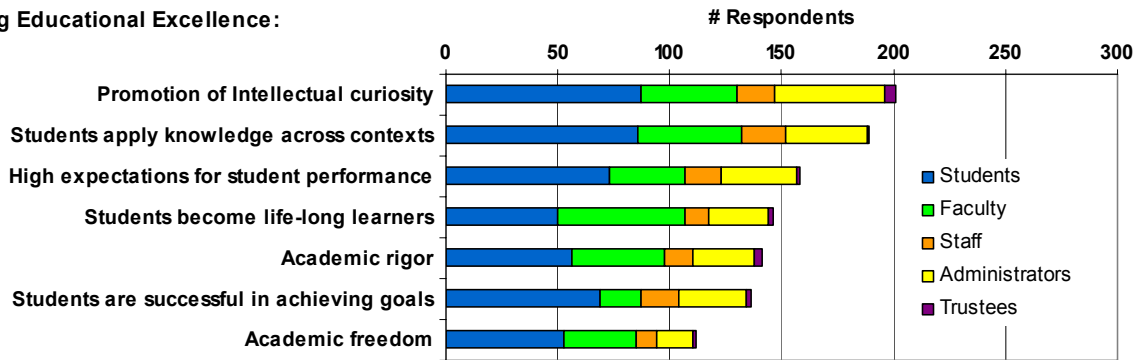
Defining Educational Excellence

In the third section, respondents ranked statements in four sections that identified important actions to improve educational excellence at USD:

- Create and/or sustain an intellectual climate
- Provide and/or sustain a liberal arts and holistic education
- Create and/or sustain student-centered education
- Prepare students in various competencies and skills

Of the four areas, respondents ranked intellectual climate as most important in improving educational excellence. Of the 31 statements within all four areas, seven were ranked first in importance by over 100 respondents.

Defining Educational Excellence:



The statements ranked as most important were “promotion of intellectual curiosity” by 201 respondents and “students apply knowledge across contexts” by 189. Again, the response patterns among constituent groups are similar, with administrators and trustees favoring intellectual curiosity.

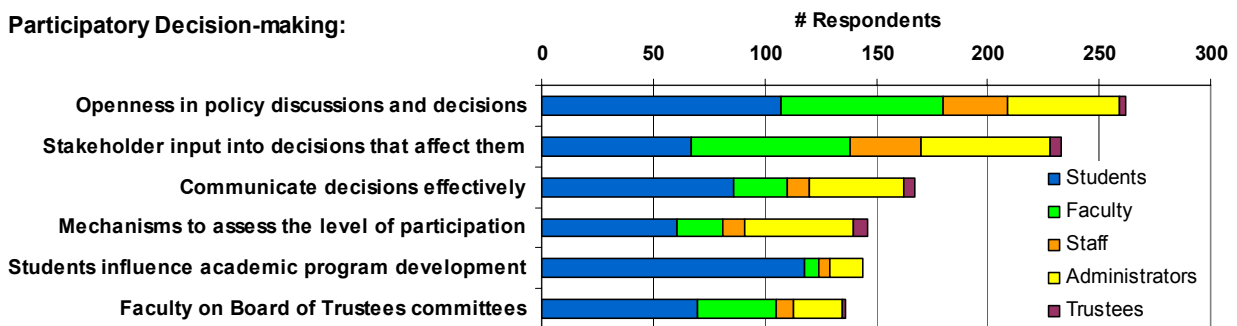
Participatory Decision-making

In addition to evaluating educational effectiveness, WASC looks at the processes by which institutional decisions are made. The survey also asked respondents to indicate the most important actions in achieving good participatory decision-making. Based on information from the focus group interviews, this section contained statements under three headings:

- Being inclusive
- Being transparent
- Having a participatory organizational structure

Of the three areas, respondents ranked being inclusive as most important in achieving good participatory decision-making. Of the 20 statements within all three areas, six were ranked first in importance by over 100 respondents:

Participatory Decision-making:



Clearly, all constituent groups value “openness in policy discussions and decisions,” ranked first in importance by 262 respondents. “Stakeholder input into decisions that affect them” was ranked first by 233, with the main difference occurring in the students’ ranking. Rankings by constituent groups varied substantially among the remaining four items.

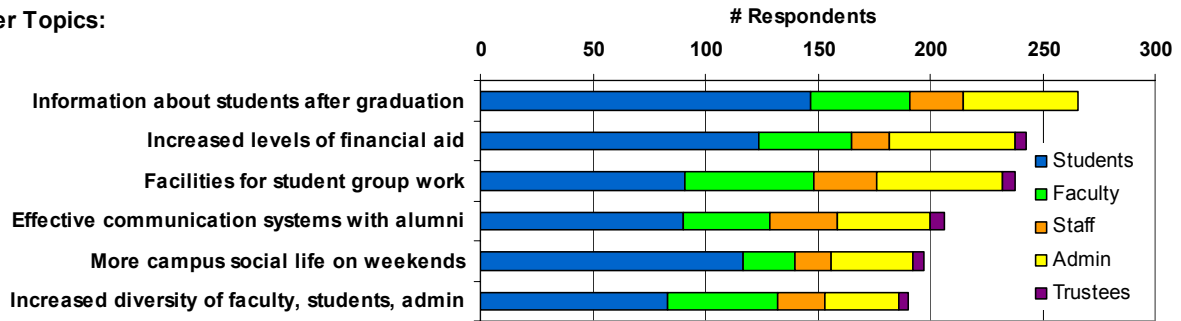
Other Topics

This final section was based on topic areas that focus group members identified as important to explore during the accreditation process. Within this section, respondents ranked statements in each of the following areas:

- Quality of campus community outside the classroom
- Graduates/alumni
- Increasing diversity and inclusion on campus

Of the three areas, respondents ranked quality of campus community outside of the classroom as most deserving of attention, with faculty and administrators ranking the importance of diversity and inclusion as a close second. Of the 13 statements within all three areas, six were ranked first in importance by over 100 respondents.

Other Topics:



This final set of topics was the most disparate of the survey, so it is useful to note that “information about students after graduation,” while shown as receiving the most frequent top ranking above, appeared in the area that captured the least interest of respondents. Presumably, there was simply more agreement about needing this information than for the other items in the “alumni” category. “Facilities for student group work” and “campus social life” were most important for improving the quality of the campus community, and “increased levels of financial aid” and “increased diversity of faculty, students, and administrators” received the highest ranking under increasing diversity and inclusion on campus.

Next Steps

WASC’s new framework represents a shift toward evaluating educational excellence and performance rather than counting inputs and resources as the basis for accreditation. Under this new approach, WASC encourages institutions to develop approaches that serve their own priorities as well as satisfy stated accreditation requirements. The four-year evaluation process gives USD the opportunity to identify priorities for educational excellence in the context of our mission and core values and the time to develop those priorities. Receiving input from the campus community is an important first step in that process, and we thank all who participated in the survey, the focus groups, and informal conversations on these topics.

This survey data, combined with the focus group interviews, USD’s institutional history, and ongoing campus conversations about educational excellence have been useful in helping the WASC Steering Committee develop themes for USD’s institutional proposal. The data also affirm USD’s commitment to enhancing the intellectual climate of the campus, and to ensuring a rigorous and engaging academic experience for students. The Steering Committee plans to complete a draft of the Institutional Proposal by the end of fall semester to afford ample time for feedback prior to the May 1, 2008 submission date.

¹ WASC Steering Committee members: Carmen Barcena, Mary Jo Clark, Jack Crumley, Beth Dobkin, Todd Edwards, Donald Godwin, Carole Huston, Cel Johnson, Sue Lowery, Teresa O’Rourke, Chris Procello, Linda Siefert, Stephen Standifird, Anne Sturz.