

REPORT OF A REQUESTED FOCUSED VISIT FOR CHANGE

Assurance Section

TO

**Western State College of Colorado
Gunnison, Colorado**

November 1-3, 2009

The Higher Learning Commission

A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

EVALUATION TEAM

Dr. Donald F. Larsson, Professor of English, Minnesota State University, Mankato, MN
56001

Dr. Gail M. Jensen, Dean, Graduate School and Associate Vice President, Academic
Affairs, Creighton University, Omaha, NE 68178 (Chair)

CONTENTS

I. Context and Nature of Visit	4
II. Evaluation of Documentation Supporting Organization's Request for Change	7
III. Statement of Affiliation Status	11

ASSURANCE SECTION

I. CONTEXT AND NATURE OF VISIT

A. Purpose of Visit

The purpose of the requested focused visit was to consider the request by Western State College of Colorado (WSC) to offer two new master's degree programs, a Master of Arts in Education and a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. Both of these programs will be offered via a low residency format. Students will be on campus during the summer semester for course work and then continuing their courses through an online delivery process during the academic year. The team also had to consider the institution's capacity to offer the majority of the coursework for these programs through an online delivery.

B. Accreditation Status

Western State College of Colorado (WSC) has been accredited since 1915. The last comprehensive visit was conducted in January 2003 and the next comprehensive visit is scheduled for 2012-2013. A commission-mandated focused visit for reviewing progress on assessment of student learning was conducted in October 2006. Progress was satisfactory and there was no commission follow up.

C. Organizational Context

Western State College of Colorado was established in 1901 as the Colorado Normal School with the charge to prepare teachers for Colorado's Western Slope. Graduate programs were first offered at WSC in 1921, but discontinued in 1990 through a Colorado system-wide reduction and discontinuance project. The discontinuance of the graduate programs not only reduced educational opportunities for regional residents but had a profound effect on the communities in the Gunnison Valley, Gunnison and Crested Butte. During the 1988-89 academic year, WSC granted 158 master's degrees. WSC has been delivering a post-baccalaureate licensure program for teachers since 2004. Currently any graduate credits offered at WSC must be brokered and credit granted through a regional contracted institution, Adams State. In 2003, WSC was designated as a regional education provider. One of the critical areas for meeting regional needs is the educational needs of K-12 teachers. In order for WSC to reinstitute graduate education, the College's statutory role and mission needed to be amended. This was done through a 2007 state legislative change which specified the

College as a general baccalaureate institution that offers undergraduate liberal arts and sciences, teacher preparation, and business degree programs and a limited number of graduate programs. The request for the M.A. in Education and M.F.A. are consistent with the institution's planning effort.

D. Unique Aspects of Visit

Team members did a review of initial documents and after team leader consultation with HLC/NCA liaison made a specific request to the institution (9/14/09) for additional documentation to further support the new program request and resources for online learning. Additional documents were received mid-October including the WSC's Consideration of Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs. The additional information specifically addressed best practice elements for the online delivery process. This information was critical in providing the team with complete documentation for the new program requests.

E. Interactions with Organizational Constituencies

1. President
2. Vice President for Finance and Administration
3. Vice President for Academic Affairs
4. Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs
5. Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs
6. Chair, Board of Trustees
7. Member, Board of Trustees
8. Registrar
9. Director, Teacher Education Program
10. Chair, Graduate Studies Council
11. Members of Graduate Studies Council (3)
12. Vice President, Faculty Senate
13. Director, Academic Resources Center
14. Assistant Director of Computer and Network Support
15. Systems Analyst for Student Information
16. Director of Extended Studies
17. Director of Student Financial Services
18. Chair, Faculty Senate
19. Chair, Department of Communication Arts, Languages and Literature
20. Graduate Program Director, MFA program
21. Chair, Assessment Committee
22. Director of Library Services
23. Library staff (3)
24. Faculty, Department of Education (6)
25. Faculty, Department of Communication Arts, Language and Literature - Creative Writing (4)
26. VP for Enrollment Management

- 27. Potential students – education (5)
- 28. Potential students – MFA (3)

F. Approvals Obtained

Internal

Graduate Studies Committee
 Curriculum Committee
 Faculty Senate
 Vice President for Academic Affairs
 WSC Board of Trustees

External: (In the state of Colorado, degree programs that lead to teacher licensure must be approved by the Colorado State Board of Education and the Colorado Commission on Higher Education)

Colorado State Board of Education (approved June 10, 2009)
 Colorado Commission on Higher Education (approved July 9, 2009)
 Colorado House Bill 07-1014 was passed and signed March 9, 2007 allowing Western State College of Colorado, a general baccalaureate institution, to offer a limited number of graduate programs and serve as a regional education provider.
 HLC/NCA (process pending)

G. Principal Documents, Materials, and Web Pages Reviewed

1. Focused visit request for program change (curriculum proposals for MA in Education; MFA in Creative writing; MA and MFA concept papers; budget summaries)
2. WSC Catalog
3. WSC Student Handbook
4. WSC Graduate Studies Policies
5. WSC's document – Best Practices of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs
6. Disability Services Handbook
7. Five year budget projections for MA in Education and MFA in Creative Writing
8. Legislation, House Bill 07-1014
9. Graduate Council Committee minutes
10. WSC Curriculum Committee minutes
11. WSC Academic Policies Committee minutes
12. Faculty Senate Proposal and meeting notes for MA in Education and MFA in Creative Writing
13. 2003 Comprehensive HLC/NCA Visit Self-Study Report

14. 2003 HLC/NCA Comprehensive Visit Evaluation Report
15. 2004 General Education Progress Report to HLC/NCA and staff analysis of report
16. Faculty Senate Bylaws
17. Faculty Senate approval of MA in Education and MFA in Creative Writing
18. Curriculum Vitas for proposed faculty for MA in Education and MFA in Creative Writing
19. WSC Institutional Budgets and Audit reports
20. Graduate forms (application, degree plan, admissions process)
21. Graduate Catalog
22. MA in Education and MFA in Creative Writing Assessment Plans
23. WSC Academic Assessment Plan
24. WSC Organizational Chart (September 2009)
25. Institutional Report for Teacher Education Colorado Commission of Higher Education and Colorado Department of Education
26. Trustees Policy Manual
27. Institutional Organizational Chart
28. WSC Report to Colorado Department of Education/Teacher Education
29. Webpages: <http://www.western.edu/academics>
<http://www.western.edu/academics/faculty-and-staff-resources.html>
<http://www.western.edu/academics/faculty-governance/faculty-governance.html>
<http://www.western.edu/administration/trustees/handbook.pdf>
<http://www.western.edu/academics/academic-resource-center/student-success-center.html>
<http://www.western.edu/academics/library>
<http://wol.western.edu/cp/home/loginf> (portal)
<http://www.western.edu/academics/extended-studies/summer-teacher-institute-june-7-19-2010.html>
<http://www.western.edu/academics/extended-studies>
<http://www.western.edu/academics/english>
<http://www.western.edu/academics/education>

II. EVALUATION OF DOCUMENTATION SUPPORTING ORGANIZATION'S REQUEST FOR CHANGE

A. Evaluation of Request

1. **Evidence that demonstrates adequate preparation and planning**
 - a. Assessment of student learning was identified as a significant challenge in the 2002 comprehensive visit, resulting in a Focused Visit from the Commission in 2007. The College submitted its report from that 2007 Focused Visit on Assessment

to this team, detailing a comprehensive and inclusive description of its structures and plans for assessment of student learning at all levels. The College also submitted its Academic Assessment Plan with revisions through September 2009, indicating an ongoing commitment to the maintenance and use of a culture of assessment within and across the institution. There are well structured assessment plans laid out for both graduate programs based on the values system that underlies the current assessment process (faculty driven, increasing use of direct measures and a cyclical process). The College Assessment Committee is a standing committee of the Faculty Senate and oversees the assessment process. This institutional commitment to assessment is further confirmed through conversations with faculty, staff and administration members involved in the development of these programs.

- b. Documentation submitted to this Team also includes Annual Discipline Assessment Plans for the proposed M.A. in Teacher Education and proposed M.F.A. in Creative Writing. The Teacher Education MA Program has an annual assessment plan that is grounded in the student learning outcomes and consistent with the essential skills specific to the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC). There are several examples of direct measures correlated to the identified essential skills (course embedded measures, sample and capstone review based on standards and a comprehensive examination). The Department of Education faculty are identified and respected by College faculty as leaders in assessment. The plans for assessment are well described and provide a sound framework for implementing these new programs.
- c. The Proposed Assessment Plan for the M.F.A. in Creative Writing describes intended learning outcomes for the (mostly online) tutorial components of the program, including specific types of assignments, faculty evaluation, and student response to that evaluation in the development of the student's creative work and writing skills and the student's analytical skills, based on these targeted types of assignments. The plan includes specific evaluation criteria for each type of assignment. The plan also describes specific evaluation criteria for learning activities that will take place during the summer residency portions of the student's program. The program provides a suggested set of activities and procedures for students and faculty, with the goal of allowing faculty to review and improve their own teaching and their students' learning. Examples of criteria and rubrics for evaluation are provided, as is a description of the final capstone experience for the program. These assessment practices are consistent with guidelines which are currently being drafted by

the Associated Writing Programs in the document, “AWP Hallmarks of an Effective Low-Residency MFA Program in Creative Writing.”

- d. Documentation submitted to the Team and interviews with key representatives from administration, faculty, and staff demonstrate a planning approach that included the following factors:
- 1) a vision from the President and Vice President for Academic Affairs for renewal of the College’s past commitment to graduate education as one component of its institutional identity and goals, in concert with an understanding of a need to develop new approaches that would meet developing enrollment and budgetary challenges
 - 2) a bottom-up development process that used faculty vision and innovation to move forward in structuring two programs that would address specific, tangible needs
 - 3) a comprehensive and rigorous program approval process that allowed input and questions from faculty across a range of disciplines, resulting in a more comprehensively structured pair of proposals
 - 4) a technological and academic support infrastructure that would be ready to meet the needs of new student cohorts
 - 5) a new Vice President for Enrollment Management who has recently taken office and will be available for consultation on recruitment and retention strategies.

Team interviews confirm that this deliberative institutional planning process was essential in building support for these programs.

- e. Key individuals, including the Vice President for Finance, confirm that the College expects the financial and other support demands of these programs to be relatively minimal during a time of other budgetary challenges to the institution, similar to such challenges to other public colleges and universities around the country. The fact that these programs are intended to be self-funded through differential tuition revenues also allows for flexibility in adjusting to enrollment demands that exceed or fail to meet projected expectations. This minimal financial impact has also helped to increase support from the greater College community.

- f. Documentation examined by the Team and interviews with key individuals including the Library Director and other learning support services staff confirm that these programs can be well-served through existing structures, including readily available online help for library services and technological problems. The initial summer residency component of each program will be used in part to give hands-on instruction to students in the use of these resources and technologies, verified by assessment techniques.
- g. The administrative processing for both programs will be part of the Extended Studies Program. This administrative unit of the College has been supporting adult programs including the summer Teacher Institute. Interviews with the Registrar, Director of Extended Studies, Director of Financial Services, and Director of Academic Resources verify their participation in the planning phases for these two new, low residency graduate programs. The preliminary steps for meeting the financial, student health, counseling and student learning needs of adult graduate students in these low residency programs are in place.
- h. The plan for the low-residency M.F.A. in Creative Writing Program demonstrates careful attention to addressing the needs of particular groups of learners. The faculty leaders who have developed this program through the curriculum approval process have tailored specific niches for the different program components, specifically program tracks in formal verse, in mainstream/genre fiction, and in documentary/nonfiction screenwriting. These tracks delineate a program that will be unique in its specificity and practical goals. Students in this program will be well-served by the demonstrable commitment and enthusiasm of its lead faculty members, who have practical experience and access to professional contacts and resources that will be valuable in the recruitment of new students and eventual new program faculty as well as in ongoing development for both students and faculty. The lead program faculty further confirmed in their Team interview that they plan to work collaboratively across their track areas in order to foster a more holistic learning environment for the students.
- i. The Teacher Education MA Program has a well detailed program plan with developed course syllabi. The program builds on a successful post-baccalaureate teacher licensure program that has a well established Support Team model in place that includes mentors, licensed administrators, and WSC Regional Coordinators. Interviews with potential graduate

students (teachers from the surrounding area) confirmed the strong reputation of the program faculty in the education community and verified support and need for the proposed tracks (teacher leadership, reading leadership and educational administrator leadership). The Teacher Education Program has been commended by the Colorado Department of Higher Education for achieving a proficient rating in all six teacher education performance measures, a feat that no other Colorado college or university has achieved. The Department chair is the governor-appointed member, higher education member of the Teacher Quality Commission. Team review of materials and interviews with faculty and administrators confirm the competence and commitment of the education faculty in the planning and implementation of this new program.

- j. The institution engaged in two years of planning and preparation for these two graduate programs. Part of that process included reinstating the administrative structure for graduate programs. The Graduate Studies Council was re-constituted in March 2008 (five person group who are elected by the faculty). This Council has been involved in the review and approval of the proposed programs, the updating and revision of Graduate Policies, and setting the criteria for Graduate Faculty appointments. The Council is currently led by one of the Associate Vice Presidents in Academic Affairs. An Associate Vice President for Graduate Studies will be named once HLC approval for the programs has been obtained. The existing committee structures within the Faculty Senate for Academic Policies, Curriculum and Assessment will be used for oversight in those designated areas. Documentation reviewed by the team (curriculum vitae of the proposed graduate program faculty, program proposals, and draft syllabi) and interviews with program faculty confirm the qualifications of the faculty for supporting these two graduate programs.
- k. The Information Technology Committee is a standing committee of the Faculty Senate that currently supports and advises the faculty on hardware and software issues. Interviews with faculty, students and administrators verifies the current responsiveness and support from the technology staff and confirms their involvement in planning of the online portions of the graduate programs. WSC has subscribed to Quality Matters and will be using the faculty-centered, peer review process for assuring the quality of online courses. The Western Online Course Review team is in place and includes several members of the education department. Interviews with faculty and administrators consistently highlighted the contributions and expertise of this department in working with the College faculty

in the areas of online instruction and assessment. The Teacher Educator Program has been involved in offering some online course delivery since 2004. The specific steps of the course development and review process are outlined on page 18 of the WSC Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs document. Expectations for faculty teaching online and responsibilities for students are well detailed in the WSC Best Practices document. Training materials and skill assessment tools for both faculty and students have been identified.

B. Other Accreditation Issues

N/A

C. Recommendation of the Team

- 1. Evidence sufficiently demonstrated to recommend approval of change request**

D. Rationale for the Team's Recommendation

The College has demonstrated sufficient planning for a recommendation of approval for the change request for the M.A. and M.F.A. programs. The Board of Trustees, administrative leadership, program faculty and the Faculty Senate, and support staff have demonstrated collaborative planning to reinstitute graduate education within a changing educational environment. The College has used existing or created new mechanisms to assure a sound planning, review and assessment process. The low-residency programs are driven by a desire to meet the needs of new types of student learners that also takes into account budgetary realities and the unique geographical challenges and advantages of the campus location. Enthusiasm of the entire college and Gunnison Valley community for these programs is demonstrable.

III. AFFILIATION STATUS

A. Summary of Commission Review

Year for next comprehensive evaluation ___2012-2013_____

B. Nature of Organization

1. Legal status

No change

2. Degrees awarded

B, M

C. Conditions of Affiliation

1. Stipulation on affiliation status

Degree offerings at the master's level are limited to the Master of Arts in Education and Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing.

2. Approval of degree sites

No change

3. Approval of distance education degree

No change

4. Reports required

None

5. Other visits scheduled

None

D. Commission Sanction or Adverse Action

None

REPORT OF A REQUESTED FOCUSED VISIT FOR CHANGE

Advancement Section

TO

**Western State College of Colorado
Gunnison, Colorado**

November 1-3, 2009

The Higher Learning Commission

A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

EVALUATION TEAM

Dr. Donald F. Larsson, Professor of English, Minnesota State University, Mankato, MN 56001

Dr. Gail M. Jensen, Dean, Graduate School and Associate Vice President, Academic Affairs,
Creighton University, Omaha, NE 68178 (Chair)

ADVANCEMENT SECTION

A. Observations of Team Regarding Change Request

Western State College of Colorado has invested in thoughtful and deliberative planning for the reinstatement of graduate programs at the institution. The M.A. in Teacher Education builds on their current work and experience with their post-baccalaureate licensure program. In addition, the education department at WSC is a leader on campus in both assessment and distance learning. The M.F.A. in Creative Writing is designed to build on existing resources and expertise in the undergraduate CALL (Communication Arts, Languages and Literature) programs and through program relationships with established regional events such as the Writing the Rockies creative writing conference and the Visiting Authors Series. WSC is statutorily designated as a regional education provider and in 2007 the role and mission of the institution was revised to offer a limited number of graduate programs. The institutional community is fully supportive of these new graduate initiatives.

B. Consultations of Team

1. Graduate Education

Program Planning: It may be helpful to project the course offerings across the initial 5 years of the program. This will allow you to see the faculty workload across student cohorts. You will want to look at faculty workload for courses, advising, and mentoring any capstone projects or other scholarly work. Such projections will also be useful to students in planning their own courses of study.

Graduate Education Administration: The incoming Associate Vice President for Graduate Studies would be well served by the New Deans Summer Institute run by the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS). If the institution has been an institutional member of CGS in the past, renewal of this membership would be very worthwhile. CGS annual meetings provide excellent information on trends in graduate education and funding opportunities. Their weekly communication is an excellent resource for any Graduate Dean. CGS has a number of publications about Graduate Schools.

Undergraduate/Graduate institutional culture: WSC is strongly committed to undergraduate education. These two new graduate programs provide an opportunity for the continued development and growth of faculty scholarship and collaborative faculty/student scholarly work. Graduate

faculty, as teacher-scholars, prepare students to practice the discipline and critically examine the common knowledge and theory underlying the disciplines. Teaching and scholarly work and productivity in its broadest sense are interdependent processes. Faculty at institutions with a strong focus on teaching still must engage in scholarly activity at the level appropriate for the institution and graduate programs it offers. With the addition of graduate programs, the graduate faculty need to be cognizant of an expectation to be involved in scholarship and the administration needs to be prepared to implement procedures and practices supportive of scholarly work.

At the same time, the institution as a whole needs to be sensitive to perceptions of disparities in funding, faculty development opportunities, pay, reassigned time and other resources and perquisites on the basis of graduate faculty status. The planning processes for both of these new programs suggest that the campus community is aware of these possible repercussions, but there should be ongoing dialogues within the campus community about the appropriate roles and responsibilities of those who teach primarily in the graduate programs and those whose responsibilities are primarily with undergraduate education. Both graduate and undergraduate programs ideally should view each other as valuable resources for their own interests, with the ability to mentor and advise each other in their teaching, research/creative, and service activities.

2. Faculty Development

Western State College seems to have well-developed processes for faculty development, promotion and tenure. With increasing demands on scholarly, research and/or creative activity because of the graduate programs, the College might consider a more expansive and flexible approach to the development of untenured and mid-level faculty that would aim to help the faculty member nurture and direct his/her professional activities with the aim of improvement in those categories that are most suited to his/her position.

One possible approach (not by any means the only one or even necessarily the best) is suggested by the contract governing the relations of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) system and the Inter Faculty Organization (IFO), which represents faculty at the seven Minnesota state university campuses, as described in Article 22 and Appendix G of the contract:

<http://www.ifo.org/contract09-11/IFOMNSCUAGREEMENT2009-2011.htm#ART22>

<http://www.ifo.org/contract09-11/IFOMNSCUAGREEMENT2009-2011.htm#appxG>

The five criteria areas for evaluation of faculty listed and described in this document allow for flexibility in how each faculty member—in consultation with the department and administration supervisors—sets particular goals

that will be appropriate for his/her position. The criteria also offer a wide range of examples that can be tailored to meet the needs of these specific graduate programs but also undergraduate programs as well.

3. Intellectual Property

As these graduate programs move forward and faculty become active within them, largely through the course management system provided by Blackboard, the college may wish to examine more closely its policies and procedures regarding intellectual property. These policies and procedures should deal with the “fair use” for academic purposes of existing texts, images, sounds, etc. that may be used for instructional purposes by faculty and students alike. In a time when many sources of textual, visual and aural communication are readily available, it is important to be careful in one’s own use of such materials for teaching and in how one teaches students to use and document such materials. In addition, the College should make certain that its own policies and procedures are set up to assure consistent and ethical application of intellectual property rights for the faculty members and students who may be creating new intellectual properties in the course of their teaching, research or studies. Such policies and procedures should pay attention to making clear distinctions about what kinds of materials are liable to become state or institutional property and about those materials to which faculty or students may make ownership claims. The College should also be careful about any potential claims that might be made through the propriety privileges of the Blackboard CMS or other such technological providers.

4. Online Verification

New federal regulations and HLC policies require clear processes to verify the identity of students who are being taught online. The summer residence portion of these programs and the sign-in procedures for Blackboard are currently sufficient to meet these new requirements, but the requirements may become more stringent as time goes by, and the College should be prepared to meet new demands for additional measures of identity verification.

5. Budget, Planning and Assessment

Currently these programs are meant to be self-funded and their structures are evidence of careful institutional planning. As noted in the Assurance section of this report, the College also has a sound assessment process in place. One common challenge that many institutions face is the final linkage between the assessment, planning and budget processes, forming a complete cycle. Because of their self-funded natures, these two programs could be a test case for “closing the loop” in the assessment-planning-budget cycle, so that student learning results are used to

structure planning and budgeting for further development and improved teaching and learning.

6. Community Relations

Part of the community support in the Gunnison Valley for these graduate programs stems from the money of the students and income brought to the community, especially during summers. Given the small size of these two programs and their online components, it is quite possible that the community will come to express disappointment at how much income and other returns will come as a result of these programs. The College would do well to engage in open and frank discussions regarding community expectations and program realities. At the same time, the faculty and students of these two programs could reach out in a variety of ways to interact with the valley residents and involve its citizens in the operations of two programs that do have potential to enrich the educational cultural lives of the surrounding community.

7. Higher Learning Commission Institutional Requests

Chapter 7 in the HLC Handbook describes the process and necessary materials for either fulfilling Commission Mandates (7.1) or Seeking Approval of Proposed Changes (7.2). The request for approval of a proposed change needs to provide a well-written and comprehensive analysis that provides the team members with as complete an understanding of the request as possible. WSC was extremely responsive when this team made a request for additional materials. The institution would benefit from having institutional representatives attend the NCA/HLC Annual Meeting. Consideration should also be given to nominating someone from the institution for future training as a PEAQ consultant-evaluator.

*Team Recommendations for the
STATEMENT OF AFFILIATION STATUS*

INSTITUTION and STATE: : Western State College of Colorado, CO

TYPE OF REVIEW (from ESS): Focused Visit-Requested

DESCRIPTION OF REVIEW (from ESS): A visit focused on the institution's request to offer first degrees at the master's level; a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and a Master of Arts in Education

DATES OF REVIEW: 11/2/09 - 11/3/09

Nature of Organization

LEGAL STATUS: Public

TEAM RECOMMENDATION: nc

DEGREES AWARDED: B

TEAM RECOMMENDATION: B,M

Conditions of Affiliation

STIPULATIONS ON AFFILIATION STATUS: None.

TEAM RECOMMENDATION: Degree offerings at the master's level are limited to the Master of Arts in Education and Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing.

APPROVAL OF NEW DEGREE SITES: Prior Commission approval required.

TEAM RECOMMENDATION: nc

APPROVAL OF DISTANCE EDUCATION DEGREES: Prior Commission approval required.

TEAM RECOMMENDATION: nc

REPORTS REQUIRED: None

TEAM RECOMMENDATION: nc

OTHER VISITS REQUIRED: Focused Visit-Requested: 2009 - 2010; A visit focused on the institution's request to offer first degrees at the master's level; a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and a Master of Arts in Education

TEAM RECOMMENDATION: None

Summary of Commission Review

YEAR OF LAST COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION: 2002 - 2003

YEAR OF NEXT COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION: 2012 - 2013

TEAM RECOMMENDATION: nc

