

Ad Hoc Peer-Evaluation Report

Skagit Valley College

Mount Vernon, WA

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*A confidential report of findings prepared for the
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities*

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Evaluators

The following peer evaluator prepared the Ad Hoc Evaluation Report:

Mr. Russell Goodrich

Director, Workforce Development & Technical Education

Division of Professional & Technical Education

Former Associate Vice Chancellor

Utah State University Eastern

Price, Utah

Introduction

Skagit Valley College (SVC) is a public, two-year institution of higher education, offering a number of certificate and associate degree programs to residents of Skagit, San Juan, and Island Counties. The College operates two campuses, and three centers.

The College web site lists over 60 individual “Areas of Study”, with 29 degree programs being listed as transfer degrees, including a number of Direct Transfer degrees. In 2014 the College Trustees approved a Bachelor of Applied Science in Environmental Conservation (BASEC) that built upon an existing AAS-T degree in Environmental Conservation and related AAS-T degrees.

The State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) approved the BASEC degree in March 2014, and the Northwest Commission granted candidacy status at the baccalaureate level for fall 2014. The College has since enrolled three cohort groups of students in the program, with a new cohort beginning each fall. All students in the first cohort are expected to graduate by summer 2016.

This Ad Hoc Report addresses how the BASEC degree impacts the overall mission of the College and provides a brief analysis of the effectiveness and completeness of the implementation goals SVC outlined in the NWCCU application. Specific NWCCU standards related to resource allocation, planning, sustainability, and assessment will be addressed as part of the analysis.

Assessment of the Self-Evaluation Report & Support Materials

The Ad Hoc Report was delivered to the evaluator a few weeks before the on-site visit, allowing adequate time for review and preparation. All necessary support materials were included in print and online formats. The headings, formatting, and writing style of the report were clear, concise, and easy to follow. Requests for additional information were provided quickly and professionally during the visit.

Additional information about the overall impact of the degree on the institution, including the projected impact on SVC’s overall mission, would have strengthened the report. Likewise, additional assessment information was needed about the measures used and outcomes expected for the identified program level outcomes.

Mission, Core Themes, and Expectations

The Mission statement, three core themes, and five strategic priorities of Skagit Valley College are published online and in print in the 2013 – 2017 Strategic Plan. The Mission of SVC is to *provide opportunities for students in pursuit of their educational and employment goals, while*

contributing to the economic and cultural enrichment of our communities. The mission is operationalized through the three Core Themes of Access, Achievement, and Community, along with five related Strategic Priorities. The BASEC degree directly supports all three themes and two of the priorities.

The evaluator interviewed several college leaders, faculty representatives, a cohort of students in the program, and a local community leader. These interviews, along with a review of minutes from Trustees' meetings, helped the evaluator conclude that all three Core Themes have been thoroughly considered and their key outcomes interwoven throughout the design, outcomes, and implementation of the BASEC degree. The program also directly addresses the related strategic priorities of "Environmental Stewardship" and "Aligning Educational Programs with Regional and State Economic Development Strategies."

An example of how the themes are addressed is found in the requirement for students to obtain an internship with a government agency or firm. Internships included partnerships with local entities and have significantly increased community engagement while providing employment opportunities and practical, hands-on learning for several students. Additional examples include efforts to work with three local Native American tribes, the recently obtained accreditation for basic water testing with the Washington Department of Ecology, and the opportunity for the College to provide water testing services for local agencies, including local fisheries and watersheds.

One community member expressed appreciation and provided examples of pervasive and on-going engagement and support of the President, other college leaders, and faculty members in addressing the needs of the local region. The evaluator compliments college and faculty leadership for widespread efforts to engage with and be responsive to the needs of the region.

Interviews reflected the belief the College should "look like our community." The College does not anticipate offering a significant number of baccalaureate degrees, and leaders indicated any future degrees must clearly meet key local needs and tie closely with the mission. The evaluator found that the BASEC degree closely matches community needs and is a natural extension of what the college already does and enhances rather than deviates from its existing mission.

The BASEC degree was found to be a natural expansion of the AAS-T degree in Environmental Conservation and has provided opportunities for students that may not have been realized without the degree. Several students reported the reason they are still in school is because the degree was available locally. They also expressed a high degree of confidence that, despite the possibility of initially lower wages, they would be able to find meaningful, upwardly mobile jobs after completing the degree. It was also encouraging that the majority of students in the

interviewed group expressed an interest in continuing their educations by transferring to schools offering an MS in Environmental Conservation or related degrees, including teaching.

Compliment: The evaluator compliments the College for recognizing and responding to key regional needs by fostering widespread and energetic engagement with community groups, tribal leaders, and government entities. Furthermore, the College is complemented for taking critical steps to respond to these needs in a way that enhances and strengthens the College Mission.

Resources and Capacity

In the Substantive Change Proposal, the College identified a number of resource needs that would be addressed to help the program be successful and sustainable. The college has systematically and adequately addressed the vast majority of self-identified resource needs. One exception and potential future needs are noted in the analysis.

Human Resources

The College hired a Program Assistant and a Lab Assistant to support the BASEC program. The positions have recently been moved to 10-month, full-time contracts. Students reported a high degree of satisfaction with the lab facilities and with the levels of support provided by the assistants and noted an increase in program flexibility and significant opportunities to combine learning with hands-on practice. The labs are run professionally, and the levels of support were found to be appropriate for student and program needs.

A significant portion of program instruction and administration in Environmental Conservation is provided by a single full-time faculty member. One adjunct in Environmental Conservation and three regular faculty members with specialties in chemistry, communication, and English teach support classes in the program. The lead faculty member administers the program and advises BASEC students. The evaluator found that while he receives extra compensation for additional duties he has assumed, he carries a workload that may be difficult to sustain and could potentially limit future program sustainability and growth.

The 2015 – 2017 Operational Plan states the College will, “Investigate hiring a full-time faculty position to support Environmental Conservation, Geographic Information Systems, and Environmental Agriculture.” Interviews of academic leaders confirmed that the faculty hire is still a high priority in the two-year strategic planning and budgeting cycle. However, a new faculty member has not been hired. It should be noted that both the 2014 Substantive Change Proposal (p. 17), and the request submitted to the SBCTC (p. 24) identified projected expenditures for a new faculty member in 2015-2016, the second year of the program.

Students expressed great appreciation and praise for the dedicated, engaged, and energetic faculty who worked hard to implement the program and who actively respond to requests for program flexibility; however, some also expressed concerns about available faculty and the perceived impact they saw on program sustainability. For example, one student stated the program is successful because of the “heroic efforts” of a few individuals, and “it shouldn’t take a heroic effort to sustain a program.”

While recognizing these areas of concern, the evaluator would note that college leaders at all levels were supportive of the BASEC program and recognized the need for program support.

Concern: Current faculty staffing resources have been able to fully implement the present curriculum and program, but additional support may be needed to assure the integrity and continuity of the program, capitalize on future opportunities, expand program offerings, and incorporate additional scheduling flexibility for students (Standard 2.B.4).

Education Resources

The evaluator found well published course outcomes for classes in the BASEC program. Course outcomes are identified in course syllabi and in the catalog. In addition, program outcomes have been identified that closely mirror course outcomes.

The program outcomes were found on the website and in printed materials. Student interviews provided evidence that students have seen and are aware of intended program outcomes.

The outcomes appear to reflect industry norms and expectations of peer institutions as evidenced by the recently granted accreditation status for basic water quality testing from the Washington Department of Ecology. Likewise, while no formal articulation agreements or MOU’s were found, the evaluator found ample evidence that transfer articulation plans have been discussed with the University of Washington, Washington State, and Huxley College. For example, the evaluator reviewed a letter from the Director of Student & Academic Services at the University of Washington identifying three matching programs and classes recommended for easy transfer.

One area of concern is the lack of a finished assessment plan that identifies specific measures for program outcomes and expected levels of achievement. The Ad Hoc report stated an assessment document and plan is being prepared for implementation in 2017, but a copy of the assessment plan was not available for the evaluator to review.

Records were reviewed that demonstrated significant student achievement in the program. All students in the reviewed cohort group had either obtained or were finalizing an internship. In addition, the evaluator complements the College for excellent retention and persistence.

Currently, all students in the cohort groups are still in the program, and all students in the first cohort are expected to graduate in the summer of 2016.

The degree contained the upper division credits identified in the Substantive Change Proposal report in communication skills, natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences. Faculty members were largely responsible for the curriculum design and program planning. Library resources and usage appear to have been integrated into the program design.

Compliment: The College is complemented for extensive and pervasive faculty support, advising efforts, and student support services that have contributed to extraordinary student retention and persistence.

Student Support Resources

The students in the BASEC program move through the program in cohort groups. The cohort groups take the same sequence of courses and participate together in labs and projects. The cohort groups consisted of 13, 9, and 14 students in fall semesters for years 2014, 2015, and 2016 respectively. A faculty interview identified that surveys of existing students in the related AAS-T degree indicate the next cohort group should include at least 20 individuals. The evaluator was impressed with the students' level of collegiality and their understanding of available services and resources.

Key information for the BASEC program, including all required catalog information, is available on the college website. Program prerequisites, the application process, and contact information are readily available online. Students were provided with information about potential job fields and areas of study.

Student advising is provided by the Department Chair of the Environmental Conservation Department. His contact information is available online, and students reported meeting regularly and expressed appreciation for clear and consistent advising.

Library and Information Resources

The College invested just over \$20,000 in library services to support the initial program. This included 195 print books, 23 eBooks, and two databases that added almost 1,200 available titles. The evaluator found that an on-going budget increase of around \$7,000 has been established to maintain existing databases or purchase new titles. One 0.75 FTE technical services librarian has been moved to a fully funded, tenure-track position.

The investments made, combined with information gathered from students and the Director of Library Services, helped the evaluator conclude the College provides access to resources that

provide the currency, depth, and breadth needed to fully support the BASEC degree. It should be noted, however, that additional resources may be needed if the program expands course offerings or if the database providers begin charging the “four-year” rate for services instead of the lower rate typically used for community colleges.

Financial Resources

The College anticipates using a tuition-revenue model to sustain the BASEC degree, supported by additional vocational or budgeted funds. An initial cohort of 20 FTE per year was anticipated to start each fall, with the program being self-sustaining in the fourth year. Initial enrollments did not meet anticipated targets, but the President and other leaders continue to express strong support and commitment to the degree despite initially lower enrollments, noting a good institutional fit, a positive impact on the region, and enhanced opportunities for students.

Significant efforts have been made to increase enrollments by enhanced marketing efforts and the development of new pathways into the degree. Examples include Tech Prep agreements with three high schools, clear pathways for students completing the Associate in Technical Arts (ATA) and AS-T degrees, and pathways to relevant MS degrees at other state institutions.

Administrators had a realistic idea of potential expenditures needed in the next 3-5 years, and a clear budgeting process is in place to review and fund prioritized program development and equipment requests. For example, an additional \$50,000 in one-time funds may be needed in the next 3-5 years, depending on the types of new testing performed and equipment or supplies needed for the new tests. The evaluator is satisfied that administrative commitment and budgeting processes are in place to continue to financially support the BASEC degree.

Physical and Technological Infrastructure

The Environmental Conservation lab has been placed in the Laura Angst Hall as a dedicated teaching and lab testing facility for the Environmental Conservation program. Appropriate funds were committed and spent to purchase the equipment and supplies needed for testing a wide variety of soils, tissues, and waters, including equipment for field-testing aquatic and marine near-shore habitats. Purchases were made to fund the initial expenses of the program, including items for a greenhouse shared with the AAS-T in Sustainable Agriculture.

The equipment and supplies purchased to create and equip the lab were found to be sufficient in quantity and quality to support the outcomes of the program, as evidenced by the recently awarded Washington Department of Ecology accreditation, a review of PAC minutes, a physical tour of the lab, and input provided in interviews.

Students expressed satisfaction with existing lab facilities. However, they expressed concerns that the computers available for use were somewhat dated and needed to be updated. They also mentioned other types of equipment that might be helpful for future environmental tests.

Planning and Implementation

Environmental stewardship, and the preservation of natural resources, are reflections of the regional priorities to protect and preserve the environment. The planning process at the College, including the selection and implementation of the Strategic Priorities, was found to be responsive to the region. For example, the College was an active partner in Envision Skagit 2060, a 50-year plan to protect the Skagit and Samish River watersheds while recognizing natural resource protection as an economic priority.

Institutional Planning

The development of the BASEC degree was found to be a direct result of planning that occurred in conjunction with Strategic Priority 3 (Environmental Stewardship) and Strategic Priority 5, (Aligning Educational Programs with Regional and State Economic Development Strategies). Evidence was reviewed of collaborations between the College, an external advisory committee, and other institutions in the the design of the program and the selection of outcomes.

Additionally, SVC used data from future job demand projections, graduation rates from existing programs, identified state economic priorities, and the environmental needs of local constituencies to guide the planning process. For example, internal documents prepared in 2012-2013 used employment surveys and other data to project 57-65 local job openings each year for the next 10 years.

Core Theme Planning

The evaluator found the planning process and the design and implementation of the BASEC degree incorporated and addressed portions of all three Core Themes. An example is provided below of one specific objective that was addressed for each Core Theme.

The Access Core Theme addressed the objective of ensuring college enrollments reflect District demographics. Student interviews found that the BASEC degree allowed several place-bound students to complete the degree locally. In addition, local internships and employment opportunities allowed students to remain in the area.

The Achievement Core Theme addressed an objective to help students successfully transition to the workforce. The BASEC degree proposal identified Skagit County as experiencing the largest statewide growth in environmental and natural-resource related jobs (p. 7), with projected job openings expected to significantly exceed the yearly target of 20 BASEC graduates. The design

of the degree includes a number of real-world environmental testing projects. The hands-on nature of the program design, combined with partnerships and jobs with local firms, should prepare students to successfully transition to the workforce.

The Community Core Theme addressed the objective of collaborating with its communities through the exchange of knowledge and resources. Examples of collaborative partnerships have been previously mentioned and include the Envision Skagit 2060 project, internships with local firms, work with local Native American tribes, and active involvement of a Program Advisory Committee (PAC), as evidenced by interviews and a review of PAC minutes. The accreditation granted by the Washington Department of Ecology will allow students at SVC to complete additional real-world tests in partnership with local firms or tribal groups.

Effectiveness and Improvement

SVC has collected a great deal of valuable information about student achievement that helped the evaluator analyze program effectiveness. Examples of excellence include a perfect retention rate for all three cohorts, excellent job and internship placement opportunities for students, a number of partnerships that have been developed for water testing, the recent award of accredited standing by the Washington Department of Ecology, and the projected graduation of all students in the initial cohort by the end of summer 2016.

While noting the work that has begun on the assessment process and evidence reviewed of student achievement, the evaluator is concerned that an institutionally approved assessment plan has not been implemented for the BASEC degree. An assessment document is being prepared for implementation in 2017, but the evaluator was not able to review this information as part of the review.

As a result, the evaluator was unable to determine if or how the data impact the assessment of existing core theme objectives. Likewise, the evaluator was unable to determine if the assessment plan allows the institution to measure clearly identified program goals or intended outcomes (Standard 4.A.2) or degree learning outcomes (Standard 4.A.3) and use assessment results to inform academic and learning-support practices that lead to enhancement of student learning achievement (Standard 4.B.2).

Summary

Skagit Valley College has completed a tremendous amount of work in a brief period of time to assess the goals of the region, document the need for a local baccalaureate degree, obtain program approvals, develop curriculum, identify program outcomes, and recruit students. During that time they have also hired new staff, made faculty and supervisory changes, allocated lab and classroom space, and purchased a wide variety of equipment, supplies, books, and support materials.

The process has been detailed, thoughtful, and well planned. The planning and implementation process has already produced a number of positive, meaningful results for the institution, the local region, and students.

There is still work that must be accomplished to finalize the assessment process and evaluate faculty and staffing needs to ensure long-term growth and sustainability. However, the evaluator complements the College for the expansive work that has already been accomplished and for the energy, commitment, and vision exhibited by faculty and administrative leaders.