

University Without Walls

An interdisciplinary program in the Division of Continuing and Professional Education offering the B.A. and the B.S.

■ The Review Process

This was a standard AQAD review. Reviewers were:

Susan Kelly (former Vice President, Council for Adult and Experiential Learning)

Esther Letven (retired, University of Wisconsin, Parkside)

Tessa McDonnell (Granite State College)

■ Main Issues

The University Without Walls (UWW) program originated in the 1970s as an alternative path to a college degree for older students with “life experience” they wished to apply to an academic program. UWW advisors work with students and faculty sponsors to develop individualized degree programs that incorporate academic credit for prior learning awarded through a rigorous portfolio review. The visiting team observed that “the longevity of the program and its success through many periods of uncertainty and reorganization demonstrates its continuing value.” The team also praised the “remarkable” dedication of program staff to the program’s mission and to adult learners in general, and noted that “alumni and current students are vocal in their praise ... of the individual attention they receive and the academic quality of their learning experiences,” often speaking of their “transformative experience” with UWW. The team offered several specific findings and recommendations, noting that “in considering changes it will be imperative to preserve the benefits that graduates value while making quality improvements.”

- **Curriculum.** The team noted that the program’s “flexibility is attractive to adult learners,” and found that “quality has been achieved by the academic program approval process and faculty participation in prior learning assessment.” The team noted that a “new curriculum model is being thoughtfully researched” with the goal of maintaining a “balance between common curricular expectations and preserving the individualized nature” of the curriculum. The new model would include as one option a series of foundation courses as a base on which to build the experiential learning assessment and “concentrations,” sequences of more advanced content courses in high interest areas. The team endorsed the new direction, noting that defined concentrations “will assure identifiable learning outcomes and a framework for the evaluation of prior learning for credit.” The team noted increasing demand for on-line course delivery, and recommended that on-line courses should be “part of the delivery mix in the future for foundation and concentration courses in the new model.”

The UWW program is organized within the Division of Continuing and Professional Education, which also offers a Bachelor of General Studies (B.G.S.) degree. The team expressed the view that it “makes sense ... that this degree might be delivered through UWW” so as to provide two degree options to adult learners: the UWW degree for those seeking credit for prior learning, and the B.G.S. for those pursuing a traditional curriculum.

- **Experiential Learning and Academic Advising.** The team found that “the current systems for teaching and academic advising are labor intensive,” and recommended these processes be

“streamlined” in line with best practices. The team observed that UWW advisors invest so much effort that student degree plans are “often so well prepared” that some “faculty indicate that their role is one of a ‘rubber stamp’.” Some students also expressed frustration in seeking faculty advisors to sponsor the degree plan. The team suggested that “these problems would be avoided if the highly qualified UWW faculty had the authority to approve proposals without additional review.” Prior learning review would still require faculty approval. The team also noted that UWW grading procedures create obstacles for students seeking to participate in the University’s honors program, and recommended that changes be considered.

- **Administration and Finance.** The team noted that UWW’s “initial emphasis on social justice [and] serving low income adults” has “shifted over time” as the program has broadened its mission and the University financial subsidy has been phased out. This has led to “competing priorities,” the resolution of which may require “more profitable partnerships” and fundraising for scholarships for special populations. Another “tension” identified by the team is a consequence of a “mixed staffing pattern” in which “professional staff and faculty have similar performance expectations yet dissimilar classifications and appointments.” The team urged that this “disconnect” be addressed. The team suggested that resolution is in part linked to the broader question of UWW’s organizational location, and urged that there be “careful consideration of how UWW ‘fits’ within the structure of the larger university.” They also urged involving more “influencers” from the campus at large on the UWW advisory board.

The team found that a number of issues must be addressed related to the shift to a self-sustaining financial model. The “budget expectation to return 20% of gross revenue” to the larger Outreach organization “is not realistic under present circumstances,” and a strategic plan to “align resources with new marketing efforts, reconfigure staff with a workload reflective of new program changes, outsource some services, and boost the number of admitted degree candidates” is needed. The team concluded that by “creating efficiencies, projecting increased participation based on solid market research, and streamlining academic delivery a multi-year transition to the 20% target can be accomplished.” The team also observed that “the satisfied alumni base has not been targeted for any systematic fund-raising,” although plans are under way.

The physical move of UWW from an on-campus location to the off-campus Continuing Education site “presents a set of challenges” related to autonomy, perceived status, and “misperceptions from both UWW and Continuing Education personnel about each other’s missions, audiences, credibility, and integrity.” The team suggested that a transition management plan could help respond to these challenges and promote shared administrative functions within Outreach such as registration, marketing, and financial aid advising.

- **Advising and Support Services.** The team identified several issues related to “role clarity,” including a perceived conflict between recruitment and advising and “pressure to bring in students even if they are under-qualified.” The range of skills necessary and “diversity of tasks splinters their time” and “affects performance and attitude.” The team also observed that “services are duplicated with other offices,” and that the failure of key services to be open nights and weekends needs to be remedied. The team urged UWW to conduct more research into the needs and experiences of students.
- **Marketing.** The team found that the marketing of UWW “has been uneven,” and that a formal marketing plan is needed to strengthen marketing both with prospective students and within the University. Basic market research is lacking, and the program needs “periodic research on market needs and ... workforce development opportunities.” The program was

urged to seek more corporate and other markets for effective program delivery, and to cultivate the “valuable alumni resource.”

■ Results of the Review

The Vice Provost for Outreach expressed appreciation for the team’s “thoroughness and recommendations,” and indicated that because of the extensiveness of the recommendations she would pursue a “phased implementation plan.” In the near term, she indicated that the new curriculum should be approved this year, and that UWW is planning for a completely on-line degree option. She reported that UWW is reviewing best practices so as to streamline prior learning assessment, and has formed a partnership with Continuing Education to eliminate redundancy in advising. A full-time recruiter will be assigned to UWW to help increase enrollment, and an initial strategic business plan has been completed.

In the short term UWW is engaged in a restructuring process that will involve revision of position descriptions and improvements in efficiency. Opportunities will be provided for UWW staff to participate in professional development activities. The relationship between UWW and CPE will be reviewed, with consideration given to moving the B.G.S. program under UWW. UWW will seek to provide greater honors opportunities for its students. Increased investments in market research and program development have supported efforts to increase market share, especially in distance learning formats. An endowment campaign will be kicked off at the UWW 35th Anniversary celebration in spring 2007, with proceeds used in part to support scholarships.