March 9, 2015

To: Rhonda Epper, Chief Student Success & Academic Affairs Officer, Colorado Department of Higher Education

From: Mollie McGill, Director, Programs and Membership, WCET

Re: Adams State University Visit on March 4, 2015

Thank you for the opportunity to join you and Heather Delange on the March 4 visit to Adams State University. As a professional in the field of e-learning for many years and as one of WCET’s directors, my role on the team visit was to contribute to the discussion of the existing practices and policies at ASU related to academic integrity, fraud, and the institutional structures in support of their extended studies program. My role was not to represent either NC-SARA or W-SARA.

Below is a summary of my observations from the meetings with Dr. Novotny, Vice President of Academic Affairs; Dr. Matt Nehring, Chemistry, Computer Science and Mathematics Department Chair; Walter Roybal, Assistant Vice President for Extended Studies; and Judy Phillips, Assistant Vice President-Operations for Extended Studies.

Academic Integrity and Student Identity Authentication

Adams State University has had an academic integrity policy in place since 2006 with three sets of revisions, the most recent revision in 2013. The policy explicitly states that it applies to all students, on campus and extended studies students. The policy also addresses the specific responsibilities and actions of instructors, the VP of Academic Affairs, and the VP of Student Affairs.

My assessment is that the ASU academic integrity policy is favorably comparable in language, procedures, roles, and sanctions with other such policies I’ve read as part of WCET’s work related to academic integrity. The focal point for integrity issues seems to be at the department level where each instructor addresses any student dishonesty concerns that may arise, determine use of anti-plagiarism tools, and determine the method for proctoring of exams (e.g. use of a physical proctor or use of the university’s contract with Kryterion and Axcio.)

We discussed briefly other tools/strategies that could strengthen the university’s commitment to and culture for academic integrity:

1. Examine the on-site proctoring services available from the National Collegiate Testing Association and its Consortium of College Testing Centers (CCTC). <http://www.ncta-testing.org/>
2. Review the proctoring policies and guidelines used by the University of North Carolina System. I am not suggesting the UNC System is replicable for ASU but there may be some proctor-related guidelines that may be informative. <https://online.northcarolina.edu/exams/overview.htm>

3. Review the Academic Initiatives and Integrity website at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. http://provost.uark.edu/academic_initiatives.php. The University of Arkansas undertook a campus-wide review and alignment of all policies, practices and communications to promote a campus-wide culture embracing integrity for all students, faculty, and employees.

4. Review ASU’s procedures for monitoring repeat accusations or confirmations of academic dishonesty. Some institutions have implemented an internal tracking system of confirmed student infractions to help an instructor determine when a more proactive intervention with a student may be useful.

5. Conduct a review of student identity remote proctoring and/or student identity verification products. Over the past five years or so, many companies have developed other options related to secure test-taking. Currently, Adams State students pay for their own proctored exams by Kryterion. ASU could examine other products, perhaps at lower cost, allowing for more frequent quizzes, non-high stakes exams, to assess student progress and lessen the motivation for cheating on an “all or nothing” high stakes exam.

6. Rio Salado College in Phoenix, Arizona, is an excellent example of an institution that has implemented several innovative approaches to promote academic integrity, at the course level through their own plagiarism software, and at the institutional level to identify non-legitimate students prior to admission and registration.

Academic Quality of Extended Studies Course Offerings

Based upon the conversations with the ASU administrators with whom we met, all of the academic offerings from Extended Studies, correspondence (in print and online modes) and semester-based online courses, are reviewed and approved by the academic department on a three-year cycle, including a review of the tests and assessments. A new policy that is relevant to the purpose of our visit is the new requirement that students cannot complete a 3-credit online course in less than 6 weeks, or in some cases not less than 8 weeks, as determined by the instructor.

AVPs Roybal and Phillips emphasized that Extended Studies is the “mode of delivery” while oversight of the curriculum and assessments are the responsibility of the appropriate academic department for its review and approval.

Another positive take-away is the high level of commitment to quality “customer care.” Whether on-campus students, off-campus lifelong learners, or incarcerated students seeking to improve their futures, the ASU representatives with whom we met addressed their commitment to student support. For example, within Extended Studies, they have four FTE assigned to help students with degree planning, transfer issues, etc.

The use of high stakes exams and non-authentic assessments in online instruction can be a challenge especially the assurance of the validity of the student’s identity and the validity of a secure testing environment. It was noted that the instructional design services of Extended Studies make use of the WCET resource, “Best Practice Strategies to Promote Academic Integrity in Online Education.” <http://www.wcet.wiche.edu/wcet/docs/cigs/studentauthentication/BestPractices.pdf>. As noted
above, the online environment can facilitate the use of more frequent and more varied authentic assessments, thus creating an additional disincentive for hiring an imposter to take one’s high stakes exam.

Other Observations

Adams State University has a successful and growing Extended Studies Program that aligns with its mission. It serves on-campus students, transfer students, lifelong learners in Colorado and nationally and provides an important educational opportunity for incarcerated adults in Colorado and other states. The story of how ASU’s Prison College Program has made a difference in individuals’ lives is impressive and should not be under-valued. However, as significant as the Extended Studies program is in terms of enrollments and revenue, it is not a stand-alone program and is well integrated into the fabric of the academic units.

The ASU leadership with whom we met each has been with the university for more than 10 years. Their commitment and dedication to the university, their students and the community is evident. That said, they should be comfortable with taking a step back to re-assess policies and practices and consider areas for possible improvements. The above references are provided to be useful examples for further exploration.

Thank you for including me as part of the CDHE visit. It was a wonderful learning opportunity. In particular, I was impressed with the ASU leaders I met and their passion for learners of all ages, at all stages of their learning careers.