

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
COMPREHENSIVE PRESIDENTIAL ASSESSMENT

PREPARED FOR THE BOARD OF REGENTS

and

PRESIDENT KIRK H. SCHULZ

by

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Introduction

The Washington State University Board of Regents retained the **Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB)** to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the performance of President Kirk H. Schulz. Board Policy #6, approved by the Regents on March 2, 2018, requires a comprehensive assessment of the president every three to four years to complement the evaluation that occurs annually. The policy calls for confidential interviews on the president's effectiveness and leadership with a significant cross-section of the campus community and external stakeholders. The comprehensive assessment took place in Spring semester 2020, in President Schulz's fourth year of service. This is the summary report of that review.

Special note: The interviews took place before Covid-19 started its rapid spread, and therefore before the magnitude of its effects became apparent. Now, everything said in this report should be read knowing that, and in the context of what is possible and what is necessary in higher education as American society struggles to get beyond the crisis.

Purpose of the Assessment

Board Policy #6 states that the purpose of the comprehensive assessment is to “fulfill an essential governance responsibility: supporting and evaluating the president.” It goes on to say:

It also addresses the larger goal of contributing to the improvement of the president’s and institution’s effectiveness. Further, the evaluation will accomplish the related goals of continuous communication between the board and the president about the president’s goals and accomplishments, the institution’s strategic position and vision, and the effectiveness of the president’s organizational decision-making. The evaluation process also meets the board’s need to be accountable to the institution’s various constituencies and to the larger public interest and public trust.

Picking up on the language in the policy about “improvement,” “goals,” and “vision,” I have focused the review both on evidence of past performance and on challenges that require strong presidential leadership going forward, linking the two. It is important to note that this comprehensive assessment was undertaken with the full cooperation, indeed encouragement, of President Schulz. Throughout the process both the President and the Board have reaffirmed the message in the above policy that the review is about presidential leadership development and success—and their contribution to the success of Washington State University.

The Process

- On November 14, 2019, I met with the Regents and the President during a Board meeting on the Vancouver campus to plan the evaluation process. That meeting established the steps that follow, which have occurred or will take place during and immediately following Spring semester 2020.
- Board Chair Blankenship announced the review to the campus communities, with a special communication to individuals to be interviewed.
- Interviews were organized and scheduled.
- I reviewed relevant documents such as strategic plans, performance reviews, annual reports, organizational charts, etc.
- President Schulz prepared his self-assessment and submitted it to the Board of Regents and me.
- Interviews were conducted. Some interviews were conducted in person on the Pullman campus and in Seattle. Some were conducted in natural affinity groups, for instance, deans, faculty leadership, and staff leadership. Those whose schedules made it impossible to be interviewed during my time in Pullman and Seattle were interviewed later by telephone. In addition to the deans and faculty and staff leadership already

mentioned, those interviewed included each of the Regents, all the Chancellors, senior administrators, student leaders, Regents Professors, alumni and Foundation board members. It is important to note that the Board of Regents includes business and civic leaders from around the state, who brought their outside professional experience and expertise to these conversations. In total, close to 70 people were interviewed.

- On March 10, 2020 I had a telephone conversation with Chair Blankenship and President Kirk to preview themes and issues that had arisen in the interviews, and to prepare for a Zoom session with the full Board of Regents later that week.
- On March 13, 2020, I presented a report to the Board of Regents in Executive Session via Zoom on themes and issues coming out of the interviews, and on my initial plans for writing the summary report of the comprehensive assessment. The Regents then engaged in a robust discussion, which concluded with their indication to me to prepare the summary report along the lines I had suggested.
- I prepared this summary report and reviewed it initially by Zoom with Chair Blankenship, Vice Chair Dickinson, and President Kirk on April 22, 2020.
- I made refinements to the report for accuracy and clarity as a result of this conversation [IF NEEDED].
- Before the June 2020 Board of Regents meeting, the report will be distributed to Board members for their consideration.
- At that meeting, the Regents will discuss the report in Executive Session.
- Chair Blankenship will convey the major themes and directions of the Regents' discussion of the report to President Schulz, who will subsequently discuss with the Board his plans to address them.
- Chair Blankenship will communicate to the university community the completion of the assessment, his appreciation for community members' participation in it, and how the Board and the President will be following up on it.

Interview Protocol

At the start of each interview I promised confidentiality to the interviewees, indicating that I would not connect their name or title to anything that appeared in the report. After addressing participants' questions regarding the process (most said they were well informed and had few or no specific questions), I asked interviewees two questions to kick off the conversation:

- What in your opinion is working well about presidential leadership at Washington State University?
- What issues in your opinion need more attention by the President?

During the ensuing dialogue, I asked follow-up questions based on the nature of the interviewees' work with President Schulz, seeking examples and specifics to amplify and support the opinions offered. I made it clear that my questions were intended to stimulate

what they had to say, and that they should take their answers wherever they wanted them to go. This combination of a directed conversation and open-endedness produced focused, candid, thoughtful interviews. I want to thank all those interviewed for their time and their genuine desire to contribute to the success of the President and the institution.

Moving on from process and protocol, following is the main substance of this assessment summary, in three sections:

1. Regard for President Schulz’s Character and Style
2. Some Major Accomplishments during His Tenure Thus Far
 - Righting the Fiscal Ship
 - Realizing the Promise of the Elson S. Floyd College of Medicine (ESFCOM) and WSU Health Sciences
 - Establishing His Statewide Presence as President of Washington’s Land-Grant Institution
3. Challenges Ahead
 - The “Systemness” Question
 - The President’s Time and Investment in Academics, Administration, and External Affairs
 - The Future of the Drive to 25

REGARD FOR PRESIDENT SCHULZ’S CHARACTER AND STYLE

Those interviewed were uniformly highly complimentary about the President’s character, values, and presence in the job. I heard often such descriptors as sincere, trustworthy, engaging, disarming, authentic, credible, genuine, affable, humble, even-tempered, thoughtful, empathetic, mature, energetic, positive. The Washington State University community clearly regards him as a person of substance, and has confidence in his judgment. People said that President Schulz leads with grace and integrity, and values all individuals, whoever they are. The feeling that emerges about the President as a person is a remarkably admiring one that encourages colleagues and other stakeholders to buy into and support his leadership.

Similarly, when it comes to matters of leadership style he has many fans. People talked about his being accessible, transparent, a tireless and effective cheerleader for the university, a convincing extemporaneous speaker, attentive to student voices, consistent, a team-builder, very visible, an active communicator adept at social media, committed to diversity and inclusion, on top of details but possessed of a long-term vision, no-nonsense, honest and direct but not offensive, a successful recruiter of talent and a wise delegator, smart and practical. As

one interviewee put it, he has the “chops” for the job. People believe he is an excellent fit with the culture and land-grant mission of Washington State University.

There are other traits that people have come to respect. President Schulz leads his Cabinet well, with a “primus inter pares”—first among equals—relationship with its members. Regents feel that his relationship with the Board is a positive partnership, in which he listens closely and responds appropriately. He operates smoothly with the Chancellors in their local and regional environments, in part because he has taken the time to get to know the players along with their problems and opportunities. Colleagues have seen him work through people’s anger without becoming defensive. He asks for solutions from governance groups, and is supportive when they come back with good ones.

All of these remarkable characteristics have led to a broadly recognized set of significant accomplishments in President Schulz’s first three-plus years of service.

SOME MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS DURING HIS TENURE THUS FAR

Righting the Fiscal Ship

When President Schulz arrived at Washington State University in June 2016, he found that the university had been deficit spending for a number of years. The result was that by FY 2017 it was some \$30 million in the hole. It had also reached the limits of its borrowing authority for capital projects. He did not know this when he was hired, and he discovered after he arrived that neither the Board nor the wider university community was generally aware of the university’s fiscal problems.

Without recriminations or finger-pointing, he rolled up his sleeves and went to work to bring the budget back into balance. He dug deep into the numbers, communicated the nature and extent of the problem clearly and without sugarcoating, set out a multi-year plan to return to solvency, and made the necessary cuts. Even with the pain involved in those reductions, people understand that the problem was not of his making and he needed to fix it.

President Schulz is given widespread credit for turning around the institution’s finances, with a strong new CFO he brought on board. The general institutional budget is now coming back into balance. The Athletic Department’s budget, which was under particularly acute stress because of spending to upgrade the football program based on significant fundraising and projected Pac 12 TV Network revenues neither of which materialized, is now on track to eliminate its annual deficit by FY 2024. A new Athletic Director hired by President Schulz has been instrumental in getting his budget back on track in the always highly visible and emblematic athletics program.

One of the challenges that had to be confronted to accomplish needed financial reforms was an outdated financial and human resources management system. With the leadership of the CFO, he established a four-year long process to replace the outdated system for management of

these back-office functions with a state-of-the-art one that will make for more efficient fiscal and human resources operations across the WSU system.

Realizing the Promise of the Elson S. Floyd College of Medicine (ESFCOM) and WSU Health Sciences

When President Schulz arrived on campus, the Legislature had authorized the ESFCOM, but had not fully funded the new school. With a strong effort from his Government Relations and External Affairs team, he obtained crucial state funding for the first several classes. The successful opening of the college represents a milestone in the history of Washington State University, and should heighten its national research profile as well as its presence and reputation across the state.

At the same time, he reorganized reporting lines to better integrate the Medicine, Nursing, and Pharmacy programs on the Spokane campus, appointing in 2018 WSU's first Vice President for Health Sciences in Spokane to oversee all three. This was a significant change from having these programs report up through the Provost in Pullman. It sent a signal to Spokane and the state about the importance of the Spokane campus as the home of a set of evolving health care sciences offerings, and about the importance of these disciplines and their service to the state in the future of WSU.

This decision also feeds into the challenges of the evolving nature of the WSU system and the future role of the chief academic officer discussed below in the section on "Challenges Ahead."

Establishing His Statewide Presence as President of Washington's Land-Grant Institution

Washington is a large state, and Washington State University is a large land-grant institution with five widely geographically dispersed campuses, as well as the Global campus. The campuses are quite different from each other in character. The cities and regions where they are located are hardly clones of each other. Leading the fulfillment of a land-grant mission in such circumstances is no simple feat.

President Schulz is given high marks for getting out around the state and representing WSU well at all its locations. The Chancellors outside of Pullman feel that he knows their people and the particulars of their environments well, and sends a positive message about the unique value of each of their campuses as a key component of Washington State University. "The boundaries of the university are the boundaries of the state" is one formulation of The Wisconsin Idea—that the university has an obligation to enhance the lives of its state's residents "wherever they live and work." President Schulz's energetic statewide presence seems to embody that notion in Washington, and has helped advance the brand of WSU as Washington's land-grant institution.

He has managed to do that while also greatly improving relations with the state's other—and imposing—public university, the University of Washington. There is always some tension between large public research universities in the same state. At best they exist in a state of productive “coopetition” with each other. The tension with the UW had been ratcheted up considerably before President Schulz took office, however, by WSU's having received approval to start a second medical school in the state.

His defusing that acrimony while at the same time building out WSU's claim to be the state's land-grant institution, a mission that the UW does not have, is a tribute to his diplomatic and political skills. Similarly, before his start date he was asked to step into a town/gown quarrel to smooth rough feelings between the Pullman campus and the Pullman community over regional airport issues. He is also said to have strengthened partnerships with community colleges.

In the impact his leadership has already had on the state, he has set the stage for the further evolution of WSU from a flagship campus with branches to a statewide public university system. The hurdles in getting that further evolution right will be discussed in the section below on “Challenges Ahead.”

CHALLENGES AHEAD

The “Systemness” Question

One definition of a university system is a place where competing public policy interests come into equilibrium. As Washington State University morphs from a single institution into a system, it is fair to say that it is in the process of figuring out what that equilibrium should be and how to get there.

When President Schulz came to the office in 2016, he recognized that he would in effect be the first leader of WSU as a system rather than a single, Pullman-centric institution. Such developments as the addition of the Everett campus, the establishment of the medical school in Spokane, and the continuing growth in the number of students enrolled online through the Global campus “stretched the current operational model,” to use his own words. Since then, issues around the nature of WSU as an institution or system seem to have stretched the current operational model still further.

In nearly every interview undertaken for this comprehensive assessment, such issues were raised, often with an intensity that demonstrated they are top-of-mind for many. To provide a flavor of conversations on this topic, the following are just a few examples of the variety of questions interviewees are struggling with:

- What should be the responsibilities and authority of the Vice Presidents and the Deans on the campuses other than Pullman?

- Does it make sense to have the same tenure criteria in academic departments across the campuses?
- What should the Everett campus, now WSU's smallest, look like in 10 years, given the current and anticipated growth in the Everett area in the state's largest population center? How will that affect the operations of the entire system?
- Is there unnecessary, and perhaps dysfunctional, duplication of positions across the campuses?
- How would a genuinely effective systemwide budget process, with incentives to behave like a unified system, be structured—and are we ready to put one in place?

Looming over all these questions, and others about systemness, is the matter of the dual role of the President and the rest of the Pullman administration on that campus and all the others. Should the President formally be appointed President of the WSU System, with a separate Chancellor hired for the Pullman campus? In states with such an arrangement, the constituent elements of the system usually are individual institutions, each with an administration separate from a "system administration." Does WSU want to go entirely or more in this direction? If so, how far and when?

There is an impatience among WSU faculty and staff about getting these matters resolved. Some said they recognize that they are still in the "messy stage" of figuring out their identity, and they want to get beyond it. A number thought the group working on system issues had had the right conversations and had made progress in thinking about approaches to the identity conundrum, but now decisions needed to be made and implemented. One interviewee expressed it this way: "What are we? If we know that and know its rules, we can play the game effectively."

In the opinion of most interviewees, President Schulz has sent regular, strong messages that the future of WSU needs to be that of an integrated statewide system. The draft 2020-25 System Strategic Plan includes first-ever governing principles for operating WSU as a system. But interviewees generally do not believe the President has yet made the tough decisions, nor put in place the structures, processes, and accountability, to make that happen. They see him trying to avoid the conflict that these actions will inevitably entail, and sense drift rather than forward motion.

These decisions will indeed be hard ones involving changing ingrained expectations and behaviors. Whatever the decisions and their accountability features turn out to be, one constituency or another—or perhaps several—will be unhappy with them. But the good news here is that after three-plus successful years in office, President Schulz knows the state and is known by it. He appreciates the differences among the campuses and their potential to come together as a system that is more than the sum of its separate parts. He has a WSU community looking for clear direction on the system issue. He has a Board of Regents that seems poised to support his decisions about it.

Because of his successful initial run, he and the Board have the credibility to set WSU on a future course of even greater service and eminence as Washington's integrated, 21st century, land-grant higher education system. Large and tricky a challenge as it is, it also could be a wonderful legacy.

The President's Time and Investment in Academics, Administration, and External Affairs

One of the features of being president of a university that can surprise new presidents is how much time and attention others will spend trying to decipher what things and people the president is devoting his time and attention to. His every word, the raising of an eyebrow, and perceived body language can be subject to overheated interpretation (often misinterpretation). Fair or not, some will scrutinize the organizational chart of the university's senior leadership as a map of the president's investment in various aspects of university life.

It became clear over the course of the interviews that there is a sense on the part of many on the academic side of the house at WSU that President Schulz has a heavy number of administrators reporting directly to him. The academics fret that he is not always able to pay adequate attention to the academic life of the place, that his view of the university is too shaped by administrative considerations. I am not saying that this is necessarily true, simply that the attitude is there. Indeed, faculty and academic leaders on campuses around the country often share this view of their chief executive officer!

At WSU there are several structural features that tend to reinforce it. For instance, the Chancellors report directly to the President, while the Deans do not. Certainly it could be argued that this makes good sense, since the Chancellors are the chief executives on their campuses, and the Deans as academic officers should report to the Provost as Chief Academic Officer. At the same time, the Deans have systemwide responsibilities for academic programs and personnel, and engage in fundraising that could affect academic achievement and reputation on all the campuses. Questions were raised about whether some of the Vice Presidents who have more academic-leaning portfolios should report up through the Provost, perhaps as Associate Vice Presidents, and about whether the array of Vice Presidents at Regents meetings sends the right signals. Do too many administrative problems get unnecessarily elevated to the President's level because of these reporting arrangements, some wondered.

Despite the consternation in some quarters about the place of academics in the President's universe, faculty and academic leaders feel that he genuinely supports and appreciates their work, and represents it well to the wider world. By and large they believe he listens to them and takes appropriate action based on what he hears. The uneasiness they articulate seems to come from their read that the organizational environment in which he sits tends to focus him on non-academic things too much.

Not surprisingly, this fretting on the academic side was aggravated by the very quick removal of the previous Executive Vice President and Provost. There is widespread lack of understanding about what happened there, not unusual when aspects of sensitive personnel matters need to be kept confidential. Nonetheless, it raised more questions about what the authority of the chief representative of academics will be. This of course puts a premium on a successful result in the current search for the next Executive Vice President and Provost.

A clear national phenomenon in recent years has been university presidents needing to turn more of their focus to the external forces that increasingly shape their institutions, whether fundraising; local, state, and federal government affairs; alumni associations; national intercollegiate sports organizations; business associations; or media relations. This need for the president to be more outward in focus, to be away from the campus more often, has led many provosts, especially if they carry the executive vice president title, to assume more of a day-to-day chief operating officer role in addition to their chief academic officer responsibilities. It's a delicate balance to get this redefinition of roles right, and makes the ability of the president and provost to form a complementary team ever more important.

For WSU, this development may provide President Schulz with a timely opportunity to recalibrate his larger senior leadership team both to ease the tensions mentioned above, and more significantly, to free up more of his own time to move the institution to its next level of relevance across the state.

He is already recognized as a very welcome and effective ambassador for WSU throughout Washington. I got the sense that people would like to see more of him on all the campuses. Moreover, a number of interviewees indicated he could really advance the WSU agenda if he had more time and energy to spend interacting with regional business, nonprofit, alumni, and political leadership, as well as with state legislators and the Governor's administration in Olympia. Regents, with their strong local networks, stand ready to deepen and widen these relationships. The new \$2 billion fundraising campaign will no doubt also require him to ramp up his cultivation of these sorts of connections.

So President Schulz's empowering the new Executive Vice President and Provost—over time as they build their team of two—to grow into something of a chief operating officer might address both internal frictions and external demands. Having several of the Vice Presidents with more academic responsibilities report to the Provost would lighten his load in Pullman and send what would be a well-received signal to academics there and on the other campuses that he was investing the chief academic officer with a more prominent institutional presence. Such a move, perhaps made gradually after the new Provost gained confidence among colleagues across the system, would send a message that President Schulz wanted the Provost to carry the authority of an Executive Vice President who could oversee at least some administrative functions day-to-day. He would then be freer to take on all the growing external pulls that loom.

A decision to have Vice Presidents who now report to the President report instead to the Provost would likely not be greeted happily by those affected. But much of the nature of the reaction would be influenced by how much interpersonal capital the new Executive Vice President and Provost has garnered by the time of the decision, and the clout the position is perceived to be gaining. If the Chancellors were to worry about a reinvigorated Provost getting in their way, one trade-off could be the advantage to them of the President's being able to be out in the state more, building up with them the strengths and reputation of the entire system.

A stronger, competent Provost could help the academics on the Pullman campus believe they will still be the heart of an evolving WSU, while giving the President the ability to enhance the circulation in the other parts of the institutional body. Also, a Provost who became recognized as a genuine #2 and thought partner to the President could eventually share some of the burden of less popular decisions that need to be taken as WSU moves from institution to system.

The Future of the Drive to 25

The goal to be recognized as one of the nation's top 25 public research universities by 2030 has been a signature element of President Schulz's tenure since the beginning. By most accounts, his energetic laying out of the goal and development of a plan to move the university toward it caught the imagination and enthusiasm of an institution that some felt had sold itself short in the past. One interviewee characterized it as a welcome "Northstar," as a rallying cry to envision and reach for a brighter future for WSU.

While some were pushing ahead hard to make this stretch goal a reality, the magnitude of the needed investments gradually sunk in, and collided with the increasing understanding of the effects of \$20-25 million annual deficit spending in the years before President Schulz's arrival. Over time, the Drive to 25 has come to be seen as more of an aspirational ambition than a fixed endpoint where a set of metrics get checked off to demonstrate the crossing of a finish line. What to do with it next was on the minds of a variety of interviewees.

That said, many still find it a useful motivator that helps sort and focus ideas for new initiatives and investments. They see it as one framework for decision-making that helps avoid the "all things to all people" syndrome. In leading the development of the new WSU system strategic plan for 2020-25, President Schulz intentionally invited suggestions on how to revise the Drive to 25 to make it more relevant to current circumstances and those anticipated in the next five years. He has committed to including additional metrics on attributes such as social mobility and others that some faculty, staff, and students believe represent their work and want to see named in the Drive to 25.

In the post-Covid-19 environment, resources to fund the Drive to 25 will be even more scarce. As indicated above, the interviews for this assessment were conducted before the massive

impact of the pandemic was known. Some of the ideas about how to rethink the Drive to 25 that came out of those conversations—ones that may still be relevant in the post-virus world, include:

- Redefine it explicitly as a motivational, aspirational goal rather than a hard target.
- Select certain areas in which WSU will be a top 25 research university, rather than in a broader range of areas.
- Narrow some goals and drop others.
- Use it as a vehicle to emphasize even more vehemently faculty research efforts that can be linked to state and national challenges.
- Move the target date back from 2030 to 2035.

These interrelated suggestions and others I heard all go to reshaping the Drive to 25 initiative, not abandoning it. Ironically, the financial fallout from Covid-19 presents President Schulz and the Board of Regents with an incontrovertible reason to do that—in the context of the draft 2020-25 System Strategic Plan that now needs to take account of an American higher education landscape shifting in the face of the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the course of my work with Washington State University, I have been impressed with how widespread and intense the attitude is that President Schulz is the right person at the right time to lead the institution. A number of his direct reports referred to him as their best boss ever, or the most engaged leader they had ever worked with. One of them said, “As long as he stays, I’m staying!” Even among members of the WSU community who have particular criticisms, there is virtually nobody who does not want him to stay and succeed. It would be an understatement to say that this happy situation does not obtain at all universities!

Because of the buy-in and good will he has created, President Schulz and the Board of Regents have an opportunity to set a course and make progress for the institution/system that could well be seen in the future as a defining moment in the history of Washington State University. The challenges outlined above, all now exacerbated by a pandemic that has hit Washington particularly hard, will require concentrated cooperation among the Regents, the President, and constituencies around the state.

Undoubtedly, decisions that have to be made to address these challenges will please some constituencies and anger others. Some Board members will like some of those decisions more than others. Yet if the Board and the President can stay on the same page, I think a great story can be written there.