

November 22, 2008

Dear Exemplary Program Selection Committee,

Recently I was able to partake in a unique and very impressive professional development program that has a seven-year history at West LA College. The organization, inclusiveness, and obvious value of this program was so impressive, I suggested WLAC submit an application to the exemplary program award "***Growing our Own: Showcasing Innovative Development Programs for Faculty***" through ASCCC. I also offered to write a letter about my observations as an outsider and participant.

For the past seven years, WLAC has developed and conducted a leadership retreat the week before the Thanksgiving break. The timing on this activity is not by accident. As was made very clear by the organizers and the College President, this represents a time when the college focuses on the stakeholders in their college, designs team building activities, educationally challenging activities, and spends time acknowledging and thanking their college community for all they do. Over 100 people attended this professional development activity this year and registration had to close early because it maxed out due to the enthusiastic response. The Leadership retreat has become the thing to do and the place to be! This intrigued me as I often hear that for many colleges, professional development activities are sustained only by requirements to complete FLEX time. Three things stood out with regards to this professional development program: 1) the faculty, staff, administrators and students come together as partners with great respect for one another; 2) the time together at the beginning and during lunch focuses on team building and thankfulness for people's contributions and college success; and finally 3) the college respects the importance of challenging their status quo and striving for excellence by hosting speaker breakouts from exemplary programs around the state that address areas where WLAC can grow through observing models in other community colleges.

Most impressive to me was the camaraderie between the 100+ participants. The mutual respect and genuine care for one another was palpable. When I learned that 10 students attended, along with classified, administrators and faculty, I was amazed. You could not tell one group of participants from the other. There were no social clicks based upon employment and the genuine sharing and respect was obviously the product of years of building a common vision and appreciation for one another. The teambuilding exercise in the beginning was fun, interactive and challenging. However, looking back over previous retreat agendas, I see this is a purposeful practice. There is a

deep river of respect amongst all stakeholders in this institution, and this professional development program intentionally cultures these healthy relationships. Most amazingly, the students participated and were part of the activities and interaction, not as hood ornaments or token attendees, but as valued contributors. In addition, where many colleges are challenged with infusing college vision and educational values in their classified staff, at this retreat I observed not only integration of the classified staff but significant inclusion in and contribution to the college vision and mission. At WLAC because classified opinions and participation are verbally and genuinely encouraged and appreciated, the classified members are an integral part of WLAC's strategic planning and mission. I was impressed with the knowledgeable comments and questions classified staff asked during my Basic Skills Initiative breakout, as well as during the Student Learning Outcomes breakout.

I can not express the deep care revealed during the lunch announcements and show of gratitude which highlighted all the activities, needs and accomplishments of each component within WLAC. A reflection of this cooperative and collegial environment is revealed in the logistics of the retreat. The college has decided that the retreat should occur off campus in order to allow a fresh perspective. However, as we all know, this adds to the cost of such an activity. I was impressed as the lunch time appreciation extended to the many components of the college that actually fund the leadership retreat. Unions, senates and outside contributors are so impressed with the Leadership Retreat outcomes, that they contribute funding. What a unique and sustainable way to deal with professional development when funding has been curtailed from the state. The fact that these organizations contribute to this ongoing effort in a significant way, validates the important and priceless role that this professional development program represents to the college across all stakeholders.

Finally the college community has determined that this professional development will not disintegrate into the common place, repetitious and only slightly useful venue we see at some colleges. Each year a challenging theme is devised and leaders from around the state address cutting edge topics to propel the WLAC forward. Last year's theme is an example of the forward looking intent of this retreat - "Imagine: The future of West LA College can be as you Imagine..." This year's theme was "Moving into the Fast Lane" and that is exactly what the retreat felt like!

WLAC has developed an inclusive, sustainable and exciting professional development program that has served classified, students, administrators and faculty for the last seven years. They are exemplary in their vision and commendable in the obvious environment this training infuses into their

college culture. I highly recommend the committee examine the fruitful and engaging professional development at WLAC as a model for other California community colleges to emulate.

Sincerely,

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ASCCC North Area Representative