Each week the Office of Planning and Assessment reports activities and contributions toward Texas Tech University’s institutional effectiveness efforts. However, this week’s report will report specifically on the West Texas Assessment Conference (WTAC), a collaborative conference hosted by Texas Tech University’s Office of Planning and Assessment and San Angelo State University’s Office of Accountability. This year’s conference is located in San Angelo, Texas on October 21st. To find out more about the WTAC, go to: https://www.depts.ttu.edu/opa/wtac/.

“Established in 2012, the West Texas Assessment Conference (WTAC) is co-hosted by Texas Tech University and Angelo State University. The goal of the conference is to bring together higher education professionals across West Texas and the surrounding areas to share innovative practices and strategies related to planning, assessment, and accreditation. Over the past few years, WTAC has benefited from attendance and participation by diverse faculty, staff, and administrators from a variety of institutions—public/private, community colleges, health-related programs, and four-year universities.” (https://www.depts.ttu.edu/opa/wtac/about.php)

With a $65 registration fee, the conference is a great value for participants. Participants are mostly from the West Texas area with a significant number of attendees coming from hosting institutions. The Conference will begin with a Pre-Conference Networking Dinner on October 20th. The conference consists of six concurrent session opportunities, a free breakfast, and a lunch and keynote speaker. The keynote speaker for this year’s conference is the Assistant Commissioner for the Academic Quality and Workforce Division at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), Dr. Rex C. Peebles. Dr. Peebles will be speaking on "Strategic Planning, Strategic Thinking, and Assessment." The two hosting institutions ultimately share funding for the conference, but
through conference attendance and corporate sponsorships, the cost to OPA is significantly offset. There are four levels of sponsorships: Bronze ($500), Silver ($700), Gold ($1,500) and Platinum ($2,500). This year there were four sponsors: Nuventive and Blackboard sponsored the conference at the Gold level, Xitracs sponsored at the Silver level, and the Texas Tech University system sponsored at the Bronze level.

The Office of Planning and Assessment began this assessment conference nearly four years ago with a one-day conference hosted on the Texas Tech campus. For the next two years, it was located in Lubbock at the Overton Hotel and Conference Center and was a collaborative event with first the TTU Health Sciences Center, and then with San Angelo State University. This year’s conference will be a collaborative event with San Angelo State University. The conference requires an extensive amount of effort by OPA staff. However, it also makes significant contributions toward the department’s goals. This week alone, hours have been committed toward finalizing presentation schedules, finalizing the program and marketing materials, updating the website, ensuring payments, and arranging travel plans.

The WTAC is an excellent outreach opportunity for OPA, but its value can also be measured in how it contributes toward departmental strategic objectives. Below is a reflection on how the WTAC has departmental value beyond its outreach.

Texas Tech will be found in compliance with all external accrediting agencies and State of Texas mandates

- Most of the sessions directly and all sessions at least indirectly relate to compliance issues with the state or accrediting agencies. Through leadership or simple participation in these sessions, the entire OPA staff becomes more aware of compliance issues, best practices of assessment, and institutional strategies. The networking opportunities alone develop opportunities to discuss how individual institutions can better address local concerns. By situating Texas Tech University as a regional leader in assessment and compliance, the WTAC enables Texas Tech to utilize new resources and build stronger collaborations with state experts. In all, the professional development and leadership that the conference allows, the networking opportunities that emerge, and position that the conference puts OPA in allows for Texas Tech to emerge as an institutional effectiveness leader.

The Office of Planning and Assessment will contribute to the Office of the Provost’s institutional planning processes

- While this objective is typically reserved for direct contributions toward informing key institutional stakeholders on institutional data related to strategic planning and leadership with institutional reporting for strategic planning, the value of the WTAC toward this objective is no less significant. For many of the reasons above, this conference positions Texas Tech in a unique situation as leaders in understanding the needs of the institution in the process of strategic planning.
The Office of Planning and Assessment will continually monitor the university’s compliance with laws, policy statements, and policies deriving from the State of Texas, THECB, and SACSCOC

- This year’s keynote is directly related to this objective. The THECB and state of Texas govern much of the operational activity of OPA. Through the professional development and networking opportunities associated with the conference, OPA will become much more fluent with these expectations. The leadership of the conference, however, allows for an even greater degree of opportunity. By demonstrating to the THECB that Texas Tech University is committed to not only remaining in compliance with these expectations, but desires to be a leader in the education of the expectations, Texas Tech University can build a unique collaboration with the state. Through this collaboration, TTU has the opportunity to present unique challenges and opportunities that exist in west Texas and on the South Plains.

Texas Tech University faculty and staff will be well-prepared to meet OPA’s faculty credentialing, assessment, and strategic plan expectations

- Finally, many of the attendees and presenters are from Texas Tech University. The number of Texas Tech representation is obviously higher when the conference is hosted in Lubbock, but even when it is not, the representation is high. This year, there are 8 TTU presenters and 17% of all attendees are from Texas Tech. This participation contributes toward the continued development of an assessment culture that is essential for the on-going efforts of “well-prepared” faculty and staff.

Over the next couple of weeks, the Weekly Report will report data from the conference such as attendance numbers, information about presentations, and survey results from the conference. However, the process of organization and implementation has already yielded significant value.