

FROM UNIVERSITY CAMPUS TO
TRANSFORMATIVE CIVIC ENGINE



UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON – TACOMA

Launched in 1990 as an urban campus less than forty miles south of its better-known sister institution in Seattle, the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT) was envisioned as a campus for students who could not or did not want to commute 37 miles to school and for those seeking a smaller public university. Offering a wide range of degrees and coursework, UWT could confer the cachet of a UW diploma to the broader Tacoma and South Sound community.

More than 20 years after its founding, the campus is home to nearly 4,000 undergraduate and graduate students. UWT offers degree programs in subjects ranging from business to nursing to social work to urban studies. An integral piece of the UWT concept was the re-purposing of architecturally-significant 19th-century manufacturing buildings in the heart of a then-depressed downtown Tacoma. The handsome re-developed, LEED-certified classroom and administrative buildings – along with pedestrian-friendly open spaces, cafes, restaurants, and bookstores – have created a bustling academic and commercial corridor and the University has been credited with revitalizing the downtown area to include museums, restaurants, and office buildings. Yet, to a large degree UWT and the surrounding South Sound area still suffer from a “second city complex,” unable to completely emerge from the economic, political, and cultural shadow of Seattle.

PROJECT DATE: 2011

SECTOR: *Higher Education*

FTA SKILLS AND SERVICES:
*Research, analysis, synthesis;
community engagement and
visioning; process design;
group facilitation*

University of Washington Tacoma (UWT) is one of three UW campuses. UWT began in 1990 with 400 students in the Perkins Building in downtown Tacoma. Today's campus reflects the University's commitment to its urban-serving mission — with nearly 4,000 students working and learning in approximately 20 re-purposed, LEED-certified structures that are the pride of Tacoma.

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In 2011, an energetic new chancellor took the helm of UWT with a bold vision to recast the institution into an “urban-serving university,” where the school would work in close partnership with the broader community for the betterment of Tacoma and the surrounding region. Seeking to learn how the University might best serve its community, the chancellor began circulating the idea of a local “Summit” with up to 100 local leaders. The prospect of initiating this conversation with such a large array of community representatives, however, seemed logistically and programmatically daunting – especially since the chancellor herself wanted to be an active participant in the discussion. UWT, therefore, turned to Fern Tiger Associates (FTA) and their expertise in broad and authentic community engagement to envision and execute a framework for what became known as the UWT Summit.

FTA knew that planning for such a day-long retreat was far more complex than just sketching out a six-hour meeting agenda. It would require in-depth knowledge not only of community demographics, economic conditions, and local institutions, but also the perceptions and priorities of its engaged leaders. The Summit was viewed as an opportunity to begin developing a “Vision for 2020” – seen as a not-too-distant timeframe for action-oriented goals. In order to convene and facilitate a successful session, FTA spent three months gathering and analyzing background data.

The decision to site a new University of Washington campus in downtown Tacoma and not in a suburban area outside of the city is praised as one of the key factors spurring downtown revitalization. The decision to renovate Tacoma’s old industrial structures – to create a campus of academic and administrative buildings rather than construct new ones – has been hailed as an example of good planning and far-thinking wisdom. The campus, with its striking, re-purposed landmark buildings has given life to the city as well as to an active and energized student body, many of whom are engaged in urban problemsolving.

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Core to the process was a series of interviews with about 35 key stakeholders representing UWT faculty and staff, local business leaders, health and education professionals, philanthropists and funders, experts in economic development and urban planning, and elected officials. In conjunction with primary data collection, FTA gathered extensive secondary data about UWT and the South Sound region such as student and resident demographics; information on key educational institutions; community educational attainment, occupations, employers, unemployment, and poverty rates; and detailed maps of the region. Finally, FTA researched “urban-serving” universities around the country, gathering highlights of best practices and drew upon its own extensive experience working with other universities, such as Arizona State.

At the conclusion of the research phase, FTA developed a 130-page briefing book to share with Summit participants – summarizing findings and research – which would not only guide discussion at the Summit itself, but serve as a reference document for ongoing reflection and conversation. Concurrently, FTA designed an engaging, participatory Summit that included a presentation of the findings and a carefully-choreographed set of rotating group sessions focused on both UWT and the region.

Held in January 2012, the Summit included more than 80 community leaders who took part in spirited, productive conversations about the role UWT could play to propel the region. Participants articulated a 2020 vision for University of Washington Tacoma as “an innovative, transformative, economic engine for the South Sound.”

Following the Summit, FTA wrote and issued a report for UWT to document the proceedings and agreements. The immediate outcome of the Summit in the days following the session was an energized group of community and university leaders, a renewed vision, and a shared sense of University priorities that could positively impact the community. The longer-term result has been that these priorities are serving as a blueprint to guide the University in setting goals and measuring progress as it moves forward in engaging with and serving the community.

The 2012 UWT Summit resulted in a strong vision and a focus on ten themes to be developed over the next decade: Academic Programs; Campus as Asset; Environmental Sustainability; Regional Diversity; K-12 Educational Outcomes; Community Collaborations; Business Partnerships; UWT Leadership; Student/Alumni/Faculty Resources; and Program Funding.