“There is a misnomer that Seattle grew UW. I believe that UW grew Seattle. That’s what colleges do. They grow communities”

– UW Stakeholder
University of Washington Tacoma
“What We Heard”

“When I talk about what’s great about Tacoma, the University is the first thing I mention”

- Tacoma residents express tremendous pride in their town and local university; yet frequently voice a feeling of inferiority to UW Seattle and a “step-child” relationship with the historical flagship university in Seattle, that goes beyond size and population
- UWT has a “solid brand;” though some feel it’s in the shadow of UW Seattle, others feel it has opportunities to be a great institution by defining a unique niche
- In many ways, UWT is a very contemporary example of the multiple roles universities play within communities, well beyond the academic role: a creator or partner in the development of a vibrant community, a stakeholder in the future development of the region, a broad thinker and voice to support a social and economic agenda, an “anchor institution,” a potentially transformative entity, a landowner, a researcher, and a public institution with the capacity to make interdisciplinary connections
- There are extremely high expectations for UWT, including significant student growth, the expansion to a sizable residential population, increased presence in research arenas, relations with businesses such that degrees come from the University and experience and skills come from internships working side by side with experienced technicians, working closely with Tacoma Public Schools, and being “the salvation for Tacoma”

“An urban-serving university means that the university has soft edges between town and gown, which is a good way to describe University of Washington Tacoma”

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1 In the course of this project, Fern Tiger Associates (FTA) conducted interviews with a cross-section of key UWT and community stakeholder. This section entitled “What We Heard” represents the collective observations and perceptions from those meetings. The section includes direct quotes, as well as “findings,” which frequently represent common themes or perceptions which we heard on multiple occasions.
“First it was just the start up years, then there was the period of capital improvements, acquiring buildings, and construction and renovation. Now it’s time to say. OK, we’ve got the infrastructure, we have the programs, we have the faculty. What are we doing now to mold this institution. How does that fit with the specific economic development needs of the city. Some people don’t think that educational institutions focus on employment. But I think they should.”

According to a 2010 report published by the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (of which UWT is a member), urban research universities educate about 47 million students annually. In 2006-7 academic year, they granted more than 55% of all bachelor’s degrees, 65% of all master’s degrees, and 70% of all PhDs in the US. Urban universities educate more than 80% of all doctors and dentists and grant about 50% of all education degrees.

To some, Tacoma can rightly consider itself a “college town” reflecting the variety of higher education options located in the area.

"UWT has good bones. The academic and physical infrastructure is there. Now we’ve just got to capitalize on it. That’s what’s going to make this university a great one.”

"Many businesses look to the Institute of Technology for professional and technical knowledge and skills.”

The UWT undergraduate and graduate curriculum has the elements of social responsibility and community engagement threaded through selected programs which could guide the development of an expanded curriculum that addresses social change and civil society issues.

The University is appropriately focused on undergraduate and graduate education, but appears to lack “public programming” which invites the community into the life of the university.

UWT faculty are highly respected; some feel that faculty come to UWT specifically because of its commitment to community issues.

The Urban Studies program is a fairly new department, which has the potential to play a strong role in community engagement activities.

The Institute of Technology and Milgard Business School are cited as two of the university’s strongest programs.
– Despite a great deal of support for the University and pride in its location in Tacoma, there is confusion about programs offered, whether or not UWT would be a place to study if one wanted to focus on liberal arts, who the appropriate students are for the campus, etc. Further there is concern that UWT is not yet known for something specific, such as a signature program that doesn’t exist elsewhere.

– There is a general sense that UWT has a good working relationship with other higher education institutions in the area and that the different colleges are cooperative, not competitive with one another. But there is also a sense that UWT has not done a good job promoting itself or defining its niche and its brand.

– Some opportunities noted include expanding the graduate offerings (but it was recognized that this takes funding); promoting special (possibly non-degree undergrad and graduate) programs and courses for employees of local businesses; building on the need for technical training (as local companies are hiring educated, skilled employees from out of state).

– Some Advisory Board members raise the question about the general public beginning to question the value of a college education and whether UWT should be ahead of the curve in this conversation – both helping families understand the value of higher education (and how UWT is a relatively inexpensive college when compared with other options) and also creating programs that focus on particular courses and/or programs geared for people already in the workforce, where companies would pay for employees to attain certain levels of proficiency in business and other fields.

“I think it would be wonderful if people were coming out of the university impassioned about the community.”

“UWT has educated people who never would have had a shot at life. They’re smart, they just never got the training to get the jobs, but now they live a better life and contribute to the community.”

– Many say that UWT graduates “stick around” the region and contribute to the local community; while others point to a significant “brain drain” of talented professionals to Seattle and other more “exciting” cities for young professionals.

– With the inclusion of the freshman and sophomore years, the student body of UWT is getting younger.

“It was a wonderful and brilliant decision to move to Pacific Avenue and utilize and renovate those old buildings. It’s done so much more for the community than anyone envisioned.”
“I think many people in the community have never really been on the campus. They think it’s a railroad track in the middle of things. But once you get inside the halls of the University you realize it’s more than just a Starbucks and a university book store with a classroom above. It’s really very impressive.”

– UWT has played an unprecedented role in the revitalization of downtown Tacoma, but has historically not taken a leadership role in the city or the region
– UWT has an easily-accessible, attractive campus, with plans to grow. The student body has already expanded and will continue to do so. The university has, and will continue to act as an economic engine
– There is a possibility for expanded street level retail in the immediate vicinity of the UWT campus, which has unexplored potential; and yet, some feel there have been underlying tensions with local, small businesses
– To many, “downtown” is only “downtown” because the University is in the center of it

“The University of Washington is the economic engine right now, between that and the Port of Tacoma, and healthcare. Those are what I call the three legs of the economic stool”

– Despite a generally good relationship between UWT and the city of Tacoma, some believe relations have been strained over the years
– There are opportunities for partnerships that have not been explored - e.g., with other local, private universities; cultural institutions; civic groups; etc. and for expanded and/or intensified partnerships
– Questions abound about what the university should/can do to enhance academic and job skill preparations for the workforce (role of departments - e.g., Institute of Technology; Urban Studies; Education; Nursing; etc.) and similarly what the university’s role should/could be in improving K-12 education, especially with the arrival of a new superintendent
– The University could do a better job articulating the benefits that it offers to the city and community at large
– There are unexplored opportunities for current UWT students to get involved in community-based activities, internships, mentoring, tutoring, etc.
– The University is described as the single most important element – or catalyst – for economic growth in the region
“I’d like to see UWT revitalize its mission, determine what’s really important for this region – the South Sound region. The University produces human capital that can grow the region. So how are we going to do it and what needs to be the emphasis?”

“I think that UWT could be like the California system, on the same status and stature as that. But it will take time and will involve a paradigm shift in people’s minds. They need to stop thinking of us as a branch or a satellite campus”

“The new leadership has a strong understanding of who we are, where we’ve come from, what we can be. We need that energy, that enthusiasm, those ideas”

“I think that UWT has made more progress than the community knows”

“The greatest strength of the University of Washington Tacoma is that everyone wants it to succeed”

“The greatest challenge facing the University is the weight of expectation of what the University can do. Sometimes I think those expectations – which are so high – are unrealistic. They’re off the charts”

- There is great hope that the new leadership at the University will set a vision that is at once “entrepreneurial” and also “socially relevant”
- Community and civic leaders are pleased to share expertise with the University, but on occasion feel frustration and lack of direction; an annual university “convening” could be a positive addition
- There is a strong sense that UWT has a great deal of potential, and needs to find its niche; UWT cannot be all things to all people
- Members of the Advisory Boards are unclear of their roles and responsibilities, but are very supportive of the University and want to help in active and diverse ways. Many feel their role should be as “ambassadors” but realize they need adequate information and ongoing data to be able to accomplish that task

“It’s time to raise the profile of University of Washington Tacoma”
Tacoma and the South Sound Region
“What We Heard”¹

“I don’t think there’s any place in the world like it. We have 48 miles of waterfront in Tacoma. I just think we’re an undiscovered gem. And I think our future is very, very bright ”

“I really love Tacoma and I want to see Tacoma and Pierce County thrive and continue to succeed ”

“Tacoma is a city of parks. A lot of the neighborhoods are built around parks and each is unique. The parks bond measure passed with 60% of the vote ”

“We’re a fantastic city with a fantastic waterfront; housing is affordable; we’re an international city; we have a working waterfront. But we have a self-esteem issue, an inferiority complex, that I think is self-induced ”

– Tacoma is a city with tremendous potential, but there is a sense that its own residents and leaders do not appreciate its strongest assets
– Tacoma has public buildings with beautiful, world-class architecture, and has had the foresight to emphasize architectural preservation
– Downtown Tacoma has a unique cluster of museums and cultural attractions, which have been created through the vision of a small group of leaders, and which has the potential to gain national attention and prominence; in spite of this cluster, residents and leaders downplay the role as an “arts destination ”
– Though Tacoma and environs have many parks, public transit, and cultural institutions, many feel the region needs more “public attractors,” including developed waterways, additional parks, public activities to “animate the street,” and expanded public transportation to encourage movement about the city in order to make it a “destination” location

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The defining lines of Tacoma, South Sound, Pierce County are difficult for people to explain but appear to be important distinctions for business, land use planning, K-12 education, taxation, development, etc. Beyond this, some describe Tacoma as part of the Greater Metropolitan Seattle Area with Bellevue at the north and Tacoma at the south (“I think we are being short-sighted if we don’t view ourselves as part of the Seattle-Bellevue-Tacoma region. If we are out of that mix, we put ourselves at a disadvantage”)

Tacoma is generally described as a blue collar, working class city

In the 1880s Tacoma called itself the City of Destiny and some think this brand is worth building on

In spite of the fact that people feel Tacoma and the downtown have improved markedly, there is a sense that no one lives downtown and that there aren’t any buildings where middle income professionals and families could live comfortably. Comparisons are made to other cities such as Chicago or Seattle, where it is desirable to live downtown

“There’s a spirit in cities like ours. Cities that are sometimes referred to as “second” cities; cities that are sometimes seen as being in the shadow of better known cities. I think the spirit comes from knowing that you can try things and you can get things done”

“We’re a bedroom community to Seattle, with so many people commuting in that direction. I think that hurts the University because people have a tendency to forget it’s here, unless you have reason to be downtown”

“Every time I get out of my car and I look around, I think this is a good place to live”

While people praise Tacoma’s assets – parks, housing, access to waterways and mountains and a great place to raise a family – they readily admit to the city’s lack of self esteem which they believe creates an image problem for the city and the South Sound area (“We’ve always been – the aroma of Tacoma; we’ve always been the ugly stepchild to Seattle”)

– When asked about lessons that Tacoma can learn from other cities or cities that are or should be “aspirational models” for Tacoma, the most frequent answer is Portland. Other cities mentioned include Vancouver, BC, Austin, TX, and Long Beach, CA.

“Tacoma is a practical place. A place where business people are practical. It’s a place where we do practical things and we use technology to accomplish those practical things.”

– Residents and business leaders refer to a five-pronged economic development strategy that builds on the industries that are already in the South Sound: international trade, healthcare, clean water technology, cybersecurity and information assurance, and aerospace. There is a general sense that these industries are tied together by the kind of education needed for jobs in these sectors – all requiring some degree of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) training.

– South Sound businesses require educated and highly-skilled employees, but have to recruit outside of Washington or train their own because Pierce County does not produce enough skilled graduates, and many of those leave for Seattle or other parts.

– There are a number of thriving family owned businesses located within the area; businesses that have made conscious decisions to remain in Tacoma.

– Greater Tacoma has developed a nexus of medical facilities. Some feel it is a solid system; some say there is a potential to be a regional healthcare destination.

“I think this community has suffered economically; it’s a challenge, partly because the leadership has really been fractured.”

“We have a freedom and opportunity to be different than what is expected in Seattle, or even Portland.”

“There are a lot of women in positions of leadership in Tacoma and Pierce County at this moment. I think our style and our ability to work together will be critical for the important work that needs to be done.”

“Tacoma is an unusually welcoming community and so it is easy to get involved and to play a leadership role.”
“Our vision is to be an attractive, international city that is well regarded for its natural setting and its diverse population.”

- Some say there is an “old guard” of leadership in the South Sound. New leaders are beginning to emerge but it is a slow process.
- There are a lot of Tacoma “boosters” who do not live in Tacoma, which some feel hurts the image of the city.

“We cannot look to the school district to fix the problems by themselves. This has to be an ‘all-hands-on-deck’ approach to solutions.”

- Local, K-12, private schools are strong, but attract mostly affluent families. Public K-12 schools are perceived as weak and in transition with an upcoming change-over of superintendents. The availability of private schools and the solid reputation of many of these schools challenges the public schools because the student demographics of the public schools do not match the city demographics.

“As a community, we all rallied round to create the University and to make that a centerpiece for the downtown core.

“Through art, there’s a possibility of building community, throwing the doors open, being a representation of all that is best in Tacoma.”

- Tacoma and Pierce County appear to embrace diverse populations and encourage innovative ideas, but there is often a sense of inertia and it can be hard to get things done.
- There are many “old” Tacoma families and family-owned businesses that form the foundation of the region and have contributed greatly to philanthropic, social, and cultural efforts. Many see the involvement of the long time Tacoma leaders as critical to helping create a transition to new leadership and new ideas.
- In spite of an embrace of “diversity,” some groups appear to be excluded or choose not to participate in the life of the broader community, including Puyallup tribe members, military personnel, and even “newcomers” to the region – though these groups may have much to offer.
- Though not part of most people’s immediate description of Tacoma, the city has an unusual proliferation of art institutions within walking distance of one another. These
museums are in communication with one another and appear to have many ideas about how to connect and promote the city through these art venues

- Tacoma is a city of neighborhoods, each with definable attributes. At times the distinctions between these diverse neighborhoods stratifies the city into parts rather than the creation of a whole

“We are the ‘Downtown of the South Sound’ We’re the crossroad of the South Sound for shopping, the transportation hub of the South Sound; the entertainment capital for the South Sound; and the cultural arts center for the South Sound.”

- The Tacoma/South Sound region has a “special place” between Mt Rainier and the waters of Commencement Bay (the tribal name, Mt Tahoma - Mother of Waters - captures the history and power of place). The region has stunning natural beauty, open waterways, and a comfortable lifestyle, top reasons cited by many who live there, but which appear to be under-appreciated and under-promoted to potential new residents

- The South Sound region has an industrial history and infrastructure, coupled with start-up technology companies, and a mindset of “can-do” practicality

- The region has a “gritty,” blue-collar history that belies its tolerant, egalitarian ethos

- Tacoma and Pierce County have lower population densities, compared to other urban regions, allowing for easy access and rapport among community leaders and residents

- The South Sound encompasses many charming, affordable neighborhoods and towns within easy driving distance of Seattle, Olympia, and other points

- The region is challenged by different priorities, often exaggerated by an urban/rural distinction