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Ralph A. Wolff

March 11, 2010

Ruben Armiñana  
President  
Sonoma State University  
1801 East Cotati Avenue  
Rohnert Park, CA 94928

Dear President Armiñana:

At its meeting on February 17-19, 2010, the Commission considered the report of the Educational Effectiveness Review (EER) team that conducted the visit to Sonoma State University (SSU) on October 7-9, 2009. The Commission also had access to the Educational Effectiveness Review report prepared by Sonoma State University prior to the visit, and the documents relating to the Capacity and Preparatory Review (CPR) visit conducted in spring 2008. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the review with you and Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Eduardo Ochoa. Your comments were helpful.

Sonoma State's Institutional Proposal stated that the primary institutional goal for the re-accreditation process was to become an intentional, reflective and evidence-based learning organization. The EER report is framed around the major topic of "Educating the Whole Student" and includes three themes: SSU's planning efforts, the distinctive qualities of an SSU education, and curriculum and the roles of general education and the major. The review team considered the report to be well written and to accurately portray the issues at the university. The visit and document review confirmed the considerable progress the university has made with respect to important initiatives and also the progress the university must continue to make with respect to initiatives that are under way, but still some distance from full realization.

The university is to be commended for the support for the liberal arts mission that is evident throughout the institution; the development of pragmatic planning documents; the implementation of a revised program review policy; and the rejuvenation of the General Education program. As noted by the team, "...as the University seeks examples of best practice in General Education, it need look no further than its exemplary First Year Experience Program." Also, "The Team commends in particular the Retention Task Force for exemplary planning and implementation grounded in resourceful information gathering and appropriate evidence." The Commission endorses these and the other commendations of the EER team.

Drawing from the EER team report and your meeting with us, the Commission wishes to emphasize the following areas for further attention and development at Sonoma State University:

**Institutional mission.** The review confirmed that SSU has made considerable progress in clarifying the relationship between its mission as a comprehensive university and its distinctive mission as a public liberal arts university. Its students enjoy a breadth of

educational options while experiencing the sense of community and engagement more characteristic of a smaller liberal arts college. It is now important that this identity and mission be articulated further for internal and external constituencies, including students and faculty and within the broader community. This continued clarification of mission is necessary as a foundation for institutional planning and budgeting. (CFRs 1.1, 1.2, 4.1, 4.2)

**Student retention and graduation.** The team reported that SSU has mounted a new effort to better understand and influence retention and graduation rates. Recommended actions from the Retention and Graduation Task Force to improve graduation rates are very promising. The Commission commends SSU for its independent identification of retention and graduation as important issues and expects that the university will continue to invest in this effort, leading to the improvement in graduation rates that it has targeted. (CFRs 2.10, 2.13, 4.3, 4.6)

**Institutional planning.** Issues related to institutional planning have been a source of tension on the SSU campus over the last few years. The 2008 CPR team recommended addressing these issues systematically in order to strengthen the sense of community and enable the accomplishment of other critical aspirations. The EER review confirmed work in that direction, including the August 2008 letter from the president to the chair of the Academic Senate, and a number of town hall meetings and retreats. The EER review team found a reduction - but by no means elimination - of tension between the faculty and administration. The university needs to continue to address these concerns, building on the transparency and spirit of collegiality and respect that it has initiated in the planning process. Issues to be reviewed include the alignment of the mission with the budget, the priority given to the Green Music Center, and the effects on diversity of fund reduction strategies that target part-time faculty in particular. The different strategic plans – institutional, academic, diversity, technological – will need to be integrated into a single comprehensive plan or at least articulated as complementary elements in a single coordinated approach to decision making. (CFRs 1.3, 1.5, 1.8, 3.8, 3.11, 4.1, 4.2)

**Assessment.** The EER review found that a broad awareness of assessment has developed at SSU and that there is an explicit commitment to implementation of assessment results. This was demonstrated in the development of student learning outcomes, the use of assessment results, and the incorporation of student learning assessment within the program review process. The team noted, however,

...that the depth and breadth of assessment from one department to another are uneven and suggests that SSU continue its efforts to improve its assessment activities. In its review of course level and program level SLOs, the Team found in some instances broad statements that might best be described as aspirational. For example, rather than revealing what students will know or be able to do upon completion of a course or program in observable and measurable terms, a broadly stated SLO might indicate that a student will “understand” a concept, theory or idea.

The team also found that learning outcomes were not available on the university’s website, nor were there common expectations that learning outcomes be included in course syllabi. The university will need to achieve greater consistency throughout the institution in defining and assessing learning and utilize direct assessment of student learning more effectively. Efforts for professional development of the faculty in this area should also be continued. There are many resources for the university to draw upon to strengthen these assessment efforts, including resources within its own faculty. (CFRs 1.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.6, 2.10, 2.11, 3.4, 3.11, 4.3, 4.4, 4.8)

**Program review.** The EER team found a robust program review process grounded in clear understanding of program-level learning outcomes and a committed oversight responsibility in the Educational Policies Committee. As part of the university's broader commitment to student learning, assessment should be strengthened in the program review process and issues of diversity addressed more assiduously. In addition, the university should continue its broad movement toward completing the "accountability loop" through the development, within the Office of the Provost, of memoranda of understanding that specify action items and necessary support. (CFRs 2.2, 2.7, 2.11, 3.11, 4.4, 4.6, 4.7)

**General education.** The team reports that the university as a whole understands and supports the values of general education as a critical component in assuring the liberal education of all SSU students. The momentum created in the early stages of program rejuvenation should be continued along with the development of a robust assessment plan for general education. Moreover, the paradox of exemplary general education programs that serve only a small percentage of SSU students should be reviewed. (CFRs 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 4.1, 4.2, 4.7)

**Diversity.** The issue of diversity has been an acknowledged concern for the SSU community both with regard to representation of underrepresented groups within the university student body and faculty, and campus climate. Campus incidents of harassment or discriminatory behaviors and attitudes have been met with prompt and compelling responses; however, the Office of Institutional Research continues to find that some faculty, staff, and students have experienced these behaviors and attitudes on campus. A ten-year analysis of trends found the campus climate toward diversity "generally supportive, positive and stable over time." Although the Commission understands that there are sincerely held differences in point of view on the university's approaches to diversity, it urges the university to continue the collaborative structure it has put in place, and also target those strategic initiatives that are likely to have the most impact with the financial resources available. The Commission urges the university to strengthen its commitment to diversity within the student body by re-examining its recruitment strategies and admissions standards for students recruited from beyond its service area, and for increasing the diversity of faculty and staff by providing additional support in the search process. (CFRs 1.5, 2.10, 2.13, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 4.1)

Given the above, the Commission acted to:

1. Receive the Educational Effectiveness Review report and reaffirm the accreditation of Sonoma State University.
2. Schedule the Capacity and Preparatory Review for fall 2017 and the Educational Effectiveness Review for spring 2019. The Institutional Proposal for this comprehensive review will be due in fall 2015
3. Request an Interim Report by November 1, 2012 addressing three topics:
  - a. undergraduate retention and graduation, including copies of the annual data submitted to the CSU and analysis of those data in the context of SSU's efforts to improve rates and decrease gaps;

- b. progress toward completing the “accountability loop” in the university’s assessment of student learning and in the program review process; and
- c. progress in rejuvenating and assessing general education.

In taking this action to reaffirm accreditation, the Commission confirms that Sonoma State University has satisfactorily addressed the Core Commitments to Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness, and has successfully completed the three-stage review conducted under the WASC Standards of Accreditation. Between this action and the time of the next review, the institution is expected to continue its progress, particularly with respect to educational effectiveness, student learning, and attending to the several recommendations of the Commission.

In accordance with Commission policy, copies of this letter will be sent to Chancellor Charles Reed and the chair of the CSU Board of Trustees in one week. The Commission expects that the team report and this action letter will be widely disseminated throughout the institution to promote further engagement and improvement, and to support the institution's response to the specific issues identified in them.

Finally, the Commission wishes to express its appreciation for the extensive work that the university undertook in preparing for and supporting this accreditation review. WASC is committed to an accreditation process that adds value to institutions while assuring public accountability, and we are grateful for your continued support of our process. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about this letter or the action of the Commission.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Ralph A. Wolff in black ink.

Ralph A. Wolff  
President and Executive Director

RW/dh

Cc: Sherwood Lingenfelter, Commission Chair  
Elaine Sundberg, ALO  
Herbert L. Carter, CSU Board Chair  
Charles Reed Chancellor of the California State University System  
Members of the EER team  
Diane Harvey, Associate Director, WASC