

REPORT OF THE WASC VISITING TEAM  
CAPACITY AND PREPARATORY REVIEW

SONOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

MARCH 12-14, 2008

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
Reaffirmation of Accreditation

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The evaluation team in conducting its review was able to evaluate the institution according to Commission Standards and Core Commitments and therefore submits this Report to the Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges for action and to the institution for consideration.

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## **I. OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT**

### **IA. Description of the University and Visit**

Sonoma State University, one of the 23 campuses of the California State University System, was established in 1960 by the California State Legislature as Sonoma State College. Originally located in Rohnert Park, the University moved to its current location at the foot of the Sonoma hills in Sonoma County in 1966. Granted its current name of Sonoma State University in 1978, the campus has grown in size and scope to include over 8300 students, to whom it offers 43 bachelor's degrees, 14 master's degrees, 10 teaching, specialist and service credentials, and one joint Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership. The University offers career and professional programs as well as programs in the traditional liberal arts and sciences. Sonoma State University is the only California member of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC).

Sonoma State University is rightly proud of its mission to prepare students to become leaders and active citizens with a foundation for lifelong learning that includes a broad cultural perspective and an appreciation for intellectual and aesthetic achievements. It is clear that the refinement of the University's mission, consistent with its membership in the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges, has created the potential for an even more distinct focus.

However, the full realization of that potential has without doubt been impacted by constraints implicit in the state financial situation within the past decade. As a member of the California State University System, the University depends on the state for 71% of its funding, determined by a system-wide allocation system based on enrollments and incremental growth.

Over the past decade, teams have made two visits to the University. In February 1999, a team made a comprehensive visit to the university which focused on the themes of undergraduate education and student learning. The Commission responded to issues of planning and evaluation

themes from a previous Fifth Year Visit when it “reiterated the need for the University to demonstrate its methods of assessment within the context of institutional and academic planning and priorities.”<sup>1</sup>

During the next five years, in anticipation of a March 24-26, 2004, Special Visit, the University was asked to improve its efforts at evaluating educational effectiveness. This Special Visit focused particularly on issues of alignment of institutional priorities with mission, the assessment of educational effectiveness, improvement of the climate for diversity, and institutional commitments to sustainability.<sup>2</sup> That evaluation team was impressed with the faculty’s commitment to develop a new general education program with clear student learning objectives. Assessment of these objectives would in turn contribute to SSU’s attempt to identify “The Marks of the SSU Student Experience.” The Commission also encouraged the institution to develop a conceptual framework for planning and decision-making with the goal of supporting underrepresented students.

The current visit by a five-member Team chosen by WASC has continued to focus on these central areas of concern and to examine progress in establishing structures and protocol to support and sustain institutional efforts.

#### **IB. Quality of the Capacity and Preparatory Report and Alignment with the Proposal**

There is general consensus by the Visiting Team that the CPR Report is well aligned with the Institutional Proposal and that the Report deals with themes, issues, and plans that reflect the concerns of the Commission that are stated above. Nonetheless, members felt that the Report should have addressed more directly and in greater detail (a) the challenges of creating a more robust infrastructure to support coordinated and systematic planning efforts, (b) the value of more thoroughly examining student learning, (c) the priority of addressing state budget

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<sup>1</sup> June 28, 2004 Commission Letter

<sup>2</sup> June 28, 2004 Commission Letter

constraints thoughtfully and intentionally in light of increased demands and growth, and (d) the continued value in creating further opportunities for faculty members to participate in the shared governance system.

The University's attempt to define the "marks" or "signature" of a quality liberal arts and sciences education for its students is a noble one in which the Team is especially interested. While the thematic title of the CPR Report (as well as one of the stated themes in the institutional proposal) is "Educating the Whole Student," this theme is not fully developed or elucidated throughout the CPR Report.

The extent of the University's progress towards achieving its stated mission as a public liberal arts institution through its general education programs and its departmental offerings was a focus of our visit. We had expected that the CPR report would more effectively examine the alignment of institutional resources with activities designed to achieve the University's chosen educational objectives. Because Sonoma State's success in meeting its own expectations (and demonstrating that success, by identifying those "marks") for students is critical both to institutional effectiveness and to compliance with the expectations of the accreditation process, a successful documentation of its commitment within the Educational Effectiveness Review should provide far more compelling indicators in this regard.

### **IC. Response to Previous Commission Issues**

The Commission noted in its June 2004 letter to President Arminana that SSU was only beginning to address outstanding and longstanding issues of planning and assessment central to the fulfillment of Accreditation Standards 2 and 4. Concerns of the Commission were direct: "It is not evident at this point that the University is able to demonstrate that it meets these Standards, nor is it sufficiently committed and organized to do so." The Commission urged SSU to

demonstrate that it has articulated institutional learning goals which have been established in a collective effort by the faculty.

According to both the Institutional Proposal and the CPR Report, Sonoma State remains committed to “Educating the Whole Student” as it seeks to become an institution *intentional* in its purposes, *reflective* its manner, and *evidence-based* in its approach to decision-making. The Team recognizes these aspirations as appropriate for an institution that seeks to distinguish itself within the company of its peer institutions. The CPR has detailed concerted efforts toward these goals, and the team was able during its visit to confirm tangible progress in addressing them. However, while the University’s current efforts are commendable, they appear uneven in terms of their inherent insistence on accountability and quality assurance.

As one example, while SSU has undertaken a variety of recruitment and outreach strategies that express a well-crafted Diversity Statement, these efforts appear not to have had a substantial impact on yield, retention, and the quality of campus life for underrepresented students. That is, such efforts appear not to be “held to account” as a means of ensuring even greater effectiveness in the future. Similarly, while significant work is under way with respect to general education goals in the form of a pilot Freshman Year Experience, the revised general education program envisioned at the point of earlier WASC reviews has not emerged. Indeed, broad general education reform no longer appears to represent a priority of the University. A more determined insistence on accountability would have yielded at least a clear statement with regard to the status of this oft-cited aspiration.

Perhaps the most compelling opportunity for demonstrating the University’s pursuit of Educational Effectiveness may lie in the progress it is making on assessment. Now in the fourth year of requiring departments to submit annual assessment reports and in the third year of its new program review cycle, the University has observed departments directing these efforts to the

strengthening of assessment. Yet the ambitious timeline for program review has not led to the documented “success stories” of continuous improvement that effective assessment should in time create. It will remain vital to the educational effectiveness of the institution that such efforts not only reflect explicit institutional learning goals that support credible assessment, but also produce visible continuous improvement in the form of the systematic strengthening of programs.

So far as planning is concerned, a comprehensive University Strategic Plan documents institutional vision and values and identifies multiple strategic areas of engagement, but the CPR Report, written and submitted before the University Strategic Plan was sent out to the campus community in draft form, could not have indicated the extent to which the plan would be embraced by campus stakeholders, how its objectives might be accomplished, and whether the implementation of the plan would be monitored according to real benchmarks. From this acknowledgment, however, arises the concern with the *pace* of the University’s planning effort. Precisely because the draft strategic plan was not completed long before the CPR was due, there appears to remain on the campus a vocal disquietude regarding the breadth of the base on which the plan rests. And the long range strategic implications of the current effort—what priorities will govern once the current accreditation cycle comes to a close—remain obscure.

The Commission has made it clear that Sonoma State will need to provide in its Educational Effectiveness Review clear evidence of student learning outcomes and the ways in which the University supports their accomplishment. To address issues of their capacity to do so, the Team has sought to confirm the assurances given in the CPR Report that planning efforts and valuable feedback mechanisms are embedded in the culture of the institution, that faculty are active participants in the development and examination of student learning, that efforts to improve and maintain a positive campus climate for its diverse community have been

institutionalized, and that, despite difficult budget constraints, institutional resources are aligned with institutional priorities.

## **II. EVALUATION OF INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY UNDER THE STANDARDS**

### **IIA. Standard 1. Defining Institutional Purposes and Ensuring Educational Objectives**

#### **IIA 1) Institutional Purposes**

The only CSU campus that is a member of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges, SSU has defined its primary mission as one of providing a strong liberal arts and science education to all of its students in the context of a regional public institution. This mission is to be further expressed through the institution's character and essential values, which are termed the "marks of a SSU student." The thematic title of the CPR report (as well as one of the stated themes in the institutional proposal) is "Educating the Whole Student," but, as noted above, this theme is not fully developed or elucidated throughout the report, nor did it surface as an organizing principle in interviews and in conversations held across campus during the course of the visit. Although this theme provided the basis for an important university-wide dialogue in 2005, for the subsequent elaboration of the "marks of a SSU student," and for a commitment to "educating the whole student," it has not so far emerged in the form of a unified vision or statement.

Rather, the 2007 CPR report indicated that, in anticipation of its Educational Effectiveness Review, the University "has committed to a full and inclusive campus dialogue regarding the meaning of a liberal arts and sciences education." (CPR p. 22). While important at any stage, such a dialogue should perhaps have been seen as a prerequisite to the declaration of the current mission and objectives, indeed, to the University's affiliation with COPLAC. Now, this important conversation about the institution's identity has a particular urgency, and it will



need to gain traction, engaging all constituencies, so that an important goal may be met: the elaboration of baccalaureate learning outcomes that is driving assessment and quality improvement at the time of the 2009 Educational Effectiveness Review (CFR 1.1).

SSU has adopted the well-regarded AAC&U LEAP<sup>3</sup> outcomes for liberal education as its foundational educational objectives. The development of more specific indicators of educational objectives and the systematic collection of evidence for evaluation of achievement of such objectives are at an early stage overall at SSU and will need to proceed apace in order to produce results for analysis and discussion in the Educational Effectiveness Review (CFR 1.2).

While it would be inappropriate for the Team to question the University's stated commitment to regarding itself as a public liberal arts university, it is legitimate for the Team to consider the extent to which the University's core resources and their deployment supports the laudable pursuit in which the University is engaged, "Educating the Whole Student" (CFR's 1.1, 1.2, 3.5) for the purposes of determining capacity. That alignment might be more clearly demonstrated if the liberal arts mission and the commitment to education of "the whole student" were more clearly defined and more effectively communicated (CFR 1.2). While it is always difficult to document a lack of awareness, repeated efforts on the part of Team members to engage members of the University community in discussion of these important concepts suggested a broad lack of awareness and understanding. Perhaps the present effort to strike a balance between two worthy identities, one as a regional comprehensive university, the other as the state's public liberal arts university, should be more explicitly and deliberately acknowledged and communicated (CFR's 1.2, 1.6, 1.7). The University might find considerable value in the

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<sup>3</sup> p 28 of the CPR Report notes that SSU intends to use College Learning for the New Global Century, a report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) "to assist the university in defining a set of outcomes for the baccalaureate that reflect SSU's commitment to a liberal arts and sciences education."

collaborative development and articulation of a simple, coherent self-definition that reflects the full extent and complexity of its aspirations.

However, even in the light of a more clearly defined mission, the Team would continue to share a fundamental concern regarding SSU's emerging identity, namely, that resources appropriate to an effective comprehensive university may prove insufficient for an institution identifying itself in terms of close student-faculty relationships, small classes, and active, innovative learning. While assessment of this question must await the EER, the Team believes the concern one worth voicing at this stage (CFR's 1.1, 1.2, 1.7, 3.5, 3.11). The Team recognizes that this issue may be addressed in many ways, e.g., through private fund-raising in support of a mission unique within the CSU, through a persuasive redefinition of how the liberal arts may be emphasized despite limited resources, or through some combination of these approaches. Though avoiding the prescribing of a strategy, the Team regards the further development and articulation of a clear strategy as a clear institutional priority.

We note that leadership has been stable for a number of years at SSU, offering a continuity that can offer the University an advantage. Moreover, adequate systems of accountability and performance assurance are in place (CFR 1.3). Nonetheless, the Team has concluded that more can be done in terms of communication and transparency. Aware of the Spring 2007 vote of no confidence in President Arminana, the Team learned just prior to its visit of a more recent set of resolutions reaffirming the position of the academic senate on concerns expressed earlier. Following the initial vote, a concerted effort appears to have been made to increase communication with campus constituencies, but the Team believes much more needs to be done to bring all parties together into productive discussion. Indeed, the Team heard within several venues, including that of the general faculty meeting, expressions of continued mistrust, disengagement, and ennui.

In Spring 2008, a series of small, informal dinners, each involving half a dozen faculty members and the President and Provost, will begin; the first coincided with the WASC CPR visit. On a larger scale, several campus forums (beginning in late February through the Spring 08 semester) will provide a town hall venue for the campus to learn about the WASC review, the CSU budget situation, the University's draft strategic plan, and the campus budget. These efforts at communication, which the Team commends, should strive for transparency and broad information sharing in order to address pervasive questions about resource allocation, decision-making, and strategic plans for the future of the University. Long before the EER, the University through such efforts should have effectively ameliorated the issues of trust and communication evident in the course of the CPR.

#### IIA 2) Integrity

SSU adopted and widely disseminated its Diversity Statement in 2005 and has implemented a range of outreach and recruitment efforts aimed at making its student body, faculty, and staff more reflective of the increasing diversity of California and the nation (CFR 1.5). One such initiative is the planned addition of affordable faculty and staff housing that should help attract diverse employees to the high-cost housing market of Sonoma County. Other initiatives target elementary and secondary schools in diverse local communities as well as potential students state-wide. Nonetheless, increases in numbers of students and faculty from underrepresented groups have been modest over the past 3-5 years. The University might benefit from additional pragmatic, inexpensive strategies for the recruitment and retention of diverse faculty that have been effective at other public California institutions (CFR 3.2). The recent formation of a retention committee offers an opportunity to renew energy around the efforts of recruitment and retention of students of color, thereby harnessing more productively the passion and energy evident behind its commitment. Similarly, the University may further support this

important commitment by judicious investment in programs and observances, such as Black History Month, that hold strong symbolic value (CFR 2.11). During the visit by the Team, students and faculty reported disappointment that several offices, units, and positions supportive of diversity have in their view been de-funded in recent years or have received reductions in funding. Admittedly, because of the restructuring of several offices, funding issues are difficult to confirm. However, if impressions of funding reductions are in fact mistaken, the University has an important opportunity to provide appropriate clarification.

A commitment to intercultural and global competencies is among the AAC&U LEAP outcomes adopted as the signature of a SSU education. Correspondingly, the SSU curriculum includes courses and degree programs in multicultural studies, ethnic studies, and women's and gender studies. Consonant with CSU requirements, the general education program includes an ethnic studies requirement. There is considerable evidence that faculty and student support professionals are supportive of the needs of diverse students; one such example is the assignment of ESL specialists as readers of the CSU-mandated Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement examination at SSU for students who identify themselves as speaking and writing English as a second language. But there is also some sentiment on campus that stronger support at the highest levels of executive campus leadership is needed for significant movement forward on diversity initiatives (CFR 1.5). Such support might, but need not, take the form of additional funding. Alternately, an invigorating statement of recommitment to this ideal in the context of a problematical legal environment, together with a resourceful exploration of proved best practices, might go a long way towards achieving an important priority.

**IIB. Standard 2. Achieving Educational Objectives Through Core Functions****IIB 1) Teaching and Learning**

The University's CPR speaks persuasively of substantive improvements in support for learning and for scholarship and creative activity. The Team found through interviews with upper-level administrators and through a review of the budget clear evidence that such improvements are in process (CFR's 2.8, 3.3). What remains to be seen is whether the investment of funds and initiation of programs without clearly stated objectives—in terms of enhanced programming for students, development opportunities for faculty, and increasingly apparent links between aspiration and fulfillment—will yield measurable improvements (CFR 4.3).

Since the previous visit in 2004 Sonoma State has enacted an aggressive schedule for conducting program reviews and yearly assessment reports on student learning. The tangible results of this work were evident as the Team was able to read from a large number of review and assessment documents. Our focus with limited time was to look for evidence of substantial engagement in the process, clear statements of actual student learning outcomes, and some evidence that available data was being used in curricular and instructional decision-making (CFR 2.7). Generally speaking we found evidence of substantial progress, in assessing student learning outcomes mostly in alignment with Sonoma State's *own* prior assessment as to which programs were in beginning, or more mature states, with respect to assessment. Although uneven in both their number and substance, it appears that every program has learning outcomes. By their own report, the majority of the programs are still in the *beginning* stage, although a number of programs are considered in the *developing* stage, with some in the *competent* stage. The programs in the *competent* stage are primarily professional programs with accreditation demands for outcomes assessment. The process under way must continue, but should suggest an

increased urgency to move along more expeditiously those programs that are just beginning to develop the practice of working from evidence.

Program Reviews now comprise information on a variety of areas: diversity and quality of faculty and staff, program mission and goals, etc. (see page 9 of CPR Report), but emphasis on the results of student learning based on direct student work, integrated across the program, compiled over time, results of which are shared within the department, should be more apparent in these presentations. With the Educational Effectiveness review less than two years away there is much work yet to be done to demonstrate the self imposed criteria for evidence-based decision-making that was highlighted in both the CPR Report and the Institutional Proposal.

As further evidence of a shift in the institution's culture to greater cognizance of assessment issues, many faculty indicated that a number of issues, including the Freshman Year Experience, have increased discussion around assessment issues within the academic senate. However, these same faculty indicated that the "culture of assessment" should be renewed and enlivened, and that time and space to conduct assessment must be created. Because of the huge investment of faculty time in these assessment efforts, the Team was given a very clear message regarding use of the outcomes of the Program Review process and the annual reports.

Faculty indicated that they want to know that they are not "spinning their wheels" and that the positive changes made possible by their increased attention to documenting and improving on learning outcomes will receive sustained support from the University in the form of budgetary allocations and increased visibility. Hence, the Program Review process needs to lead to further communication among the academic and institutional decision-makers at SSU, both administrative and faculty, thereby "closing the loop" of continuous improvement and creating an on-going cycle of review that has a visible influence on resource allocation and programmatic change.

We suggest in this regard that additional opportunities for faculty to learn more about contemporary assessment strategies might be provided. Such opportunities would enable the faculty to reflect on student learning at more conceptual levels and to revise program goals and processes in accord with current best practice.

On a more specific note, there are heartening indications of intentionality in syllabi for the Senior Capstone and Senior Seminar, one of six key elements in the commitment to General Education reform (CFR's 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.9). While not consistent throughout, many of the syllabi do communicate clear learning objectives. That is, while nearly all syllabi describe course requirements, reading assignments, and criteria for grading, many provide also a statement of what students who have taken the course are expected to know and be able to do (CFR 2.3).

Moreover the syllabi suggest that the capstone courses by and large function as *genuine* capstones; they assume and build on work the student has previously accomplished. A typical syllabus begins, "This is *your* course, in which you pull together all of the concepts and ideas you've gained as a . . . major and bring them into focus in the context of the discipline . . . ." (CFR's 2.5, 2.6).

Even here, however, the Team believes that such syllabi would be still further strengthened by a more explicit identification of the explicit learning outcomes appropriate to each course. Ideally, a student should be able to measure her or his curricular needs and intellectual interests against detailed statements of what is sought. On any given day, in any given class, a student should be able through reference to such outcomes to understand the larger significance of the day's work (CFR's 2.3, 2.4). But that will not occur without more robust communication among faculty members in different disciplines and from different schools. It cannot happen without determined and attentive faculty advising. And unless faculty attend to

this concern, from the drafting of syllabi to the framing of daily lesson plans, students will be unlikely to do themselves what their faculty members appear unwilling to do.

## IIB 2) General Education

A concern addressed in previous reviews, the status and health of the general education program was a focus of the Team in discussions across a number of venues and with different constituencies. Sonoma State began its current journey toward revitalizing general education around 2002 and to date has introduced one component that represents what could be considered a structural and conceptual change. This is the Freshman Year Experience (FYE) course which is just completing its second year of a two year pilot, involving 10 faculty members, 150 students, and 9 units of study organized around the theme of Identity and Global Change.

This well supported and highly visible pilot project represents a critical component of Sonoma State's effort to align its curriculum with the goal of offering a distinctive education to undergraduates. Although the complete FYE assessment is not yet fully available, there is considerable enthusiasm within the university community as to the quality of this program. However, discussions suggested a number of barriers to using the FYE pilot as a springboard to more widespread reform. Such concerns have to do with funding, unexplored issues of academic freedom, institutional risk tolerance, potential faculty workload issues, and questions regarding ownership of the curriculum. Unless these issues can be resolved—and funding may be the most intractable of the issues—the Team has difficulty in envisioning how a single pilot, even if successful, can penetrate the larger business-as-usual model of instructional delivery. While this is not an unusual challenge in higher education, it is one that an institution touting its strengths in the liberal arts arena will need to address.

But the Freshman Year Experience pilot, while heartening, points to a larger issue. In the Special Visit report in 2004, the Visiting Team recommended that Sonoma State focus its



attention on a future GE program rather than develop an assessment plan for its current program. However, the Team found no evidence that broader reform efforts leading to a revised program are underway.

Admittedly, there are important current efforts appear focused on qualitative improvements to the current program. For instance, there is an initiative under way to develop specific learning outcomes for the sub-areas of GE. Such outcomes will provide consistent criteria for approving or not approving courses in the present GE curriculum. Moreover, the University's development of an assessment plan for its current program could presumably apply to a newly configured GE Program as well as the current one. But there appears to be little question that the ambitious program reform objectives set forth in earlier communications are at least for the moment on the back burner. As for the assessment plan itself, the Team recognizes the challenges that the University faces with regard to moving from a model focused on seat time to one that focuses on achieved learning outcomes. Nevertheless, it seems unfortunate that the University has been unable to document more substantive progress with regard to a priority it identified nearly a decade ago.

In short, with regard to the GE Program, the administration either should continue to work closely with the academic senate to establish a structure which allows for thoroughgoing innovation in the development of new models for lower division general education or clearly define, pursue, and celebrate the objectives of the more limited strategy that may be implicit in the University's current efforts. Similarly, every effort should be made to accelerate the progress being made towards a fully functioning, conspicuously productive engagement with assessment.

Such efforts will be well served by the development of a well articulated mission statement and accompanying teaching goals for the current General Education Program. Four general learning objectives have been developed, each with specific articulation of components

of the objectives. Each of these components specifies which teaching goal is being addressed. Additionally, the Team's meeting with the General Education Subcommittee provided further information regarding plans to expand and detail the learning objectives for the GE areas and subareas. Without question, progress is being made. The learning objectives for Area B are being finalized and Area D is scheduled next. Areas A and C are scheduled for next fall. The learning objectives workshops involving faculty engaged in the teaching of General Education as well as faculty who are interested in doing so are laudable. These workshops should continue and incentives should be considered as one means of increasing the number of faculty participating.

It should also be noted that, as one means of sustaining the opportunity for programmatic reform in General Education, the University has avoided a further proliferation of courses. First, there was a two-year moratorium, now complete, on the "review of new GE courses" so as "to focus committee work on FYE development." But even following the expiration of the moratorium, only one new course has been approved for General Education. And that approval process reflected the newly designed course approval form, which requires stated learning objectives, an assessment plan, and an articulation of the course's relationship to existing courses in related GE areas. The only other course approval recognized University 102, the FYE Pilot, as a permanent course in the curriculum.

In sum, after extensive discussion during the course of the visit with faculty members and administrations and through thorough review and discussion of representative program review outcomes (CFR 2.7), the Team observed that through the course of nearly a decade, the prospect of general education reform has prompted creative planning, the implementation of a paradigmatic program (the Freshman Year Experience), the advancement of an ambitious change agenda, a modest investment in general education reform, and an eventual sharp reduction of the

change agenda in apparent reaction to budgetary and practical realities. Although one faculty member described the history of general education reform at Sonoma State as “one step forward, two steps back,” there is at least clear evidence that the step forward is under way.

What seems most clear is that, in the demonstration of its educational effectiveness, the University will want to clarify conclusively its present intent with regard to general education and to demonstrate systematic pursuit of that intent in the light of a clear and expeditious timeline. Similarly, the commitment to assessment, while already beginning to bear fruit, should represent an increasingly important component of demonstrated educational effectiveness.

### IIB 3) Scholarship and Creative Activity

The commendable earmarking of \$200,000 annually over the next five years in support of faculty research, creative activity, and professional development is significant in light of the state’s fiscal situation. But these allocations cannot alone further the University’s goals in these areas. For example, \$10,000 annually has been allocated to faculty development in the service of general education reform, a long-standing priority of the University. In 2007-2008, this investment will support the development of learning objectives, an endeavor the team has described as “laudable.” This and similar investments can yield considerable dividends. However, in the view of the Team, the likelihood of success would be considerably enhanced by the development of more explicit expectations for this funding. Because the bulk of the allocations (\$150,000) were made to the Schools and the Library based on their respective FTE faculty, every effort should be taken to ensure that they are applied strategically. Otherwise, the impact may prove not very great. Even small allocations should carry with them clear statements of anticipated outcomes and an expectation that the pursuit of such outcomes will be clearly documented.

#### IIB 4) Support for Student Learning

Neither previous reviews nor the University's report identified support for student learning as one of the University's most pressing concerns. By and large, the Team agrees. As indicated elsewhere, the University has articulated a strong and distinctive commitment to the education of the whole student. That commitment appears in the emphasis placed on residential living, on the construction required to accommodate an increasing percentage of residential students, and on programming designed to provide co-curricular experiences to residential students. Less clear to the Team were strategies for extending the benefits of co-curricular learning to commuting and transfer students. They should be clarified in advance of the EER. Interviews with students, faculty members, and administrators did not reveal pressing issues with student support services. To the contrary, several students spoke approvingly of the "personal touch" they find in student services offices.

### **IIC. Standard 3. Developing and Applying Resources and Organizational Structures to Ensure Sustainability**

#### IIC 1) Core Resources: faculty, staff, finances, library technology

The proper focus of the Capacity/Preparatory Review so far as Standard 3 is concerned lies on "sustainability." That is, are the University's core resources, organizational structures, and decision-making processes sufficient to a realistic, promising pursuit of institutional objectives? By contrast, whether the University has leveraged its resources to achieve its aspirations is more properly the focus of the Educational Effectiveness Review. It is therefore appropriate to declare at the outset that the University appears to enjoy adequate core resources, structures, and processes (CFR's 3.1, 3.2, 3.5, 3.6, 3.7). Indeed, resources allocated to important needs in faculty development and research have recently been enhanced. However, the Team does seek to share certain concerns in anticipation of the EER.

When viewed as a comprehensive university, Sonoma State documents effectively that its personnel are adequate to the pursuit of the University's mission, so far as it is well understood, and are well qualified for their respective assignments (CFR's 3.1, 3.2). Both faculty and staff appear, further, to support the growth of the University, though the Team received expressions of concern, both verbal and in writing, about the extent to which they have been carefully and regularly consulted as this growth has been pursued (CFR's 3.8, 3.11).

As is proper within a Capacity and Preparatory Review, the Team considered in its analysis of faculty resources not only whether the University's faculty is adequate to the University's mission but whether its deployment appears to support the University's planning emphases (CFR's 3.2, 3.3).

For instance, while faculty resources appear consistent with those of other institutions within the CSU system, their deployment appears somewhat at variance in two respects with that seen in many other public liberal arts universities. First, the FTE Student-to-FTE Faculty Ratio at SSU of 21.9, consistent with the CSU average, represents a commendable accomplishment on its own terms but appears high for the cohort of public liberal arts universities.<sup>4</sup> Second, the distribution of the faculty among the disciplines at SSU, necessarily reflecting students' choices of majors, does not reveal the concentration of faculty within the liberal arts characteristic of many COPLAC member institutions. Indeed, the largest major by far appears to be Business Administration, which granted 235 BA/BS degrees in 2005/06, while the next most productive program was Psychology, with 154 (CFR's 1.1, 1.2, 3.2, 3.5, 4.2).

The Team acknowledges important efforts to build capacity in this regard. Current efforts to hire 33 new full-time tenure-track faculty, 11 of whom will help to address consistent

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<sup>4</sup> While there may be a few COPLAC institutions with ratios as high (Southern Oregon University has a ratio of 21), most claim to offer ratios that promise smaller classes and the "close human and intellectual relationships among students and faculty" to which SSU aspires. For example, the ratio currently advertised by the University of North Carolina at Asheville is 18 and that of both Truman State University and Eastern Connecticut State University is 16.

increases in enrollment, may enable the University to address both issues to some extent.

However, impending budget reductions may result in hiring at a considerably lower level (CFR 3.2).

Again, while the Team does not offer advice as to the deployment of the University's resources or consider at this stage of the review process the results of that deployment, it must consider in the context of a Capacity and Preparatory Review the University's ability to achieve its stated objectives. Continued attention to teaching loads, to class sizes, and to the deployment of the faculty among the disciplines should support SSU's determination to educate "the whole student" within the context of a public liberal arts/ comprehensive regional university (CFR's 1.1, 3.2, 4.1, 4.2) as discussed in Standard 1.

Faculty policies and evaluative protocols, in large part governed by contracts maintained on a system level by California State University, appear consistent with the maturity of the University, and due process is well embedded within the University's procedures (CFR 3.3).

Another important element within the University's academic capacity lies in faculty development (CFR 3.4). The Team noted with pleasure the designation of a "permanent home" for the Center for Teaching and Professional Development and the allocation of additional faculty time to its staffing. The Team acknowledges also the workshops offered each year and enjoyed visiting the teaching and learning center in the University Library.

However, while the EER may more appropriately review the results of these important resource allocations, it is reasonable to question here whether these allocations are sufficient to support the paradigm shift from "teaching" to "learning" evident especially in discussions of liberal education reform. One measure of capacity may be found in the current modest level of programming by the Center for Teaching and Professional Development. It may be reasonable to question whether programming at this level is sufficient to fuel the further development of an

academic culture intent on emphasizing the liberal arts mission. Perhaps the Center will be a prominent beneficiary of the University's pledge of \$1 million over the next five years "to faculty development initiatives and projects," but that "perhaps" further illustrates the importance of clearly stated expectations for the investment of the pledge.

"Finances" represents in a sense the ultimate "core resource," and the Team shares with the University concerns about the future. The Team did not observe issues in the management of the University's present resources and commends those within the Division of Administration and Finance for their publication of the entire budget of the University, including auxiliary services, and for workshops offered for the university community in the interest of broader understanding (CFR's 3.5, 4.1).

The library appears to enjoy a reputation as the "heart" of the University and, according to the surveys it has conducted using LibQual+, its users find satisfaction in the library "as a place" and in the services provided by the staff. Perhaps paradoxically, given the library's deliberate effort to move (together with many other university libraries) from identity as a "repository" to become a genuine center for access and learning, its users express interest also in expanded technological resources and in "deeper collections." The Team believes the library well justified in the pursuit of this new paradigm and will in time welcome further evidence of its contributions to student learning (CFR's 3.6, 3.7).

Information technology appears in one sense to be an area of considerable progress for the University. While the fact that Instructional Technology Services emanate from the Division of Administration and Finance, rather than from Academic Affairs, must indeed create "unique challenges," the Team finds commendable the level of resources made available (e.g., the "computer refresh program" and access to WebCT) and the support offered through faculty workshops. The work of the Center for Distributed Learning appears particularly relevant to an

institution endeavoring to realize the efficiencies and learning effectiveness available through properly conceived and supported distributed education (CFR 3.7).

While the Team assigned to the EER will in time consider whether such support from IT (and from the CTPD and the CDL) produces through technical and pedagogical innovation measurable improvements in learning outcomes, this Team believes that the capacity currently in place is at least sufficient to support such progress (CFR 4.4).

Yet the Team heard also of frequent outages in telephone services and in the technology that supports distance education. Every university has such experiences from time to time, but the review of educational effectiveness may want to consider the extent to which such glitches may be interfering with the University's commitment to distance education and, thus, to its primary mission (CFR 3.7).

Many of the concerns shared by the Team are reflected in a recently-passed (March 6, 2008) resolution of the Faculty Senate. While the Team should by no means ignore a unanimously approved faculty governance resolution, it understands that the prompts for such actions are complex and must be considered in the context of a broad understanding of institutional history. That said, as indicated below in "Preparation for an Educational Effectiveness Review" (IV), the resolution offers a perspective worth considering as one prompt for that stage. In particular, the emphasis of this resolution on greater openness, inclusiveness, and effectiveness within the planning process is one the Team commends to the institution as a whole.

## II C 2) Organizational structures and decision-making processes

A central question asked in the Commission Action Letter of June 2004:

"One principal question remains—will Sonoma State engage in ongoing institution-wide planning and devise ways to measure effectiveness in fulfilling its planning goals?" In order for



the institution to demonstrate its commitment to CFR 3.8 (and to CFR's 4.1, 4.2), the institution's organizational structures and processes must be clear. SSU administrators, faculty, and staff have been mobilized in a variety of planning processes, the very extent of which may have sown seeds of confusion within the University. Certainly, it has been one of the challenges for the Visiting Team to understand the roles of each of these groups. These groups include the University Planning Steering Committee, Academic Affairs Council, the Campus Reengineering Committee, and the Academic Planning Committee of the Academic Senate. The CPR Report also reports that other entities engage in planning: University Library, School of Extended Education, Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, and the Academic Schools including Business and Economics, Education, Science and Technology, and Social Sciences. How these are all effectively linked remains a central question.

Until more recently, broad based planning has been done in "parallel" tracks. One has been that of the Academic Planning Committee (APC), a standing committee of the Academic Senate that revised a Long Range Academic Plan (LRAP, revisions adopted 2/5/2004) from a previous version from a decade before. The other has been that of the Academic Affairs Strategic Planning Committee in the Office of the Provost (Academic Affairs Plan 2005), an effort begun subsequent to the Special Visit that called for a priority to be placed on strategic planning, a priority then clearly articulated by the Commission.

Indeed, the appointment of Provost Ochoa made clear his particular responsibility for planning, and he began, understandably, with planning in academic affairs. What effect, if any, of previous planning by the APC had on the Academic Affairs Plan was unclear to the Team. The Team noted, however, that because the Chairs of both the APC and the EPC were original, full members of both the Academic Affairs Strategic Planning Committee and the University

Planning Steering Committee , there has been a clear potential for continuity. The extent to which that potential has been realized was less clear.

In this light, the Educational Effectiveness Review would benefit from a clearer demonstration of continuity, cooperation, and visibility in the planning process. Any disjuncture between academic planning bodies could lead to tension instead of coordination, a particular concern in a time of limited resources. The Team therefore commends the proposed working agreement between the Academic Planning Committee and the Academic Affairs Council as an unprecedented opportunity for the resolution of tensions between governance and administrative approaches to planning. At the time of the Educational Effectiveness Review, clear evidence that this agreement has prospered and has proved productive would be most significant.

High quality executive, academic, and financial leadership exists at SSU. No planning effort can be sustained without effective executive leadership (CFR 3.10). The President of SSU, well known for his entrepreneurial style of leadership, has been instrumental in putting forward various “strategic” initiatives reflecting “planning” mainly on the part of senior leadership. Examples include construction of the Green Music Center and a renewed emphasis in recruiting more first year students for a “residential” experience. The lack of clear and sustained alignment between “planning” (by a campus wide committee with constituency input) and these presidential initiatives raises questions regarding the engagement of “multiple constituencies in institutional reflection and planning processes”; the clarification of the institution’s strategic positions; the articulation of its priorities; the alignment of purposes, core functions and resources; and the defining of “the future direction of the institution” (CFR 4.1).

The first true effort towards unified, broad-based strategic planning under the aegis of the University Planning Steering Committee began in 2006 (UPSC). Because earlier planning done

by both Academic Affairs and by the Division of Administration and Finance (Campus Reengineering Committee), while not university-wide, enjoyed significant representation from across the campus, the foundation for broad-based planning appears to be in place.

The new committee is co-chaired by the Provost and the Vice-President of Administration and Finance. Its purview having been expanded to include a review of the internal and external environment of the University, it has defined strategic areas such as academic programs, community engagement, diversity, enrollment management, external support, faculty and staff, infrastructure, quality of student experience, and sustainability. Senior members of the administration, as well as well as the current, past, and future Chairs of the Faculty are members of this campus-wide committee, as are the chairs of the EPC and APC. Each goal now has numerous objectives to be achieved. While recognizing the importance of this step, the Team believes that timelines for the accomplishment of many of the mission-related academic and diversity-related objectives might be more clearly defined and that initiatives well under way, such as the Green Music Center could be implemented in ways that more clearly provide for their maximum usefulness and cost-effectiveness.

In short, this renewed planning effort offers much hope for the future, but the delay in the initiation of such planning and its continued very deliberate pace remains a cause of concern.

Long term planning efforts need constant attention. How is the campus informed of progress towards these goals? How much true progress has been made under these objectives? What information do reports of progress reflect? Are results shared with the wider community for input, feedback, and “closing the loop”? Discussion around the strategic planning effort and wide-based campus communication on its progress can serve to unify the faculty, staff, and students to create excitement around its goals and its accomplishments. Whether or not this in fact occurs should be a matter of some attention on the part of the EER.

Furthermore, all of these planning efforts must work in close correspondence with the faculty governance system (CFR 3.11) to insure that the faculty exercises “effective academic leadership and acts consistently to ensure both academic quality and the appropriate maintenance of the institution’s educational purposes and character.” Does the faculty contribute appropriately to the process through the institutional shared governance system? The Team observed that during its open meeting with faculty, it asked for a show of hands to the question: “Does the strategic plan have buy-in from the faculty?” and not one hand was raised. A likely explanation lies in the fact that dissemination of the plan had occurred only just prior to the Team’s visit—a regrettable indicator of the apparent lack of urgency given to the planning process in anticipation of the CPR.

Yet it is to be hoped that the process is now on track to move forward with all deliberate speed. Hence the task for the University at this point would appear to be the building of confidence in both the plan and the planning process so that approval by the Senate may follow. Then the greater challenge will be how to proceed, with expectations raised, so as to secure the kind of tangible results that enhance the internal credibility of the process and provide documentation of educational effectiveness at the next stage of this review.

We note that while there have been some changes in executive level positions through restructuring the top positions in the executive and financial sectors have remained constant. Stability in the Presidency, the Provost’s Office, and the Administration and Finance division can be beneficial when an institution engages in a long term planning effort. We hope that the faculty, the President, and the administrative leadership can move to a more collaborative and mutually informative relationship for the benefit of the University and its constituencies.

**IID. Standard 4. Creating an Organization Committed to Learning and Improvement**

Standard 4 encouraged the Visiting Team to examine and better understand Sonoma State's commitments to its core mission to "educate the whole student." This component of the current review is especially important in that previous WASC reviews and Commission letters have questioned whether SSU actually has in place processes and strategies sufficient to demonstrate adherence to this commendable standard.

Sonoma State clearly has in place forums and opportunities for various constituencies to participate in institutional planning (CFR 4.1) as discussed in the previous section. Discussions with students, faculty, and members of the administration confirm this access to participation. Yet, these same discussions raise questions as to how effective the institution as a whole may be in terms of clarifying priorities and aligning resources with mission. The Team made a special effort during the visit to understand how the various planning bodies have evolved in recent history, and how they may fit together as a coherent whole (see Standard 3 discussion).

The picture that emerges is one that continues to show a cautious endorsement for planning at the very highest level, coupled with some less encouraging indications that the committee structures currently in place may not be resolving tensions that exist with respect to mission priorities. Two specific indicators include the following:

- *Concerns voiced by student leaders about the alignment of resources with mission.*

While students spoke almost reverently about their individual relationships with faculty members, they voiced concern with regard to the institution's resolve to align mission and resources. They expressed the conviction that closer alignment would support more productive attention to broad and persistently difficult issues such as diversity and retention, general education, and advising.

- *Concerns voiced by faculty members about the overall planning and decision making process.* The strength of the faculty's anxiety is clearly demonstrated in the no-confidence vote and in their persistent expressions of concern about how mission priorities are determined and supported. A number of faculty members spoke publicly of an apparent disjuncture between administrative and governance approaches to decision making. Some faculty members went so far as to characterize this disjuncture as a slowly unfolding tragedy.

The Team's attempts to understand the current situation yielded no easy answers to how greater confidence might be built in Sonoma State's approach to strategic planning and decision making (CFR's 3.8, 3.11, 4.1, 4.2). However, left unresolved, the despondency characteristic of some members of constituent groups may inhibit continued institutional growth as the institution seeks to perform well with limited resources.

Because the University has a clear commitment to move forward in the realization of its complex mission, the Team offers several reflections for consideration. First, where there are areas of contested decision making that may not be directly within the purview of the faculty governance process, such as the Green Music Center, there may be much to be gained by mounting a more effective communication process. Precisely because there are legitimate alternate visions for Sonoma State (see discussion in Standard 1), the various stakeholders must learn to weigh them carefully. Second, while the existing planning processes appear to provide ample opportunities for continuing dialogue among parties who may disagree on some issues, they must be exercised regularly to be effective. A clear success accomplished through a shared approach to "low hanging fruit" could provide encouragement to address another, more challenging objective.

One context for such concrete problem solving may lie in the strategic effort described as "repairing the base." With no clear prospect of new funding to accomplish this goal of increasing

program level budgets, the “repair” project promises conversations regarding what is possible when hard decisions cannot be avoided. Might it be possible that such conversations would reveal unanticipated agreement on base assumptions? And third, the celebration of even small gains and successes (such as the apparent willingness to protect new funding for faculty development) could yield important benefits.

### **III. SUMMARY, MAJOR FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Apparent to the Team is a thorough commitment throughout Sonoma State to the dissemination of knowledge and the search for truth. SSU students affirm the dedication of the faculty and express confidence in the quality of the education they are receiving. We found among the faculty a culture that values scholarship and creative activity in the context of a teaching institution. The University has gained an enviable reputation for tracking and responding to the needs of its region with regard to its degree programs, and effective fundraising has secured important flexibility for the University in a challenging budgetary environment. Recent endowment increases help distinguish Sonoma State among its peers.

#### ***Standard 1: Defining Institutional Purposes and Ensuring Educational Objectives***

1. It appears to the Team that the University is at present balancing two worthy identities, one as a regional comprehensive university, the other as the state’s public liberal arts university. These identities may well prove compatible, but the University might find value in the collaborative development and articulation of a unified, coherent self-definition that reflects the full extent and diversity of its aspirations. If the mission of “educating the whole student” is to prove determinative, further explication of this important concept must consider the educational implications of a “whole student” approach. The Visiting Team believes the SSU community must approach this issue as an opportunity to demonstrate its educational effectiveness. In the

meantime, sustained inquiry should itself prove to be of considerable benefit.

2. The University might harness more productively the passion and energy evident behind its commitment to diversity. Building on a commendable range of outreach, recruitment, and student support programs, the University might benefit from observing and pursuing additional pragmatic, inexpensive strategies for the recruitment and retention of faculty of color. Similarly, the University may further support this important commitment by judicious investment in programs and observances, such as Black History Month, that hold strong symbolic value.

3. The University may find it possible to leverage the dedication of its Campus Climate Committee by pursuing more aggressively the committee's concerns and recommendations.

4. The University must find ways to use the no-confidence vote and ensuing resolutions to build stronger bridges throughout the university community based on a clear communication of priorities, further clarification as to the locus of decision making, agreement on priorities, and acknowledgment of leadership's responsibility for effective advocacy, responsiveness to emerging needs, and collegial governance.

***Standard 2: Achieving Educational Effectiveness Through Core Functions***

1. The campus has made progress in assessing student outcomes. Indeed, it appears that every program has developed learning outcomes, even though they appear uneven in both number and substance from department to department. However, more departments must move from the beginning to the competent stage in terms of the University's own rubric. The institution needs to establish stronger processes that allow programs that have undergone program review to "close the loop."

2. By building on the progress it has made in defining learning outcomes for its different academic programs, the University can proceed to an effective clarification of outcomes specific



to general education, so that assessment of general education may be operating productively prior to the educational effectiveness review.

3. To encourage scholarship among the faculty, especially among faculty new to the tenure track, the University should explore creative means of building capacity for research and creative activity within the context of a teaching-intensive university.

4. As the University continues to build its capacity for academic program review, from the commendable level it has attained to one that demonstrates greater maturity, it should increasingly manifest an explicit emphasis on student learning outcomes, on direct assessment of student work that yields guidance for programmatic improvement, and on the completion of the quality loop by the use of such guidance to effect program improvement.

***Standard 3: Developing and Applying Resources and Organizational Structures to Ensure Sustainability***

1. The University's commendable investment in research and faculty development, which demonstrates both growth in capacity and alignment between mission and allocations, might contribute more forcefully to educational effectiveness if implemented according to clear timelines, performance expectations, and insistence on accountability.

2. Financial structures and budget decisions should be so far as possible accessible and understandable. The administration should maintain its commitment to informative briefings, and members of the university community should avail themselves of such opportunities.

3. The University should document the reasons for and the opportunities inherent in the expansion of the Green Music Center project. How will this impressive facility contribute to the University's educational objectives? A demonstration of the facility's contribution to the University's educational effectiveness might provide an important focus for the educational effectiveness review.

***Standard 4: Creating an Organization Committed to Learning and Improvement***

1. Following constituency approval of its draft strategic plan, the University may wish to implement elements of the plan according to an agreed upon and broadly understood order of priority. Moreover, the productivity of the initiatives prompted by the planning process would in all probability be enhanced by a greater emphasis on clear performance expectations and accountability according to explicit timelines.
2. The University may discover many relevant best practices among its own offerings and initiatives. The First Year Experience (FYE) appears to exemplify thoughtful planning, careful execution, and thorough assessment. The Team encourages the University to explore alternate means for judicious expansion of a program demonstrated to be effective in meeting its important objectives.
3. As one means of attesting to an organization committed to learning and improvement, the University should clarify, explicate, articulate, and promote its commitment to “educating the whole student” in light of the clarification of its mission. The public information effort of the University should interpret this service description persuasively even as the University strives to add substance to it.

**IV. PREPARATIONS FOR THE EDUCATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS REVIEW**

The recommendations above, which track closely the Team’s experience in reviewing the University’s documentary materials, considering its report, and speaking with members of the university community, offer perhaps the most reliable guide to preparations for the EER. However, there may be value in distilling here the essence of the most compelling recommendations.

First, the University should endeavor to assure that educational outcomes, evident in all course syllabi, drive directly appropriate assessments that yield information useful in course and programmatic strengthening.

Second, the University should reach consensus on a clear definition and articulation of its complex mission, so that planning efforts may proceed in the clear light of a widely shared understanding.

Third, in pursuit of this mission, the University must yoke its disparate planning efforts into a single respected process that honors both administrative entrepreneurship and faculty governance.

Fourth, in the context of a clear mission and coherent planning, the University should reach agreement on the scope of its long-proposed reform of general education, establish a realistic timeline for such reform, and present within the EER documented evidence of indisputable progress.

Fifth, the University should extend its diversity efforts through the consideration and adoption of appropriate pragmatic strategies to accomplish its desired goals.

Sixth, the University should address systematically the elements expressed in recent expressions of concern so as to strengthen the sense of community and enable the accomplishment of other critical aspirations.