



March 6, 2006

Stephen L. Weber
President
San Diego State University
5500 Campanile Drive
San Diego, CA 92182-8000

Dear President Weber:

At its meeting on February 16-17, 2006, the Commission considered the report of the Educational Effectiveness Review team that visited San Diego State University (SDSU) on November 9-11, 2005. The Commission also had access to the institution's Educational Effectiveness report and materials and your letter of January 25, 2006, in response to the team report. The Commission found the opportunity to discuss the review with you and Geoffrey Chase, Accreditation Liaison Officer and Dean of Undergraduate Studies, helpful in better understanding the University and the issues raised by the visiting team.

The accreditation review cycle for San Diego State University began with the University's Proposal for Reaffirmation of Accreditation, which was submitted to the Proposal Review Committee and later revised for acceptance on December 7, 2001. Following the later expansion of the SDSU Review Coordinating Council during the summer of 2002, the University then submitted a working paper to WASC dated December 12, 2002, which provided further update and focus to the intended outcomes for the review. The succeeding two stages of the review process were designed to explore three areas of inquiry seminal to the future of the University: (1) student learning, with special attention to educational experiences that reflect core values and the needs of an informed citizenry; (2) the balance among access, retention, and graduation rates so as to provide the highest quality educational experience for students; and (3) the maintenance and enhancement of quality undergraduate programs while pursuing high-quality graduate programs.

The Capacity and Preparatory Review report written for the fall 2004 visit centered institutional inquiry on eight essays reflecting the three foci for the review and demonstrating the University's alignment with the Standards of Accreditation and Core Commitment to Capacity. The recommendations from the Commission and team that emanated from the Capacity Review were responded to in the institution's Educational Effectiveness report, and the visiting team evaluated progress on these and integrated further comment in its Educational Effectiveness team report.

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The format of the SDSU Educational Effectiveness report consisted of three separate self-study essays. These addressed the three review foci of student learning; access, retention, and graduation; and undergraduate research, scholarship, and creative activity. The Commission found that each essay represented an authentic institutional inquiry, with carefully defined research questions, thorough compilation and review of evidence, deep engagement of participants, collaborative work, self-recommendations, and a spirit of openness that pervaded the report and the entire approach to the self-study process. The Commission commends SDSU on writing an exemplary report, one that is fully aligned with the values and objectives of the new WASC model of accreditation, and which also, in its very writing, by all accounts, has proven valuable to the University. Because SDSU leadership and the WASC Coordinating Council approached writing the report with institutional improvement as the ultimate goal and open inquiry as the methodology, far more was achieved than a traditional accreditation report would have permitted, and the University demonstrated for itself, the Commission, and the entire region the potential power of functioning as a true learning organization in the WASC review process.

Also deserving of commendation is the experimental visit methodology pioneered during the Educational Effectiveness visit. The modified fishbowl format in which the team conducted much of its review allowed team members and SDSU faculty, staff, and students to explore aspects of each of the essays and to reflect on what had been learned and where the most promising directions for future development might lie. The team reported that its discussions were frank and generative, with team members and institutional representatives exploring ideas from their combined experience, expertise, and perspectives. The visit format served to advance our thinking about how better to align visit methodology with the power of the self-study model of institutional inquiry, and the Commission is grateful for the openness of the University and the trust it demonstrated in engaging in this pioneering venture. San Diego State continues to be cited in WASC workshops as a best practice exemplar in conducting an effective and consequential accreditation review. The Commission is also grateful for the participation of SDSU speakers who have participated with WASC staff in workshops and conference panels to describe this process of self-study to other institutions.

In its report, the team commented on the quality of the leadership at San Diego State, not just in its support of the accreditation self-study process, but also in its commitment and sense of accountability for assessing and improving student and organizational learning. The team report noted that, "[s]trong evidence was presented of President Weber's and senior management's attention to fostering linkages among unit-level educational effectiveness planning, cycles of institutional planning, and budgeting and resource allocation." (Team report, page 7) San Diego State was able to translate this commitment into effective strategies for engaging faculty to commit time and energy to the assessment of student learning. In this regard, the team commended the provost for encouraging accountability for student learning through the requirement of annual program assessment reports, and for underscoring the importance of assessment by denying requests in AY 2006 for faculty lines to departments that had failed to submit annual reports.

Through encouragement and the support provided to faculty, the progress in institutionalizing summative programmatic assessment at SDSU has been palpable. Some 84 percent of programs now have defined learning outcomes and assessment plans in place. The Student Learning Outcomes Committee has been instrumental in providing assistance and feedback to departments on its efforts, and the effective use of the Committee's assessment rubric was noted as the kind of support that builds capacity for analysis and improvement. Other areas identified in the Capacity and Preparatory Review as deserving of commendation were the University's hallmark programs in international education and the strength of its initiatives in graduate programs and in undergraduate research, scholarship, and creative activity.

The team report contains many useful observations and suggestions, as well as summary recommendations. The Commission accepts and endorses these, and urges the University to take into consideration the advice offered by the team. It also urges the University to give thought to how, and in what ways, it might capture and institutionalize the momentum for change that was self-generated through the review process.

In addition to the team recommendations, the Commission wishes to highlight the following recommendations for the University's consideration:

Continuing Progress on Assessment and Learning-centeredness. While there has been commendable work in evaluating and improving student and organizational learning, the team also identified a number of useful strategies to assist the University in accomplishing its educational effectiveness goals; for example, the University may wish to consider definitive administrative assignment and appropriate resources for continuing assistance to faculty in their efforts. You indicated in your response to the team report that a number of departments have named representatives who can serve as lead people to meet regularly and share progress and best practices across departmental lines, and the Commission encourages that steps be taken to formalize and structure such opportunities for dialogue. You also indicated that both Student Affairs and graduate programs are moving to extend their assessment efforts. The development of strong learning assessment in these areas would continue the trajectory toward excellence that SDSU has developed. Also, the Commission found advisable the team's suggestion to find ways to recognize and honor those who are making significant contributions to pedagogical and curricular improvements, and it encourages the University to share what it is learning not only across academic departments, but also within the CSU, the region, and nationally. Finally, the team recommended, and the Commission concurs, that further development of institutional research capacity to assist departments would be helpful, including the development of standardized indicators for program effectiveness. These approaches, and others discussed in the team report, would provide further momentum to the good work that is being done with assessment and improvement activities and would align the University with the Commission's expectations in Criteria for Review 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 2.11, 4.1, 4.5, and 4.7.

Giving Emphasis to General Education Reform. In both the Capacity and Educational Effectiveness Reviews, a number of key issues surrounding General Education surfaced. Most salient, it appears that General Education lacks an administrative champion with

appropriate infrastructure and resources to lead the reform that is needed to bring it to the same level of excellence that is expected of disciplinary programs. Little progress has been made on identifying an achievable set of outcomes that represent those competencies, skills, and qualities desired of a college-educated person of the 21st century. The Commission understood from your response to the team report and from the provost and dean of undergraduate studies' discussion at the Commission meeting that you are fully aware of the challenges in this arena, and it supports your intention to ensure that the SDSU signature strengths of global education and research, scholarship, and creative activity are reflected in the General Education outcomes. San Diego State will need to move expeditiously to study the questions raised by the team and enumerated on page 14 of the team report. It also is encouraged to develop comparative research about how CSU campuses and other peer institutions are approaching General Education reform. Most importantly, the Commission encourages the University to focus its attention on the fundamental and critical issue of assessing what students learn as a result of their participation in General Education. The Commission's expectations that baccalaureate programs engage students in an integrated course of study of sufficient breadth and depth to prepare them for work, citizenship, and a fulfilling life are further described in Standard 2 and Criterion for Review 2.2.

Analyzing and Improving Retention and Graduation Rates. The team identified the entire area of enrollment management as needing enhanced leadership and coordination, and better data analysis, to bring the operational goal of success for all students into better alignment with University mission and intention. The University has made significant improvement in its retention rates in the past five years; however, with its growing selectivity, SDSU can and should improve on its six-year retention to graduation rate, even as it has grown from 34.6% to 50% in the last five years. The team found "a number of specific, limited efforts at rational enrollment management...but...no overarching plan, philosophy, or leadership is currently functional at the institution to manage enrollment." (Team report, p. 29) The team identified a number of strategies to address disparate problem areas that surfaced during the site visit. Overall, in order to ensure that the University is attending to the needs and aspirations of all of its students, it will need a more systematic approach, with much improved data and analysis, to support enrollment planning and decision making. As the team report enumerates, in order to fully respond to the expectations of the Commission in Criteria for Review 4.4 and 4.5, and in order to fulfill the expectations it has for itself, the University will need to develop and analyze evidence in applicant and admission yields studies, cost/benefit analyses of impacted programs, disaggregation of data by factors known to be important to retention, quantitative prediction models, evaluations of interventions, and more extensive use of peer and benchmark data. The Commission concurs with the team recommendation that SDSU develop and implement a comprehensive philosophy, strategic plan, and defined targets for enrollment management efforts from application to graduation.

Improving Services to Transfer Students. Because the University had identified services to transfer students as an area of inquiry in its self-review, the team spent some time analyzing this important sector of the student body. The team confirmed that transfer students report feeling socially segregated and academically disadvantaged compared to students who enter as freshmen. A number of structural and procedural impediments were

identified that the Commission encourages the University to review. The Commission understands that the University has already begun to move forward on these issues. The most salient among them include the need for better intake advising, closer articulation processes with community colleges, more timely review of applicants' transcripts, reform of transfer student orientation, and attention to aspects of the curricular roadmap templates that disadvantage transfer students. An issue that is not unique to transfer students, but very relevant to them, is the recurring pattern of pre-major students in impacted programs failing to progress, and in effect, stalling at the lower division level by failing to raise their grade point averages high enough to meet entrance requirements for a preferred major and upper-division status. When this pattern occurs for transfer students, it is particularly disappointing to them because of their aspiration to attain an SDSU degree. As the team report notes, "The continued lack of progress of these students toward graduation is potentially having a deleterious effect on SDSU's graduation rate, the rate of individual student success, and prospects for future alumni happiness and financial support." (Team report, p. 29). The Commission expects that the University will serve all students well and equitably, and that it will assure itself that students are not disadvantaged in any way by their enrollment status, consistent with Criteria for Review 2.10, 2.11, 2.12, 2.13, and 2.14.

Sustaining the Progress on Integrating the Imperial Valley and Brawley Campuses. The Commission acknowledges the importance of the two branch campuses and the criticalness of the campuses to the educational needs of the region and to the mission of SDSU. The team noted both the effective leadership of the new dean and the efforts of Student Affairs and the Associated Students to develop stronger relationships with the campuses. Longstanding issues of communication and faculty inclusion continue to plague the relationship between the branch campuses and the home campus, however, and, while acknowledging the difficulties inherent in managing campuses 120 miles apart, the Commission urges continued attention to the needs and aspirations of the students, faculty, staff, and to the campuses themselves. The Commission endorses the team recommendation for strategies to improve processes, structures and, especially, technology communication at the branch campuses that would further support the educational enterprise at these remote sites.

In summary, during the review process, SDSU established itself as an institution of high quality that has successfully taken on the challenge to inquire deeply into important areas of its institutional functioning. The University's own recommendations for improvement, and those of the team, provide a template for further growth and development. San Diego State has established that it can, and has, demonstrated concern for student success, high academic quality, and research and scholarship.

The Commission acted to:

1. Receive the Educational Effectiveness Review Report.
2. Reaffirm the Accreditation of San Diego State University.

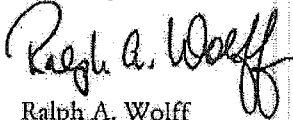
3. Schedule the Proposal for the two-stage comprehensive review to be due on March 1, 2013. Schedule the Capacity and Preparatory Review for fall 2015 and the Educational Effectiveness Review for spring 2017.

In taking this action to reaffirm accreditation, the Commission confirms that San Diego State University has satisfactorily addressed the Core Commitments to Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness, and has successfully completed the multistage review conducted under the Standards of Accreditation. Between this action and the time of the next review, the University is expected to continue its progress and be prepared to respond as expectations of institutional performance, especially with respect to Educational Effectiveness and student learning, further develop under the Standards of Accreditation.

In accordance with Commission policy, we request that you send a copy of this letter to Chancellor Charles Reed.

Please contact me if you have any questions or comments about this letter or the action of the Commission.

Sincerely,



Ralph A. Wolff
Executive Director

RW/brn

cc: John D. Welty
Geoffrey W. Chase
Members of the team