

July 6, 1998

Steven Browning Sample  
President  
University of Southern California  
University Park  
Los Angeles, CA 90089-0012

Dear President Sample:

At its meeting on June 24-25, 1998, the Commission considered the report of the evaluation team that visited the USC campus on February 3-6, 1998. The Commission also had available to it the self study prepared by the University and the Data Portfolio. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to meet with Provost Lloyd Armstrong, Associate Provost Jerome Walker and Data Consultant Veronica Tincher. The Commission was very pleased to learn that the recommendations of the team have already been discussed at a Board of Trustees retreat and follow-up initiatives have already begun or are being planned for the fall.

The Commission recognizes and commends the University for being one of the first to undertake an "experimental" self study and to develop a Data Portfolio. It has been the Commission's desire to create new accreditation models which would provide 1) a more simple and efficient means of assuring basic accountability, 2) permit self studies to be more aligned with institutional priorities and 3) to use processes that would contribute more meaningfully to the improvement of the institution. The Commission is very pleased to learn that this new approach proved to be so effective in meeting all of these goals.

The Commission understood the agreement with the University was for the self study to incorporate a comprehensive Data Portfolio which would provide the basis for the Commission to assess the University's

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compliance with the broad scope of the WASC accrediting Standards, and would be used by the University to assess the accomplishment of its four strategic goals. In addition, it was hoped that the Data Portfolio would provide a platform for assessing and improving the effectiveness of the use of data in the decision making processes of the University.

In its review of the Data Portfolio and self study, the evaluation team and the Commission found that the Data Portfolio provided a basis for addressing these several objectives. While this first effort to construct a Data Portfolio serves as a prototype, and could be developed further as discussed below, the Commission was pleased by the efforts of the University to gather data in such a systematic and comprehensive fashion, track it over time to the extent possible, and gather information from all schools.

As reflected by the self study and the evaluation team, the University demonstrates many strengths, and much progress in quality since the last visit. The University is well underway in its transformation, as described by the team, as a *de facto* land grant University to a premier research institution. The Commission was impressed by the clarity of the University's Strategic Plan and the priorities identified in the Plan. It is evident from the team report that these priorities are understood and shared throughout the University, and form the basis of many significant initiatives. There is considerable information to indicate the progress made by the University to fulfill each of the four strategic goals, and within each area there are a number of exciting activities underway. Of particular note is the revision of the general education program and centralizing responsibility for general education courses within one school. Together, these should give the program a new focus and coherence.

There are a number of important recommendations made in both the University's self study and in the evaluation team report. The Commission urges the University to give these recommendations full consideration. They appear well considered and appropriate in light of the information presented. In addition, the Commission would like to highlight several areas important to its accreditation function.

Continued Development of the Data Portfolio. One of the design principles for the Data Portfolio is that it might serve the University in an ongoing way as well as WASC in its periodic review processes. Thus, it will be important to see how the Data Portfolio can be continued within the University, and refined and improved. The evaluation team made a number of recommendations for continued development of the Portfolio, and the Commission recommends their adoption in a manner appropriate for the University. Of particular interest to the Commission is the need for the development of key indicators to

support the Strategic Plan's call for "metrics of excellence." It is hoped the University can build on the data it is collecting for focused analysis in relation to key areas. The Commission concurs with the evaluation team view that much further work is needed to streamline the data collected, analyze it, and use it meaningfully in planning, priority setting, and resource allocation. It is not clear how this effort can be sustained, and improved, without adequate staff and a clear assignment of responsibility for improvement of the Portfolio and the dissemination of salient data and analyses. It will also be important periodically to assess how well this data is used to improve communication, priority setting and quality improvement at the University.

Continued Refinement of the Strategic Plan. The economy of the Strategic Plan makes it accessible to any within the University community, as does the clarity of the four strategic goals. Now that the goals have been endorsed throughout the University, there would seem to be a need to develop the next order of specific objectives, as recommended by the evaluation team. As stated by the team: "First, the plan requires a second order of *definition* which translates the broad goals into a more detailed blueprint identifying specific areas of emphasis and the steps that must be taken for implementation.... Second, measures should be taken to *align* the management system and derivative functional areas of the University to better support achievement of the Plan." The team recommends a number of considerations where the RCM budget system might be improved to enhance collaboration and support new ventures, as well as strengthen the Provost's Office to oversee the implementation of the Strategic Plan and the overall quality of the University. The Commission commends the University for already beginning steps in this very direction.

Program Reviews and Quality Assurance. In light of the broad array of schools, programs and departments offered at the University, it is important for the University to demonstrate that it has adequate methods to assure quality. While a number of programs undergo external review by specialized and professional accrediting agencies, the University does not have an ongoing method to review and improve the quality of all of its programs. The need for such an ongoing system has been the recommendation of the previous evaluation team and the current one. The Commission believes that these recommendations need to be addressed, either through a process of program reviews or some other regular means adopted by the University.

As stated by the team: "We strongly reaffirm the recommendation of an earlier WASC evaluation that USC initiate a vigorous and continuing program review process. The review process should include an evaluation of undergraduate and graduate programs, as

well as the more traditional review of departmental distinction in research and scholarship.” Such program reviews, or some alternative means, could incorporate data developed through the Data Portfolio, build benchmark comparisons, and be linked to key indicators developed by the University. It is important to note that data collection (such as through the Data Portfolio) should be only one means of quality assurance but it is no substitute for *judgment* about program effectiveness that typically comes through peer review. Periodic reviews also could be conducted by student services and support units, and integrated with departmental reviews in planning. In addition to such periodic program reviews, the Commission endorses the recommendation that the new general education program, the new writing requirement and the new system of minors be reviewed within a specified time frame. It is hoped that the positive steps undertaken since the visit to develop a program review process might incorporate these considerations.

Student Learning and Student Outcomes. The Data Portfolio began to gather initial data on student learning and outcomes information from across the University, in both academic and nonacademic units. The Commission urges the University to continue to develop data in such areas, as reflected above in the general education program, the writing program, from program reviews and other sources, as a way of validating the commitment of the University to academic excellence. The Commission urges continued emphasis on teaching excellence and the need for improving data collection on the quality of teaching. The Center for Teaching Excellence appears to be an important resource as well as the Center for Scholarly Technology.

Undergraduate Selectivity, Student Retention and Advising. The University, consonant with its mission and its strategic goals, has targeted improvement in the selectivity and retention of its undergraduate students as a top priority. The Commission would concur and urges that consideration be given as well to team concerns about student advising. Students admitted as qualified to succeed at USC should be provided clear information and support to make the best use of the rich range of opportunities available at the University.

The Commission acted to:

1. Reaffirm the accreditation of the University of Southern California.

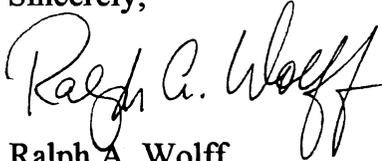
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2. Schedule the next comprehensive visit in the spring of 2008. The draft self study in preparation for this visit will be due October 15, 2007. The final self study report will be due two months before the visit.
3. Request ten (10) copies of a Fifth-Year report due March 1, 2003. Enclosed is a memorandum providing guidance on the format and content of a Fifth-Year report. It is hoped that a revised and updated Data Portfolio might form a significant part of this report.

In addition, the Commission wishes to encourage the University to collaborate with WASC in the further development of new visit models and Data Portfolios. The Commission is very interested in continuing to develop approaches to accreditation which have external credibility and provide value to institutions. As the Commission is now undertaking a review of its current practices, processes and standards, it welcomes the University's involvement in this process. The Commission believes that the collaborative tone established in this accreditation process could serve as a model for the future.

Please let me know if you have any questions or comments regarding this action.

Sincerely,



Ralph A. Wolff  
Executive Director

RW/brn

cc: David K. Winter  
Jerome B. Walker  
Members of the Team

Enclosure