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PRESIDENT
Ralph A. Wolff

March 7, 2011

C. L. Max Nikias
President
University of Southern California
University Park Campus
Los Angeles, CA 90089-012

Dear President Nikias:

At its meeting on February 16-18, 2011, the Commission considered the report of the Educational Effectiveness Review (EER) team that conducted the visit to the University of Southern California (USC) on October 11-13, 2010. The Commission also had access to the EER report and exhibits prepared by USC prior to the visit, your January 12, 2011 response to the visiting team report, and the documents relating to the Capacity and Preparatory Review (CPR) visit conducted in fall 2008. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the review with you; Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost Elizabeth Garrett; Associate Provost and ALO Robin Romans; and Executive Vice Provost Michael Quick. Your comments were helpful.

USC's institutional proposal outlined two themes: spanning disciplinary and school boundaries to focus on problems of societal significance; and increasing responsiveness to learners. The CPR report and a later update expanded on those themes, and described new initiatives in the areas of internationalization, diversity, and technology-enhanced learning. Building on the proposal and the CPR visit, USC used the EER as an opportunity to examine effectiveness in four areas: interdisciplinary learning, including minors and the core/general education program; assessment of student learning; university-wide efforts to raise global awareness and promote international engagement; and academically centered approaches to student success.

The Commission views the refinement of areas of focus during the accrediting process as an example of the University's commitment to self-reflection and change, and to being deliberately responsive to issues raised during the CPR. USC is to be commended for approaching the accrediting process with a spirit of inquiry and an interest in improvement, producing well-organized and well-documented reports, undertaking well-planned research investigations, and, in particular, generating widespread faculty enthusiasm, engagement and support. The Commission was pleased to see the university's broad engagement with new processes for assessment of student learning and program review. As the EER team noted, "faculty understanding and acceptance of the assessment process has increased dramatically since the team's first visit." The Commission especially acknowledges the team's

observation regarding “the positive feeling on the part of the USC faculty that efforts to date and planned future steps will have important benefits for the quality and impact of undergraduate programs.”

The Commission's action letter of March 6, 2009 highlighted two major issues for special attention during the interval between the CPR and EER visits: assessment and program review. In terms of assessment, the Commission recommended that USC increase its efforts to expand faculty members' understanding of assessment, develop student learning outcomes for the general education curriculum and degree programs, and identify ways to measure whether outcomes have been attained. While there is now strong campus-wide understanding of assessment and its importance, and all departments, with one exception, have developed learning outcomes, most of the undergraduate programs are in the initial or emerging stages of implementing a comprehensive assessment process. Concerning program review, the Commission recommended that USC, which already has a process for reviewing graduate programs, develop a mechanism for reviewing its undergraduate degree and general education programs that incorporates assessing student learning outcomes. The University has since created a comprehensive peer review model for undergraduate programs.

The Commission commends USC for its many accomplishments during this comprehensive review, including: responding thoughtfully and in detail to suggestions made by the team in the CPR report; creating an array of initiatives that encourage interdisciplinary learning and that position USC as an institution of global learning; developing new undergraduate programs that enhance advising, provide an introduction to the academy, and expand community service opportunities; conducting research studies that document the success of core writing courses in improving students' critical thinking and writing skills, and that document the success of core diversity courses in improving students' critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and problem-solving skills; assuring high quality in its off-campus and distance learning programs; and recognizing the criticality of a strong strategic plan in guiding the institution and aligning resources.

Of special note is USC's high graduation rate. The Commission joins the team in commending USC for progress in raising the overall six-year graduation rate from 70 percent in 1998 to 89 percent in 2010. The team noted that faculty and staff are “enthusiastic about reaching for an even higher target, and their concern for every student is real and laudable.”

The Commission endorses the recommendations of the EER team and is looking forward to learning more about the institution's achievements, particularly in these areas:

Continuing Development of Assessment and Program Review. As highlighted in the team report, the USC faculty embraces assessment and program review. They recognize what both can contribute to strengthening the quality and effectiveness of educational programs -- but much work lies ahead. As the EER team noted, “Measuring the extent to which learning outcomes have been accomplished, determining reasons for any failures, and feeding this information back into the curriculum to improve pedagogy have scarcely begun.”

In terms of assessment, the Commission recommends that USC proceed expeditiously to assess the extent to which learning outcomes have been achieved, determine reasons for outcomes not met, and use this information to improve teaching, learning and the curriculum – for undergraduate, graduate and professional programs. Because formal program review at the undergraduate level was just undertaken this year, the team was not able to evaluate the effectiveness of program review. However, based on the plans and on-site interviews, the team found the faculty to be “seriously engaged with the reviews” and “looking forward to learning both from preparation of the self study and from feedback from the reviewers.” The Commission recommends that further program reviews be undertaken as planned and that findings from assessment of learning outcomes be incorporated consistently into the review process. Further, the Commission recommends that USC undertake an evaluation of the pilot program review process at the end of the first cycle and make refinements and improvements, as appropriate. (CFRs 2.3, 2.4, 2.6, 2.7, 4.4, 4.6, 4.7)

Promoting Student Success. While the overall six-year undergraduate graduation rate is high (89%), some disparities appear to exist by ethnic group. The Commission recommends that USC examine more closely disaggregated data to identify possible disparities in performance among various subpopulations, seek to understand these disparities, and explore strategies that could improve the rates in areas identified. In addition, the Commission recommends that USC compare its graduation and retention rates to other appropriate institutions in order to “develop a challenging yet reasonable target for further improvement.” (CFRs 1.2, 2.6, 2.10, 4.4)

Studying Interdisciplinary Learning: General Education and Minors. USC’s program of minors and general education is designed to achieve a balance between providing students with concentrated study in more than one area (framed as interdisciplinarity) and providing the breadth needed for the classic, well-educated individual. The team raised some questions about the effectiveness of the current undergraduate curriculum model and whether it is serving its intended purposes, and recommended that USC would benefit from a closer examination of the entire curriculum (general education, majors, minors, and electives) to see whether it provides the desired breadth of learning. The Commission endorses this recommendation and urges USC to proceed with plans to study this important issue. (CFRs 2.1, 2.2, 4.4)

Given the above, the Commission acted to:

1. Receive the Educational Effectiveness Review report and reaffirm the accreditation of the University of Southern California.
2. Schedule the Capacity and Preparatory Review for fall 2020 and the Educational Effectiveness Review for spring 2022.
3. Request a Special Visit in fall 2014 to review progress on the following issues cited in the EER report: a) assessment: developing effective methods and using the results to improve learning; b) undergraduate program review: incorporating assessment of student learning into program review, refining the process as needed, and proceeding to complete

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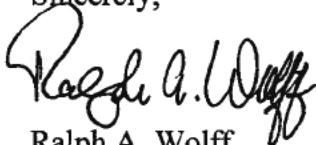
more reviews; c) student success: identifying appropriate benchmarks for graduation and retention data and disaggregating data for subpopulations to analyze possible disparities and develop plans to address them; and d) breadth of learning: studying the balance of depth and breadth in the undergraduate curriculum to assure appropriate balance. Progress should be demonstrated, as defined above.

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

In accordance with Commission policy, a copy of this letter will be sent to the chair of the University of Southern California's governing board in one week. The Commission expects that the team report and this action letter will be widely disseminated throughout the institution to promote further engagement and improvement, and to support the institution's response to the specific issues identified in them.

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

Sincerely,



Ralph A. Wolff
President

RW/BD/cf

cc: Linda Johnsrud, Commission Chair
Robin Romans, ALO
Edward P. Roski, Chair of the Board of Trustees
Members of the EER team
Barbara Gross Davis, WASC Vice President