March 6, 2015

Dr. 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 18-20, 2015, the Commission considered the report of the Special Visit team that conducted the visit to the University of Southern California (USC) on November 19-21, 2014. The Commission also had access to the Special Visit report and exhibits prepared by USC prior to the visit and your January 22, 2015 response to the visiting team report. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the review with Interim Provost Michael Quick and Associate Provost Robin Romans. Their comments were very helpful in informing the Commission’s deliberations.

The Commission scheduled a Special Visit to the institution in fall 2014 to focus on the following areas: undergraduate program review and assessment of student learning; student success, with specific attention to disparities in student achievement among undergraduate subpopulations; and interdisciplinary learning and general education.

USC is to be commended for producing a well-organized and well-documented report, and, as the team noted, successfully addressing the issues “in thoughtful, deliberative, and intellectually substantive ways.”

During its time on campus, the team found much to commend:

**Undergraduate program review.** As highlighted in the report, USC has developed a “thorough and comprehensive” program review process that has become “well-established at the university” and that faculty embraces with “enthusiasm for (its) value.” The team reviewed evidence that shows departments make good use of the findings “to identify issues, establish priorities and consider changes to curriculum, student support and co-curricular activities.” Overall, the team commended USC for developing a strong undergraduate program review process “and implementation strategy for the outcomes that has had a material impact on the curriculum and student experience.”
Assessment of student learning. The team applauded USC’s nationally recognized longitudinal writing and critical thinking study that examined the writing of students in their first year and again in their third year, documenting strides in critical thinking that occur over the course of a USC education. The findings from this research “are informing pedagogy and curriculum in the writing program and general education at large.” The team lauded this work as “representing institutional learning at its best.” The team also commended USC for the development of “creative” and “innovative” capstone courses and culminating projects in the arts, communication, and engineering schools that “serve as a model for enhancing the level of interdisciplinary study across the entire campus.” As the team report noted, these capstone experiences not only assess student achievement but the “results are used to evaluate and change the curriculum itself.”

Student success. USC has significantly increased its six-year undergraduate graduation rate from 70% in 1998 to 91% in 2013. This has occurred as USC has increased access and the diversity of its student body, particularly transfer students, low-income first-generation students, and students in need of significant financial aid to attend USC. The university internally analyzes disaggregated retention and graduation data, identifies any patterns or gaps among subpopulations, seeks explanations and strategies for improvement, and then formulates action plans accordingly. The team was particularly impressed by the institution’s efforts to reach out to students who have not registered for the next semester, which has strengthened retention. Overall, the team commended USC “for the attention that they have placed on increasing the graduation rates for all students on campus.”

General education and interdisciplinary learning. As the team noted, USC has substantially revised its general education curriculum “in a collaborative and deliberative manner,” enlisting a variety of stakeholders “to develop a thoughtful and flexible structure” that leverages the many strengths of USC. The new general education requirements, according to the team, are a good strategy to increase cross-disciplinary study and expand the number of small seminar courses available to undergraduate students. The team concluded that the changes in general education requirements “will have a positive impact on the exposure of undergraduates to disciplines outside their major field of study.”

The Commission commends USC for transparent public access to the materials submitted for this review and endorses the commendations and recommendations in the Special Visit team report. The Commission identifies the following areas for attention and further development before USC’s Comprehensive Review scheduled for fall 2020.

Enhancing program review. The Commission expects USC to continue its successful efforts in undergraduate program review, which includes faculty-driven reflection on qualitative and quantitative evidence of student learning to improve program educational effectiveness and academic quality. In addition, the university might consider better alignment or coordination of undergraduate and graduate reviews to help inform the decisions about resource adjustments based upon these reviews. (CFRs 2.7, 4.4-4.6)
Leveraging institutional research capacity. As the team noted, USC’s institutional research capacity “is improving.” The Commission expects the institutional research unit to communicate regularly and work closely with administrative leadership and the faculty so that data are analyzed, presented, and otherwise made available in ways that are useful for decision-makers. USC could also benefit by posting on its website data and analyses about student success, “in part to highlight and publicize its exemplary work with transfer students.” (CFRs 4.1, 4.2)

Implementing new general education requirements. USC examined its breadth requirements and created a revitalized system of general education to take effect in fall 2015. USC has defined student learning outcomes, extended the opportunity to teach general education courses to faculty in the professional schools, emphasized seminar formats with no more than 19 students per course, and increased cross-disciplinary study. USC will want to carefully monitor implementation of the general education program, making changes as needed and appropriate. (CFRs 2.2a, 3.1, 3.7)

Finding ways to share the experiences and expertise of USC faculty engaged in the assessment of student learning. The team observed that USC is “serious about its commitment” to assessment. Like other large, complex universities, however, the opportunities for faculty to learn from one another may be limited. The Commission encourages USC to explore ways of sharing the knowledge and experiences of faculty who have developed capstone courses with other faculty to increase institutional understanding of ways to assess student learning. (CFRs 2.4, 2.8, 4.4)

Eliminating remaining barriers to interdisciplinary learning. USC has undertaken various successful initiatives to encourage interdisciplinary learning, including interdisciplinary majors, minors, and degree programs. As stated in the team report, “Interdisciplinary courses can be challenging to mount and make known to students.” Barriers include technical difficulties in cross-listing and allocation of resources for courses that are co-taught by faculty from different departments or schools. The Commission recommends that USC continue to encourage interdisciplinary courses and programs and to explore strategies to remove obstacles in the way of their development and implementation. (CFR 2.8)

The Commission acted to:

1. Receive the Special Visit report.
3. Confirm the scheduled Mid-Cycle Review in spring 2016.

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. The team report and the Commission’s action letter will also be posted on the WSCUC website. If the institution wishes to respond to the Commission action on its own website, WSCUC will post a link to that response.

Finally, the Commission wishes to express its appreciation for the extensive work that the University of Southern California undertook in preparing for and supporting this Special Visit review. WSCUC is committed to an accreditation process that adds value to institutions while assuring public accountability, and we thank you for your continued participation in this process. Please contact me if you have any questions about this letter or the action of the Commission.

Sincerely,

Mary Ellen Petrisko
President

MEP/bgd

Cc: William Ladusaw, Commission Chair
    Robin Romans, ALO
    Edward Roski, Board Chair
    Members of the Special Visit team
    Barbara Gross Davis, WSCUC liaison