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PRESIDENT AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Ralph A. Wolff

June 26, 2009

F. King Alexander
President
California State University, Long Beach
1250 Bellflower Blvd.
Long Beach, CA 90840-0115

Dear President Alexander:

At its meeting June 17-19, 2009, the Commission considered the report of the Capacity and Preparatory Review (CPR) team that visited California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), March 4-6, 2009. The Commission also had access to CSULB's Capacity and Preparatory Review report, its Institutional Proposal, the University's 2001 action letter, and its accreditation history. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the review with you, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Graduate Studies Cecile Lindsay, and Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts David Dowell. Your comments, particularly regarding CSULB's plans for dealing with the economic downturn, were most helpful.

In its Institutional Proposal, CSU Long Beach set forth three themes or "Core Commitments" that would be the organizing principles for inquiry at both the CPR and Educational Effectiveness (EER) stages of the review: "Organizing for Effectiveness," "Staffing for Effectiveness," and "Assessing Student Success." These themes were chosen partly in response to recommendations from the Commission's 2002 action letter, which emphasized the need to address 1) assessment of student learning, and 2) shared governance, decision making and communication in the context of a highly decentralized institution. Staffing became an additional concern as the University grew to an enrollment of 38,000, workloads increased, the cost of living in the region rose, and the University became concerned that it was not able to recruit, retain, and adequately support highly-qualified personnel.

The visiting team found that the CPR report provided comprehensive information on these themes, which are even more salient today than when the Institutional Proposal was written two years ago. As the team report puts it, CSULB "has ridden a roller coaster of enrollment increase, decline, and containment, coupled with budget enhancement, retrenchment, and recurring cut-backs." This volatility is likely to be with the Long Beach campus, as well as other campuses of the CSU system, for some time to come. It will inevitably challenge all sectors of the CSULB community: leadership, faculty and other educators, staff, and students.

The University is to be commended for the leadership, careful planning and budgeting, commitment to shared governance, and flexibility it is demonstrating in these turbulent times. The team was impressed by the University's documented improvements in advising, retaining and graduating students; its beginning efforts to assess general education and degree programs; the nascent collaboration between Institutional Research and Academic Affairs; the recent expansion of graduate degrees to include the EdD; the University's respect for the role of staff; and its commitment to serving its community and the region. The team was amazed that a campus as large and decentralized as CSULB could maintain

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such a vital culture of community, shared governance, and horizontal as well as vertical communication; but the team also worried that budget cuts and rapid change could seriously stress that culture.

The team noted areas for improvement and made the following recommendations: 1) create a robust plan for promoting diversity at staff and administrative levels; 2) clearly articulate expectations for student learning and attainment, making greater use of direct methods of assessment; 3) widen the circle of engagement, communication and governance on campus to include voices that are currently silent; 4) address student concerns about budget cuts and cost of attendance; and 5) ensure that the university is developing a culture of evidence rather than a culture of data. The Commission endorses these recommendations and wishes to elaborate on two of them: #2 (student learning and assessment), and # 5 (a culture of evidence versus a culture of data).

During the conversation with the Commission, both you and David Dowell emphasized the point that “data drives everything.” The Commission welcomes this, but would add two observations. First, data collection is only the beginning of an improvement process, whether for student learning or for any other aspect of institutional functioning. It is equally important to go beyond measuring, beyond looking at the *what*, and to understand the *why*. It is in moving from measuring to inquiry and reflection that the data become evidence, and the evidence becomes a tool for innovation and improvement. Second, there are legitimate student learning outcomes that do not lend themselves to traditional data collection (e.g., GPA, credits earned, survey results). For these, it will be essential for faculty and other campus educators to examine student work directly and then engage in the entire process of reflection, interpretation, and application of findings that constitutes assessment of student learning. Providing departments or programs with data from Institutional Research is a valuable service that can round out the picture of student achievement, but such data alone will not sufficiently illuminate student learning. Departments and programs need to be supported as they undertake the difficult task of directly examining student work and performances and using the findings for improvement.

The team report makes a related point about the importance of the University focusing its research questions more sharply, collecting evidence, analyzing it, and presenting findings by the time of the EER visit. As the CPR team report notes, “The team had hoped to see...more discussion of varied measures of effectiveness and more preliminary evidence. Team members also expected to see more discussion regarding assessment planning and implementation in administrative units besides Academic Affairs.” The Commission trusts, with the team, that “a more consistent pattern of inquiry and disciplined and consistent use of evidence” will emerge, and that evaluations of effectiveness will be apparent at the time of the EER.

In addition to finding that program assessment was “uneven,” the team suggested that progress had been slowed by the lack of assessment expertise and support to programs. Thus the commission was disappointed to learn that shortly after the visit, the full-time instructional researcher with responsibility for assessment was reduced to less than half-time, and the general education coordinator was reduced from half-time to one quarter-time. Like the team, the Commission appreciates the campus’s desire to “protect the student’s educational experience” and preserve the instructional program in the face of budget cuts. The Commission would suggest, however, that assessment and use of findings *are* integral to instruction and the educational experience (CFR 3.1, 4.5). As the university introduces a strong cycle of inquiry and improvement into its already data-driven culture, it will become an even more impressive institution that it is today.

The Standards of Accreditation place special emphasis on student learning and on the obligation of institutions to assess student learning and identify ways to improve it. CSULB is just building the infrastructure and intellectual capital for assessment of student learning and program effectiveness. At the time of the EER visit, the team will expect to see processes in place and specific results. These include the following:

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- Evidence throughout the University of data collection, analysis, and use for decision making (CFRs 4.3, 4.4, 4.6).
- Evidence of institution-wide assessment of student learning outcomes at the program and institutional levels, and including general education and program review. Direct methods, analysis, and use of findings for feedback, decision making, and improvement should be demonstrated (CFRs 1.2, 2.2, 2.3, 2.7, 4.6, 4.7).
- A financial plan for dealing with budget cuts to the CSU system and other impacts of the economic downturn (CFR 3.5).
- A plan for increasing diversity among faculty and staff (CFR 1.5).
- A plan for strengthening communication and outreach to all members of the University community (CFR 1.7, 3.8, 3.11).

The Commission believes that CSULB is in a position to proceed to the Educational Effectiveness Review in 18 months. Thus the Commission acted to:

- 1) Receive the Capacity and Preparatory Review report and continue the accreditation of CSU Long Beach.
- 2) Proceed with the scheduled Educational Effectiveness Review, October 6-8, 2010. The Institutional Report will be due twelve weeks prior to the visit.
- 3) Request that the institution incorporate in its Educational Effectiveness report its response to the issues raised in this action letter and the major recommendations of the Capacity team report. In addition, the institution is expected to prepare a brief analysis of how it meets the expectations established in the changes to the Standards and Criteria for Review, which were effective July 1, 2008. These changes can be found on the WASC website at www.wascsenior.org. You may include this analysis in an appendix to your EER report or incorporate it into the report.

In accordance with Commission policy, copies of this letter will be sent to Chancellor Charles Reed and the Chair of the CSU Board of Trustees in one week. It is the Commission's expectation that the team report and this action letter will be widely disseminated throughout the University to promote further engagement and improvement, and to support the University's response to the specific issues identified in them.

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

Sincerely,

Ralph A. Wolff
President and Executive Director

RW/aa

cc: Sherwood Lingenfelter
Chancellor Charles Reed
CSU Board of Trustees Chair
David Hood, ALO
Members of the CPR team
Barbara Wright