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June 24, 2015

Dr. Barry Ryan
President
United States University
830 Bay Blvd.
Chula Vista, CA 91911

Dear President Ryan:

At its meeting June 17-19, 2015, the Commission considered the report of the Accreditation Visit team that conducted an Onsite Review of United States University (USU) April 7-9, 2015. The Commission also reviewed the institutional report submitted by the university prior to the visit and the institution's May 29, 2015, response to the visiting team report. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the visit with you, Dr. Steve Stargardt, Provost and ALO, and Dr. Oskana Malysheva, Chief Financial Sponsor and Board Member. Your observations were very helpful in informing the Commission's deliberations.

Current Status of USU

In June 2013, the Commission placed USU on Probation because it failed to meet key elements of Standards 1, 2, 3, and 4. Prior to being placed on Probation, USU was scheduled for its Offsite Review in fall 2014 and Accreditation Visit in spring 2015. In the July 10, 2013, Commission letter, USU was asked to continue with the scheduled reviews and to submit an institutional report that demonstrated compliance with all four Standards, with special attention to strategic planning, board governance, financial viability, program growth and mission, and policies and procedures.

Commission Action

After careful review of the team's findings, the Commission has determined that USU has made sufficient improvement to be considered in compliance with the Standards, and as a result, has removed Probation and reaffirmed accreditation for seven years. In addition, the Commission has issued a Formal Notice of Concern and scheduled a Special Visit in two years, to highlight the need for continued progress and ongoing monitoring of USU.

Team Findings

The team investigated how well USU has addressed previous areas of concern and assessed USU against the four WSCUC Standards.

Previous areas of concern. According to the team, USU has made “significant progress” in addressing previous Commission recommendations. USU has:

- Developed a 2015-2019 strategic plan with “widespread and active engagement of multiple stakeholders” that identifies three strategic directions (sustainability, quality, accessibility), specific priorities, milestones, timelines, resource considerations, and responsible parties;
- Revised governing board bylaws to align with WSCUC standards and policies and reconstituted the board with members who have “impressive expertise in higher education and a commitment to the mission of USU”;
- Focused on boosting enrollment as a path to financial viability by pursuing new target populations, expanding marketing activities, and redirecting resources toward recruitment activities that have been shown to be effective;
- Clarified and recommitted to the institutional mission of serving the underserved; the mission “is well-known and supported by the campus”;
- Revamped and strengthened the curriculum for some programs to align with professional practice and needs of employers;
- Eliminated low enrollment degree programs;
- Ensured that each academic program has at least one core faculty member in addition to adjuncts;
- Put in place policies and procedures expected by WSCUC.

Standard 1: Defining Institutional Purposes and Ensuring Educational Objectives. The team verified that USU has: developed a clearly defined mission; created institutional learning outcomes aligned with the mission; aligned program learning outcomes with institutional outcomes; reviewed and updated all its policies; and demonstrated an institutional commitment to diversity. One area within this Standard requires further development and attention. USU has faced “ongoing and significant” deficits in gathering and using data because, prior to 2012, the university lacked the appropriate systems. The Commission was pleased to learn that three new enterprise systems have replaced the previous inadequate legacy system. The Commission expects USU to use the information generated from these new systems to enable data-driven decision-making.

Standard 2: Achieving Educational Objectives Through Core Functions. The team verified that USU has: ensured a sufficient number of qualified faculty to teach in its programs; created an infrastructure for the assessment of student learning outcomes, though “most assessment work is about 12-18 months old”; defined criteria for hiring and evaluating faculty; put in place “useful and complete program information and advising” for students; and identified needs of entering and continuing students and offered “appropriate support services.” Several areas within Standard 2 require further development. USU has revised and strengthened the curriculum for some of its degree programs, but certain other programs could benefit from a similar review to ensure quality, viability, and rigor. The team reported that learning outcomes for those programs may not be at the appropriate degree level and that student work “is uneven.” Because many students arrive unprepared for college work, USU will want to clarify what is needed to bring students from where they are at matriculation to where they need to be at graduation. Additional work is needed in the area of assessment.

While learning outcomes exist and rubrics have been created, the team observed that “evidence from assessments [has not yet] been aggregated, analyzed and used” for improvement. Finally, the team agreed with the institution’s self-assessment that retention and graduation rates could be strengthened. The Commission was pleased to learn that data migration to a new system has been completed and that the university will now be able to better analyze and interpret retention and graduation rates. The Commission expects USU to make continued progress in assessment, student success, and the rigor of some of its academic programs.

Standard 3: Developing and Applying Resources and Organizational Structures to Ensure Quality and Sustainability. The team verified that USU has: adequate staffing; an active academic senate; orientations for new faculty; support for faculty development; faculty and staff handbooks; new technological systems that give faculty and staff “access to the information they need to make decisions and to teach and advise students”; a “strong” leadership team; and an “informed” and engaged governing board. Within Standard 3, financial stability “is an ongoing concern, and leadership has rightly focused on boosting enrollments.” USU needs to continue to grow its enrollments and improve retention to expand revenue. Early termination of a lease for a largely unused building will help USU’s financial situation. However, financial stability requires continued investment by the chief financial sponsor. The Commission was pleased to receive written confirmation of her intent to provide ongoing financial support to USU and to cover short-term budget deficits.

Standard 4: Creating an Organization Committed to Quality Assurance, Institutional Learning, and Improvement. The team verified that USU has: a strategic plan in place “with full community involvement” that is “ready for implementation”; the foundation for “a viable institutional research function”; and a “deep commitment to the application of data...in the policies, protocols, and procedures of USU.” The team was “impressed with USU’s efforts” to grow into an organization that is evidence-based and data-driven. As the team noted, however, “adverse circumstances” and “considerable challenges” have impeded USU’s progress in fully developing quality assurance processes. The Commission appreciated learning that USU has recently hired a full-time institutional researcher. The Commission expects USU to continue to collect and analyze data “to enable sufficient support for decision-making and planning.”

Commendations

The Commission endorses the team’s commendations of USU and especially highlights the following: the significant progress the institution has made since the last visit in addressing Commission recommendations and concerns; the mission of USU to “serve the underserved,” which is widely embraced and reflected in the strong diversity of students and faculty; the personal attention students receive that contributes to their academic success; the “successful and dramatic revitalization” of the governing board; the “development of a collaborative university community dedicated to improving and strengthening USU”; and the “nimbleness and agility” of USU in adapting to changing organizational circumstances.

Areas for Attention and Further Development

Based on the team report, the Commission has identified four areas requiring additional attention and development. USU is expected to:

Strengthen Academic Programs. As Needed

1. Assess the viability of degree programs, carefully considering opportunities for effective specialization within them, given the university's mission and market needs. (CFRs 2.1, 2.7)
2. Ensure the quality and rigor of academic programs, making certain that the expectations for student learning are appropriate to the degree level. Assess the students' achievement of those outcomes, clarifying what is needed to bring students from where they are at admission to where they need to be at graduation. (CFRs 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.6)
3. Continue the scheduled implementation of the program review and assessment cycle. (CFRs 2.7, 4.3)

Continue to Focus on Student Success

4. Gather, analyze, interpret, and disseminate retention and graduation data across all programs and degree levels, using standard reporting methods. Use the results of the analyses to make changes in policies and practices to improve graduation rates. (CFRs 1.2, 2.10)
5. Continue to enhance the quality and currency of technology and expand student support services and faculty and staff training to improve online learning experiences.

Enhance Institutional Research and Planning

6. Continue to build a robust institutional research capacity and ensure its smooth integration into the organizational structure to enable data-driven decision-making. (CFRs 4.1, 4.2)
7. Establish protocols for monitoring the progress and outcomes of the strategic plan and for revising the plans' priorities as necessary to achieve institutional goals. (CFRS 4.1, 4.5, 4.6)

Build Financial Sustainability

8. Continue to grow enrollments in currently viable programs while improving retention and strengthening student success. (CFRs 2.10, 2.13, 3.4)
9. Establish realistic budgets based on achievable targets for enrollment. (CFR 3.4)
10. Continue to reduce the annual budget deficit, while developing plans for long-term financial sustainability. (CFR 3.4)

The Commission acted to:

1. Receive the Accreditation Visit report
2. Reaffirm the accreditation of United States University for a period of seven years
3. Remove Probation
4. Issue a Formal Notice of Concern
5. Schedule the next Comprehensive Review with the Offsite Review in fall 2021 and the Accreditation Visit in spring 2022
6. Schedule the Mid-Cycle Review in spring 2019
7. Schedule a Special Visit in fall 2017 to assess USU's progress on the following:
 - a. Academic Programs: viability, quality and rigor of current offerings; plans for new academic programs, if any
 - b. Assessment: update on the assessment cycle; evidence of how the results of assessment efforts have been used
 - c. Student Completion: retention and graduation rates, aggregated and disaggregated by program and other variables of interest to the institution; plans to improve retention and graduation rates
 - d. Enrollment: projected and actual enrollments from 2015-2017, by program, with an explanation of any gaps
 - e. Finances: projected and actual budgets; deficits, if any; audited statements

In taking this action to reaffirm accreditation, the Commission confirms that United States University has satisfactorily addressed the Core Commitments to Student Learning and Success; Quality and Improvement; and Institutional Integrity, Sustainability and Accountability. United States University has successfully completed the multi-stage review conducted under the 2013 Standards of Accreditation. Between this action and the time of the next review, the institution is expected to maintain and advance its compliance with WSCUC Standards and uphold its commitment to continuous quality improvement.

In accordance with Commission policy, a copy of this letter will be sent to the chair of USU's governing board in one week. The Commission expects that the team report and this action letter will be posted in a readily accessible location on USU's website and widely disseminated throughout the institution to promote further engagement and improvement and to support the institution's response to the specific issues identified in these documents. 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 USU undertook in preparing for and supporting this accreditation review. WSCUC is committed to an accreditation process that adds value to institutions while contributing to public accountability, and we thank you for your continued support of our 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: Barbara Gross Davis, Vice President
William Ladusaw, Commission Chair
Patricia Potter, Board Chair, USU
Steve Stargardter, ALO, USU
Members of the Accreditation Visit team