

**REPORT OF THE WSCUC TEAM
SPECIAL VISIT**

To United States University

February 18-21, 2025

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The team evaluated the institution under the 2023 Handbook and Standards of Accreditation and prepared this report containing its collective evaluation for consideration and action by the institution and by the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC). The formal action concerning the institution's status is taken by the Commission and is described in a letter from the Commission to the institution. This report and the Commission letter are made available to the public by publication on the WSCUC website.

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SECTION I – OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

A. Description of the Institution, its Accreditation History, as Relevant, and the Visit

United States University (USU) was founded as InterAmerican College (IAC) in National City, California, in 1997. The institution was originally a non-profit school designed to provide private liberal arts education that was “personalized” to underrepresented populations. The first curriculum was designed to build bilingual capacity of students in the fields of nursing, healthcare, and education in Southern California to assist underserved populations.

WSCUC granted candidacy to formerly IAC in 2005. After receiving initial accreditation in 2009, IAC underwent a structural substantive change to convert the university from nonprofit to for-profit status, and its name was changed to United States University (USU) the next year.

In the following years, the institution experienced three changes of ownership, a name change, a decision to relocate to Georgia, and the untimely passing of the university’s president. In 2017 the Aspen Group (AGI) assumed ownership of USU, triggering a structural change. Following a Special Visit in 2018, the Commission issued a letter removing the Notice of Concern and scheduled a Special Visit for spring 2020, followed by an Offsite Review in fall 2021 and an Accreditation Visit in spring 2022. In 2022, the university received an eight-year reaffirmation of accreditation, with a Special Visit planned for spring 2025, an Offsite Review for fall 2029, and an Accreditation Visit for spring 2030. Due to changes with AGI in 2023, the university has provided quarterly progress reports focusing on enrollment and finances from June 2023 through June 2024..

A Special Visit was scheduled for spring 2025 to assess progress on six WSCUC recommendations from the reaffirmation review.

WSCUC scheduled the Special Visit, conducted remotely, for February 18-21, 2025. The Special Visit institutional report was submitted in December 2024. This visit focused on the following recommendations identified in the June 2022 action letter:

1. Continue to work on a mission-driven strategic plan that reflects careful thought about the role of each current and planned program in furthering the USU mission in a competitive and changing higher education landscape. (2013 CFRs 1.1, 4.6, 4.7; 2023 CFRs 1.1, 4.8)
2. Support strategic planning with financial analyses that disaggregate data by student population and by type of program, including undergraduate programs, to better understand profitability and institutional needs. (2013 CFRs 3.4, 4.6; 2023 CFRs 3.5, 4.8)
3. Continue to work with the financial aid service provider to ensure appropriate financial aid policies and compliance with Title IV requirements considering issues identified in recurring financial aid audit findings. (2013 CFR 1.7, Title IV Compliance Policy; 2023 CFR 1.4)
4. Acquire knowledge of co-curricular services and programs in online environments that address the needs of all students and support their personal and professional development in meaningful ways. Develop a more holistic and comprehensive model for academic and student support services that is regularly assessed. (2013 CFRs 2.11, 2.13; 2023 CFRs 2.14, 2.13)
5. Continue to develop and strengthen assessment and program review processes and use the results to inform decisions regarding program viability, sustainability, improvement, and planning for growth. (2013 CFRs 2.7, 4.1; 2023 CFRs 4.3, 4.1)

6. Develop a culture and infrastructure to support student and faculty success at the doctoral degree level. (2013 CFRs 2.2b, 2.8; 2023 CFRs 2.2, 2.8)

The institution currently offers 16 programs in the fields of business, education, nursing, and health sciences. Enrollment at the time of the report was 2,233 with most students enrolled in the Master of Science in Nursing (almost 90% of enrolled students). Four programs (Bachelor of Science in Nursing RN, Teacher Credentialing Preparation, Master of Arts in Teaching, MBA) account for 8% of enrolled students, and the remaining programs each have between one and seventeen students enrolled. USU has a handful of full-time faculty, with most courses taught by adjunct faculty; all faculty are paid on a per-student basis. Except for those courses taken by those on student visas, all courses are offered asynchronously online.

USU's mission is as follows:

USU provides professional and personal educational opportunities, with a special outreach to underserved groups. Through campus and online programs, the university offers affordable, relevant, and accessible undergraduate and graduate degree programs and certificates in a supportive student-centered learning environment. (USU Mission Statement)

B. Description of Team's Review Process

The Special Visit team was constituted in the spring of 2024, and the team began work once the institutional report was submitted in December, working asynchronously on the Special Visit team worksheet and meeting via Zoom on December 12 to discuss findings, confirm roles and responsibilities, and request groups with whom to meet and develop the list of additional materials. The assistant chair then worked with the ALO to finalize the schedule and request additional documents before the visit, after reviewing the newly uploaded materials.

The WSCUC team began its visit, via Zoom, on the afternoon of February 18, 2025, to review the visit schedule and finalize discussion items for each visit session. The WSCUC team held sessions with the USU community on February 19 and 20, 2025, with the visit concluding on February 21, 2025.

The WSCUC team met with the ALO, president, steering committee, board, finance and strategic planning groups, co-curricular services, assessment and program review group, deans, directors and program directors, provost, faculty, and students. Before and throughout the visit, a confidential WSCUC-based email address was available to the campus community, and the review team considered communications.

The sessions with USU personnel were productive, and the review team was impressed by the level of commitment of faculty, staff, students, and administrators to their campus mission and community. The team was particularly appreciative of the responsiveness of the ALO to various questions and requests during the visit. Prior to, during, and following the visit, designated first and second writers developed their team report sections based on review of the USU Special Visit report, the team worksheet, inspection of additional documentation and information provided by USU, and findings from the various sessions during the visit.

C. Institution's Special Visit Report: Quality and Rigor of the Report and Supporting Evidence

The USU Special Visit Report was prepared by the president who is also the ALO, with the assistance of a Special Visit steering committee. Before submission, university constituents, including the Board of Trustees, reviewed a draft version of the report. The report was thoughtful and helpful in contextualizing the many changes that have occurred at USU over the past few years.

SECTION II – EVALUATION OF ISSUES UNDER THE STANDARDS

Issue A: Continue to work on a mission-driven strategic plan that reflects careful thought about the role of each current and planned program in furthering the USU mission in a competitive and changing higher education landscape. (2023 CFRs 1.1, 4.8, Standard 4)

In response to this recommendation, United States University provided the WSCUC team with several documents, including the institution's new 2022-2027 strategic plan. In addition, the team met with USU's strategic planning group and asked questions about the planning process in team meetings with staff and faculty.

According to the report and affirmations within the team meetings with staff and faculty, a wide group of university staff and leadership began work in late 2021 to develop a new five-year strategic plan approved by the board in 2022. The team learned through its open meeting with the faculty that USU's faculty senate was not, as a group, involved in the development of the strategic plan, although one full-time faculty member indicated significant involvement in its development. (CFR 4.8)

USU's 2022-2027 strategic plan is centered on a continued commitment to its mission and the following three goals:

- Growth and stability: Continue to grow in a scalable fashion, enabling USU to provide quality education to its students in financially viable programs.
- Culture of Innovation: Develop and support innovations that lead to improved USU student and institutional outcomes with the aspiration of providing professionally relevant and universally affordable high-quality educational opportunities addressing a variety of 21st century societal needs.
- Quality: Enhance operational effectiveness across USU with an aspiration of demonstrating that its programs are high quality and effective, while supporting its

faculty and staff in their ongoing professional development as they fulfill the university's mission.

USU's strategic plan includes initiatives to achieve each of the three goals and a general description of tactics and timelines. Completion of initiatives is monitored each quarter and reported to the board's audit committee annually. The team reviewed a document entitled "Strategic Plan Learning Outcomes," which contains a comprehensive documentation of actions taken, leading USU to conclude that it is progressing across all initiatives. Although completion of each initiative is monitored, the plan lacks clarity in terms of how USU will know that the institution has achieved each goal. Questions that arose for the team include these: What does success for each goal look like? What are the indicators that will help USU know that they have achieved each goal?

With respect to USU's goal to grow, the team found ample evidence that USU is highly focused on enrollment growth, evidenced not only by the documents provided to the team but also through the feedback received by the team throughout its meetings with USU's board, university leadership, staff, and faculty. USU's goal is to double its enrollments by 2030 through an assortment of efforts.

Based primarily on the results of financial analyses, USU determined that its mission is best served by pausing several undergraduate programs and one new doctoral program. USU continues to analyze current programs for financial viability and has shifted its focus to grow enrollments in its current graduate programs (particularly doctoral programs) and teacher credential programs. It also hopes to add new graduate programs when a competitive market analysis suggests doing so is warranted.

While the strategic plan indicates an intent to increase international student enrollments in the business programs, discussions with university members suggest that this area of potential growth is not a current primary focus but rather a long-term plan. Although USU believes it can serve international students in a unique way, the team heard in several of its meetings that university members understand that growing and serving this population is complex and will take time.

Marketing as a key factor in achieving enrollment growth was a conversation in several meetings with university constituents. This important topic is addressed later in this report in Issue B.

Improving student persistence, retention and degree completion is another area of emphasis to promote enrollment growth. To assist in achieving this goal, USU created a student progression task force focused on student completion. In addition, USU changed its enrollment policy, requiring students to enroll each term or formally take a leave of absence or file an intent to return to be considered an active USU student. By creating this disincentive for students to skip a term, student attrition has dropped, and it is hoped that time to completion and overall graduation rates will increase. (CFR 2.10)

With respect to its goal to create a culture of innovation, university members worked to identify the meaning of “innovation” for what the report refers to as the “typical USU student – now approximately 40 years old.” As a result, USU increased the services it provides to its students by creating a student mentor program, working to strengthen academic advising, and renewing its own institutional commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

USU’s third strategic goal is “quality,” defined by USU as enhancing operational effectiveness across USU with an aspiration of demonstrating that its programs are quality and

effective. The plan identifies the following as general indicators of success: student success, accessibility of education, graduation rates, affordability, career success, and commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. (CFR 4.1)

The team was unable to find more specific definitions for each of these elements of quality. During the visit, the team inquired as to how USU will know when it has achieved these goals? For example, how will they know if students have succeeded? What is their target graduation rate? The team heard various responses in its meetings, focusing on a general intent to increase student retention and program completion, successes on comprehensive exams, and post-graduation successes. (CFR 4.1)

Conclusion

It is unmistakable that USU took this recommendation seriously and spent significant energy developing a mission-driven strategic plan. In every meeting with the team, USU members proactively discussed the institution's mission in the context of the planning work, and passionately showed commitment to the plan, indicating that it was the driver of everything they do. However, the team was not able to find as much evidence that there was reflection and analysis, perhaps because of USU's intense effort to accomplish as much as possible. For example, what analysis was done to arrive at the enrollment target of 5,000? What was learned by the need to pause accepting students into the EdD program? When comparing similar programs offered by other institutions, was there analysis and thought as to the rationale behind the units required for the same degrees at USU? What was learned by finding that only a handful of students took advantage of the student mentoring program? (CFR 4.1)

It was clear to the team that the centerpiece in determining the appropriate program portfolio for USU is the financial viability and return on investment for each program. It was less

clear to the team that USU is giving equal weight in its planning and decision-making on its goals to focus on quality as it relates to student learning outcomes. (CFRs 3.10, 4.8)

Strategic plan documents indicate that USU will begin to prepare its next strategic plan in 2026. As it embarks on developing its future strategic plan, it will be important to ensure that both full-time and adjunct faculty have many opportunities to provide input into this effort.

The team recommends that USU design, track, and reflectively analyze comprehensive key performance indicators (KPIs) over multiple years that align with the USU's strategic plan goals while systematically documenting achieved outcomes, implementation challenges, and necessary tactical adjustments. (CFR 4.8) The KPIs for the strategic plan, for example, might include specific targets for revenue growth, graduation rates, and student satisfaction. USU should regularly analyze the actual KPI results versus the target goals to understand what happened and to adjust, as needed, the underlying initiatives or create new initiatives to help achieve the planned outcomes.

Issue B: Support strategic planning with robust financial analyses that disaggregate data by student population (i.e., new students, continuing students, attrition) and by type of program to better understand profitability and institutional needs (2023 CFR 3.4, 4.8)

USU shared with the team a financial analysis presented to its finance committee in September 2024, which provided an ending student population analysis over time and a “one quarter” analysis of program profitability. It is significant that the institution undertook a return on investment (ROI) analysis; however, the university’s analysis was done in a simplistic manner, reflecting all costs except marketing at the same percentage of revenue and only for one quarter. The rationale for this allocation approach was to be able to produce program profitability quickly, as the data is not easily available to be more specific in terms of costs, but the CFO acknowledged that some costs are different per program. Even though USU considers this to be

a true ROI analysis, it is, rather, an allocation of USU's entire costs to programs for a quarter. A true ROI is more comprehensive, considering specific revenue and expense assumptions over the life of the student in the program. For example, some of USU's programs are new and will incur additional costs later during the dissertation phase of a student's program. These additional expenses need to be considered in future ROI analyses. In addition, with USU's new potential focus on international students in the MBA and DBA programs, an understanding of any incremental costs (e.g., international specific marketing, student support costs, staffing costs to manage programs, travel for onsite) need to be included in the analysis.

The team learned that, because of these programmatic financial analyses, USU decided to halt admissions into all undergraduate programs except for those that ladder into the university's graduate programs and temporarily paused its new EdD program.

USU shared with the team its four doctoral substantive change request documents to provide an example of the financial analysis that was conducted for new programs. The financial analysis includes significant details, including the needs for staff expansion, startup costs and enrollment plans. The three-year budget projections included in the documents provide a good example of an overall profitability analysis since it takes into consideration projected enrollments and program specific costs over time. The analysis used to analyze new programs is a model for USU to use in examining the ROI of its current programs. (CFRs 3.4, 4.8)

The team heard differing views as to the impact of marketing during the visit. Numerous individuals expressed frustration about the lack of marketing in the past few years, believing that a significant increase in marketing is required to achieve growth goals. However, others expressed doubt that an increased investment in marketing is needed because of USU's strong reputation for its nursing programs and success in relying primarily on organic leads to attract

new students. USU's schools of education and business are smaller and have been shrinking lately, many attributing this decline to a lack of paid marketing to build awareness and generate leads. Currently there is frustration with the lack of marketing and without additional direction, morale can suffer, especially in the small shrinking programs.

A major contributing factor to the limited marketing funds is related to financial decisions of AGI. The acquisition of USU by AGI in 2017 was transformational, elevating it from a previously weak financial position to its current robust standing with a 3.0 composite score. Despite the USU's financial health, AGI has drawn significant resources from the institution, including distributions of \$5.6M in fiscal year 2023 and \$4M in fiscal year 2024.

USU received approval for three new doctorate programs in the past few years, Doctor of Nursing Practitioner (DNP), Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) and a Doctor of Education (EdD). USU desires to grow in new areas to help its long-term sustainability. Growth in new areas requires investment, especially in marketing. Gaining alignment on USU's growth strategy is essential to ensure each new program is adequately supported and set up for long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

USU has started the profitability work and is making tough programmatic decisions with the insights it learns. The team recommends that USU continue to enhance program profitability analyses by incorporating detailed, specific cost drivers per program and disaggregating student data to better understand profitability to optimize resource allocation and strategic decision-making. (CFR 3.4) The analysis should include costs incurred and expected to be incurred. The disaggregated data should analyze degree programs at a demographic level to understand if there

are different results due to the composition of the students enrolled such as age, full-time versus part-time students, international vs domestic student, and other demographic factors.

Due to USU's current financial situation and desire for growth, the team recommends that USU develop a comprehensive, data informed, multi-year growth strategy and implementation plan in concert with the USU Board and AGI that demonstrates enrollment potential, financial outlook, and investment needs in marketing and operations for sustainable institutional scaling. (CFRs 3.4, 3.6, 3.7) Once there is alignment on the growth goals, USU should communicate its plans to its internal constituencies, so they better understand the goals.

Issue C: Continue to work with USU's financial aid service provider to ensure appropriate financial aid policies and compliance with Title IV requirements in light of recurring financial aid findings. (2023 CFR 1.4)

To examine the financial aid compliance recommendation, the team carefully reviewed USU's financial aid audit for the period ending April 30, 2024, and met with relevant administrators. USU's parent company, AGI, processes financial aid for USU under the Master Services Agreement. Previously, AGI used a third party to assist in the processing. AGI now does all the processing directly. USU has updated policies and procedures to improve compliance and put in quality assurance checks. In addition, USU implemented Anthology's Campus Nexus Solutions (CNS) that also helps with compliance.

The April 30, 2024, audit shows no material weaknesses. There is one finding related to enrollment reporting that has been remediated by USU's management. USU states that they are now fully compliant and will continue to be compliant with Title IV requirements. (CFR 1.4)

Conclusion

The team commends USU for implementing financial aid reforms that ensure compliance and enhance student service delivery.

Issue D: Acquire knowledge of co-curricular services and programs in online environments that address the needs of all students and support their personal and professional development in meaningful ways. Develop a more holistic and comprehensive model for academic and student support services that is regularly assessed (2023 CFRs 2.11, 2.13)

To begin addressing this recommendation, USU participated in the 2022-2023 Accreditation Leadership Academy (ALA). A key result of this participation was the decision to administer a survey that solicited feedback on areas in which USU could better support student engagement through co-curricular activities. Specifically, USU distributed a survey to alumni with two questions that focused on co-curricular activities:

1. *What, if any, co-curricular activities, or programs would have contributed to your engagement and success within the university if they were available to you while you attended?* and
2. *What types of workshops/seminars would have been helpful to you if they were available while you attended?*

In response to the first question, the majority of alumni (56.16%) chose “None,” with approximately 30% selecting a mentorship program, approximately 20% selecting an honor society, and the balance distributed between Eclub, volunteer committee, or other. In response to the second question, the majority (55.38 %) chose career-related workshops, with the balance endorsing financial literacy (29.23%), how to conduct research (36.15%), time management (33.08%), and writing (30.77%) workshops.

Informed by these results, USU implemented several programs (CFR 2.13) including the following:

Career-related services and workshops: These services are overseen by a newly retained career and alumni services manager. Services offered include one-to-one virtual student appointments, workshops, a monthly newsletter, and a resource-focused website. Student access and satisfaction related to these services have been high. In 2023, 624 students accessed the services and satisfaction was rated at 4.93 on a scale of 5.0.

A mentoring program: Launched in Summer 2024, this initiative pairs new students with high-achieving students and alumni as mentors. While the program aimed to enhance students' sense of belonging and confidence in using available services, the assessment methodology presents limitations. The absence of baseline and post-program comparative data makes it difficult to evaluate the program's effectiveness against its stated objectives. Available metrics show mixed results: satisfaction ratings declined from mid-program (4.86) to completion (4.42), and participation decreased from seven mentors and nine mentees initially to four of each by conclusion. Additionally, mentees showed a small GPA decline of 1.1% after completing the program. The evaluation lacked key indicators such as mid-program GPA data and meeting frequency metrics, as well as substantive analysis that could inform quality improvement efforts.

Two national honor societies: As of December 2023, Alpha Beta Eta (College of Nursing) and Kappa Delta Pi (College of Education) have inducted 140 members. USU reported that the honor society is highly active. and members have attended doctoral dissertation defenses, supporting doctoral candidates and interdisciplinary collaboration between USU schools.

A Student Progression Task Force: USU merged the academic advising and registrar functions, which support a collaborative and proactive approach to identifying students who are at risk (such as those who did not post to their courses, those who are demonstrating academic challenges, those who express academic or extra-curricular challenges). Students are linked to

appropriate services designed to mitigate the issue(s) faced. The activities function of the student information system is leveraged to track both concerns and interventions, which renders each transparent to all involved in a student's education. USU made an additional change in January 2025 to support students, mandating that students complete a self-paced new student orientation, designed to scaffold students by socializing them to USU's online learning management system, structure, policy and procedures, and other key factors that can support their academic success.

In general, USU has intentionally increased its co-curricular services to support student success. Two items for additional consideration include the following:

- The services were developed based on alumni surveys and assessed based on student satisfaction rates. For the mentoring program, baseline data were not collected on many key indicators. Additionally, the data collected suggested that the program might not be effective as currently designed; however, an analysis of the data was not provided. USU reported that they have recently operationalized a new student information system (SIS). The team suggests that USU adopt key performance indicators for each co-curricular endeavor, and that the SIS be leveraged to measure the data that can be analyzed to ensure alignment with intended outcomes. The team also suggests that future co-curricular activities be established based on additional data, such as pattern analysis of internal data by student population and benchmarking against other similar institutions (i.e., environmental scans).
- It was reported that the institution reviews every flagged student before assigning the student to an advisor through the Student Progression Task Force. This process will inevitably pose challenges as USU meets its growth goals. The team suggests that a scalable solution be considered (e.g., applying branching logic, triaging, leveraging

technology, etc.) to ensure sustainability and efficiency without losing the provision of important service linkages for students in need.

Conclusion

Due to the analysis of survey data related to student satisfaction with services, USU has increased co-curricular services to support student success. Through increasing resources desired by students, USU is further enhancing its academic and graduate culture in support of student success. USU is encouraged to reassess student satisfaction with the implemented changes and newly provided services and is commended for this effort. (CFRs 2.11 and 2.13)

Issue E: Continue to develop and strengthen assessment, program review processes, and use the results to inform decisions regarding program viability, sustainability, improvement, and planning for growth. (2023 CFRs 2.7, 2.9, 4.6)

Since the time of the last visit for reaffirmation of accreditation, USU has hired an institutional research and assessment director. This director is engaged in internally coordinating the assessment and institutional research activities of the university to help further develop a data-informed culture of evidence. Additionally, the school has recruited a compliance officer for the nursing program. Since this is a large, key program of the university, this position will help this program remain in compliance with state regulatory and professional accreditation standards and requirements.

Along with the institutional report, USU provided an annual recap of the activities of the office of institutional research and assessment (OIRA). While it is unclear specifically which year the recap covers, this document provided information about how, since the time of the last review, USU has made changes, and this office now has a seat at the leadership meetings to help bridge the gap between decision-making and needed data. The document describes a leadership environment in which there are regular conversations about what each college and department

needs to make data- informed decisions. Additionally, this position provides an enhanced infrastructure and leadership, with the creation or reestablishment of the needed assessment committee and provision of additional material resources such as a revised assessment and program review handbooks.

Additionally, a key institutional research function is now internally owned and managed, with the compiling, cleaning, and dissemination of data delivered with summaries to USU leadership for use in decision-making. Further, OIRA has worked on enhancing the quality of its indirect assessments by revising internal surveys for students and faculty. This office has created data digest templates for use by programs to help “close the loop” regarding the extent to which data-informed decisions are improving the student experience. In support of its blossoming assessment culture, USU has developed a policy related to assessment (Policy 214 - Assessment Materials Approval Process).

While USU has made strides in improving some of its indirect assessment processes as well as assessments, the university has the opportunity to build its faculty-driven direct assessment of student learning processes. While USU provided a sample of a PLO/ILO-aligned analytic, criterion-referenced rubric, there were minimal pieces of evidence of the planning for direct assessment nor direct assessment results. While the assessment handbook states that assessment of student learning occurs in the spring each year, the sample assessment plan submitted does not contain information about planned direct assessment summative PLOs, nor is there evidence of ongoing, recent assessment activity. (CFRs 2.7 and 2.9)

While the university has reactivated its assessment committee, the information provided by the OIRA focused on indirect assessment and institutional research updates rather than the direct assessment of student learning, and the committee charge document does not address

direct assessment of PLOs. PLO assessment results are thoughtfully included within the program review samples provided to the team; yet the assessment of student learning results reflected within these reports are all several years old. During the visit, the USU faculty asserted that they are indeed in the process of building a meaningful, aligned assessment process. (CFR 4.6)

Conclusion

Through the hiring of the director, the university has shown its commitment to building strong assessment processes across the institution. It will be important for the institution to build upon current assessment measures to incorporate the regular assessment of PLOs in accordance with assessment plans. (CFRs 2.7 and 2.9)

Issue F: Develop a culture and infrastructure to support student and faculty success at the doctoral degree level (2023 CFRs 2.3, 2.8, 2.13)

Since the last accreditation visit, USU has made notable progress in strengthening its institutional culture and infrastructure to enhance student and faculty success at the doctoral level. Key areas emphasized during the site visit included faculty support, scholarship, library resources, curriculum development, and synchronous meetings. (CFRs 2.3 and 2.13)

Faculty Support: Doctoral culture is supported through the appointment of appropriately qualified faculty members, and as outlined in their handbooks, the institution supports and expects faculty research and scholarship to be part of the faculty practice and role. (CFR 2.8) The faculty cultivates and encourages doctoral-level professional development through their guidance and modeling to demonstrate the application of coursework to professional practice. They also provide timely feedback to students to enhance reflection on their values and practice. It was noted in several interviews with students that the faculty is highly communicative about expectations and responsive to student academic, psychosocial, and co-curricular needs. (CFR 3.1)

Faculty and staff coordinate monthly doctoral huddles with program directors to discuss additional ideas for deepening student involvement based on feedback regarding what works and where opportunities exist for more assistance or resources. (CFR 4.6) USU provided the team with documents from its doctoral huddle defining and explaining doctoral culture as “curiosity, research, knowledge, collaboration, support, idea sharing.” USU strives to provide a culture of thoughtful academic discourse that is responsive, resourceful, and respectful, with students interacting well with others and prior research on their topics to promote knowledge advancement and exchange.

To further obtain this goal, USU implemented the Two Minute Takeaway (2MT) for applied doctoral candidates to come together and share the translation of research into practice, a mechanism through which institutes of higher education provide presentation skills training. During the visit, students noted that this was one of the most challenging assignments in their programs but also the most useful because it helped them to solidify and articulate their projects and areas of study.

Scholarship: Scholarship serves as a fundamental pillar of the doctoral culture at USU. Both adjunct and full-time faculty members are cognizant of and actively utilize the professional development funds available to maintain Continuing Education Units (CEUs), attend or present at conferences, conduct research, or receive tuition reimbursement for ongoing educational pursuits. (CFR 3.3) Moreover, in 2023, USU established an Institutional Review Board (IRB) to support research initiatives while ensuring the protection of research subjects.

Another example of USU scholarship was evidenced in the leveraging of the College of Nursing and Health Sciences (CONHS) lecture series to offer monthly colloquiums to the USU community to foster and promote academic scholarship. Furthermore, it was noted during the

visit that as part of their support of the doctoral students in the DNP program, USU's honor society members of Sigma Theta Tau recently attended the doctoral defense to support their peers and colleagues in this milestone academic event.

USU has implemented a mentorship program in which doctoral students serve as mentors for undergraduate and master's students, providing role models for advanced studies and facilitating the exchange of ideas. However, the evidence presented to the team included a survey from the Fall 1 2024 cohort in which only nine individuals participated as mentees. At the Mid-Program mark of Week 4, there were 44% still participating and by the end of the program at Week 8, all mentees had discontinued their participation in the program. Consequently, this program's effectiveness and its impact on student progress at the undergraduate and graduate levels remain uncertain.

Library Resources: The library staff at USU is highly qualified as each of the five librarians possess a minimum American Library Association (ALA) accredited degree in Master of Library Sciences (MLIS), equipping them to support students in doctoral research and writing. (CFR 2.3) Furthermore, they have curated several doctoral-focused instructional guides including a doctoral research support guide (for support in conducting a literature review, research methodology, publishing, scholarly formats, information for doctoral students across programs), a knowledge synthesis guide for nursing and healthcare content, a guide for assistance in conducting a literature review, a scholarly research primer, an APA support guide, a research basics guide, a statistics and datasets guide, and a faculty resource center guide with links to faculty presentations and publications, information on copyright and fair use, open educational resources (OER) and pedagogy. (CFRs 2.3, 2.13)

At matriculation, USU students are oriented to the breadth and depth of learning resources available in the library. The librarians attend student events to further socialize with the available library services and allow for relationships to develop with students throughout their educational careers. All resources can be accessed seven days a week and 365 days per year remotely, with further on-demand support provided 24/7, which is a critical need for online doctoral students pursuing advanced and specialized degree support. (CFR 3.6)

Curriculum and Synchronous Meetings: The doctoral programs at USU are designed to challenge students within a cohort model, fostering the integration of knowledge for continuous learning, point-of-care decision-making, self-directed education, professional research and scholarship. The courses are delivered online and are structured to cultivate a learning environment that is open, professional, respectful, independent, resourceful, and inclusive of diverse ideas, cultures, and geographical perspectives. (CFR 2.2)

The team observed that the implementation of doctoral programs aligns with the scope and academic mission of USU's other offerings. For instance, the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) degree represents a logical and advanced extension of existing programs, enabling graduates of the Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) program to transition seamlessly into doctoral studies. Notably, interviews revealed that 85% of students enrolled in the current doctoral programs are alumni of USU's master's programs.

The expansion of these doctoral offerings was driven by both faculty and student interest. However, due to low enrollment in the Doctor of Education (EdD) program, USU has temporarily suspended new enrollments while the teach-out process continues. Interviews suggested that if market conditions improve in the upcoming fiscal year, the program may be reopened to accommodate prospective students.

At present, the remaining active doctoral programs include the DNP, Doctor of Business Administration (DBA), and International Doctor of Business Administration (iDBA). While these programs also have relatively low enrollments, students expressed satisfaction with the smaller class sizes, citing benefits related to academic rigor and collaborative engagement. Additionally, the DNP and iDBA programs incorporate on-ground weekend sessions to facilitate clinical residencies and fulfill requirements for international students. These sessions have been well received, fostering a deeper connection to USU and further embedding students within the institution's doctoral culture.

Conclusion

As USU continues to grow its enrollments and program offerings, the team encourages USU to keep supporting the students within their doctoral culture to obtain an education through which students develop the competencies and confidence required in a complex and changing world. (CFR 2.13)

SECTION III – FINDINGS, COMMENDATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The team observed a culture characterized by mutual respect, collaboration, and care. Employees expressed strong confidence in leadership and genuine enthusiasm about their collective potential. USU has satisfactorily addressed all six requirements, though continued development remains appropriate in some areas. Despite facing significant challenges, the institution demonstrated substantial effort and a collaborative approach, reflecting its commitment to continuous improvement.

The university's passion for its mission was evident, as was its cultivation of an inclusive environment that enhances institutional effectiveness and stability. The thoughtful

implementation of the requirements and broad engagement across constituencies indicate an organizational culture focused on ongoing enhancement.

The team offers the following commendations and recommendations to USU:

The team commends USU for:

1. Demonstrating remarkable institutional resilience through effective, compassionate responses to challenges and tragedies.
2. Creating a mission-focused culture that is enthusiastically embraced across all constituencies, from students and faculty to staff and administrators.
3. Fostering a highly collaborative and respectful environment that actively advances the university's mission.
4. Developing a culture and foundational infrastructure that supports student and faculty success at the doctoral degree level, which is a planned area for strategic growth.
5. Implementing financial aid reforms that ensure compliance and enhance student service delivery.
6. Maintaining an experienced and engaged Board of Trustees that demonstrates a clear dedication to the University's mission while realizing its fiduciary responsibilities.

The team recommends USU:

1. Develop a comprehensive, data informed, multi-year growth strategy and implementation plan in concert with the USU Board and AGI that demonstrates enrollment potential, financial outlook, and investment needs in marketing and operations for sustainable institutional scaling. (CFRs 3.4, 3.6, 3.7)

2. Design, track, and reflectively analyze comprehensive Key Performance Indicators over multiple years that align with the USU's strategic plan goals while systematically documenting achieved outcomes, implementation challenges, and necessary tactical adjustments. (CFR 4.8)
3. Analyze program and initiative effectiveness using quantitative and qualitative internal data and external metrics and insights to advance strategic goals and student success. (CFRs 4.1, 4.8)
4. Continue to develop direct assessment methods for Program Learning Outcomes that yield actionable insights to enhance program review, teaching, and learning through data-driven decision-making. (CFRs 2.7, 2.9, 4.6)
5. Continue to enhance program profitability analyses by incorporating detailed, specific cost drivers per program and disaggregating student data to better understand profitability to optimize resource allocation and strategic decision-making. (CFR 3.4)