



July 6, 2007

Don W. Kassing  
President  
San José State University  
One Washington Square  
San José, CA 95912

Dear President Kassing:

At its meeting on June 20-22, 2007, the Commission considered the report of the team that conducted the Educational Effectiveness Review (EER) visit to San José State University (SJSU) on March 7-9, 2007. The Commission had access to the University's EER report, the report of the visiting team, and the institutional response to the team report, dated May 18, 2007. The Commission also reviewed the action letter of August 7, 2006, which dealt with the findings of the Special Visit in March, 2006, as well as with the problem of the University's compliance with Substantive Change policy. The Commission would like to thank you, Carmen Sigler, Vice President for Academic Affairs, and Robert Cooper, Associate Vice President and ALO, for your participation in the Commission's review. Your comments were most helpful.

The San José State University Educational Effectiveness Report was framed around three themes: "Integrative Learning," "Community Connection," and "Inclusive Excellence." In addition, it addressed recommendations from the team report and action letter following the Special Visit, and it responded to the problem of compliance with Substantive Change. The EER team found the institutional report clearly organized, well written, and extensively documented. There was much evidence that the campus community was broadly involved in the discussion of the reflective essays. During the campus visit, the team interacted extensively with administrators and a range of faculty leaders, as well as with students and professional support staff.

The Commission would like to extend its commendation to the San José State University community on the truly remarkable distance it has traveled since fall 2004. The team report notes "significant progress" in assessment of student learning and enrollment management; the positive influence of recent appointments at the senior level; an operational strategic plan; innovative new programs for student success; and, above all, "dramatic changes in culture,

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energy, and focus on campus.” Especially in the area of community connection, creative projects have been undertaken (e.g., CommUniverCity). The Commission wishes SJSU every success as it seeks to continue and expand such work.

The team report contains many observations and suggestions that can guide the University over the coming years, allowing its efforts to become both more effective and more efficient. The Commission urges the University to study those suggestions closely as its many and varied initiatives unfold. The Commission also endorses the report’s concluding recommendations and urges the University to focus strongly on them. These include the following: 1) sharpening priorities and aligning resources to achieve Vision 2010; 2) moving forward on assessment at program, college and institutional levels; and 3) focusing on achievement of goals for inclusive excellence.

In addition, the Commission would like to highlight the following points, all of which support the team’s recommendations, cut across the University’s three themes, and relate ultimately to *results*.

**Benchmarks, targets, standards, and results.** In a number of places, the team report notes that much effort has been expended on assessment processes: overcoming resistance, defining learning outcomes, developing methods of assessment, and collecting data. Now, the report suggests, it is time to shift “from a predominant focus on data collection to a broader and more balanced focus on data collection, data utilization, and results” (CFRs 2.2, 2.4, 2.6, 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5). Elsewhere, the team report calls for a consideration of “impact” and for establishment of “outcomes,” “benchmarks,” and “targets for success.” It encourages the University to make fuller use of available data before introducing additional assessment or data collection efforts.

The team’s point is well taken. Too much process may delay action on the data already at hand and prevent direct engagement with the problems themselves. It may interfere with “closing the loop” and thus impede changes and improvements; ultimately, it may even undermine campus support for assessment and data collection if the time and energy invested seem to yield few tangible results. Now, even more than at the time of the 2006 action letter, the University should be sure it has defined benchmarks, targets, or standards of performance for its many initiatives, and should begin to focus sharply on *findings* or *learning results* and levels of achievement, as well as *specific actions* taken to improve results.

Departments and programs should begin to shift their focus from course-level assessment to assessment of the major as a whole, and beyond that to assessment of the ways in which different kinds of learning – in the major, general education, the co-curriculum, and service learning, for example – are integrated to produce a well-educated graduate. To that end, data and findings will need to be shared broadly across programs and units, and across the traditional divide between curriculum and co-curriculum. While assessment at the course level is useful, WASC’s most urgent interest is in the quality of overall student learning, as demonstrated at graduation.

**Inclusive excellence.** As both the EER report and the team report note, the data suggest that success and excellence “are *not* equitably achieved among all students at SJSU.” While six-year graduation rates at the University are disappointing (the team report identified a 38.1% graduation rate, while at the Commission meeting you cited 41%), the rates for African American and Latino males are truly dismaying and unacceptable to both the University and to the Commission. The team reports that such data have galvanized the campus, breathing new life into existing initiatives and leading to additional efforts to improve academic success and campus climate, as well as retention and graduation rates. The need to increase the diversity of the faculty has also gained new urgency.

The team applauded this work but also saw a need to create a conceptual framework, unify efforts, establish priorities and benchmarks for success, and focus on collecting and *using* the information that will be most useful in guiding action to improve results. Research can be expanded beyond questions about completion to an examination of programs with high success rates. Data should be disaggregated to show the success rates of subpopulations and specific programs, and to learn from successes so that lessons learned can be shared. SJSU can also explore what has worked at other institutions and learn from those successes. STEM disciplines, particularly computer science, deserve special attention, given SJSU’s location in Silicon Valley. Finally, the ways in which a diverse campus enhances the learning of *all* students, traditional as well as non-traditional, should be studied.

The University is to be commended for its courage in taking on this difficult issue, which is of such enormous significance and potential that it deserves, indeed demands, sustained attention. In the words of the team, “we suggest that inclusive excellence not be a theme for a single year, but an overriding theme that, if integrated into strategic planning, assessment efforts, retention and graduation efforts, faculty recruitment, integrative learning, student support programs, and campus climate issues, can help San José State University reach the goals outlined in Vision 2010.” The Commission strongly urges the University to establish and achieve specific targets for improved retention and completion appropriate to its student population, and to track these targets in its data reports and analyses.

**Sustainability.** The three themes of the self-review – “integrative learning,” “community connection,” and “inclusive excellence” – are eminently worthwhile and very ambitious. At the time of the EER visit, the University seemed to be working at a fever pitch on multiple programs and initiatives to support these themes. The team found the level of commitment and enthusiasm impressive but it also worried about eventual burnout.

To ensure that initiatives can continue with maximum return on the effort expended, it will be essential to approach them intentionally, to determine “what instruments and approaches are most useful to answer specific questions and . . . can be sustained over

time” and prune away, perhaps, what is redundant or less productive. It will also be necessary to ensure that there is alignment with the strategic plan, to provide adequate resources for those initiatives that work, to reduce faculty and staff workloads when appropriate, and to ensure that faculty and others are rewarded for the effort they invest in assessment, integrative learning, community connections, service learning, or inclusive excellence. (3.1, 3.5, 4.1, and 4.2)

The promise and the momentum of the University’s past three years should be carefully nurtured, and activities that work should be supported. WASC also looks forward to the sharing of lessons learned so that other institutions in the region can benefit from SJSU’s successes.

**Leadership.** Clearly, the remarkable progress that San José State has made since 2004 is due in large measure to excellent appointments and strong leadership at senior administrative levels, along with outstanding support from faculty leadership. The Commission would like to commend that leadership for its commitment to engagement with a range of difficult but eminently worthwhile issues. To ensure that the gains of recent years are sustained for the long term, and to accomplish the ends that are called for elsewhere in this letter, it will be important to institutionalize SJSU’s commitments so that they rest on firm foundations and are able to flourish beyond any future leadership transitions.

The Commission acted to:

1. Receive the Educational Effectiveness Report and reaffirm the accreditation of San José State University.
2. Schedule the Proposal to be due on October 15, 2011, the Capacity and Preparatory Review for spring 2014, and the Educational Effectiveness Review for fall 2015.
3. Request that five copies of a progress report be submitted by November 1, 2010. The progress report should focus on results and sustainability of assessment at all levels; development of the three themes, particularly “Inclusive Excellence” into core campus values and the improvement of retention and graduation rates; and provisions for leadership transitions. The report should also identify whether targets have been set and progress made in relation to them on retention and graduation rates. Enclosed is a memorandum providing guidance on the format and content of a progress report.

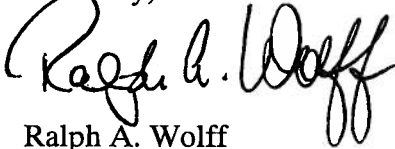
In taking this action to reaffirm accreditation, the Commission confirms that the institution has satisfactorily addressed the Core Commitments to Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness, and has successfully completed the multistage review conducted under the Standards of Accreditation. Between this action and the time of the

next review, the institution is expected to continue its progress and be prepared to respond as expectations of institutional performance, especially with respect to Educational Effectiveness and student learning, further develop under the application of the Standards of Accreditation.

In accordance with Commission policy, a copy of this letter will be sent to Chancellor Charles Reed in one week. It is the Commission's expectation 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.

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ralph A. Wolff". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "R" and "W".

Ralph A. Wolff  
President and Executive Director

RW/aa

Cc: John D. Welty  
Charles Reed  
Robert Cooper  
Members of the team  
Barbara Wright

Enclosure