

February 28, 2005

Stephen L. Weber
President
San Diego State University
5500 Campanile Drive
San Diego, CA 92182-8000

Dear President Weber:

At its meeting on February 17-18, 2005, the Commission considered the report of the Capacity and Preparatory Review team that visited San Diego State University's (SDSU) Imperial Valley Campus on October 29, 2004, and the University's main campus on October 31 through November 2, 2004. The Commission also had access to the Institutional Presentation for the visit and your letter of February 3, 2005, in response to the team report. The Commission found the opportunity to discuss the review with you; Nancy Marlin, Provost; and Geoffrey Chase, Dean of Undergraduate Studies, helpful in better understanding the institution and the issues raised by the visiting team.

The accreditation review cycle for San Diego State University began with the University's Proposal for Reaffirmation of Accreditation, which was accepted by the Proposal Review Committee on June 6, 2002. Some months after submission of the Proposal, and following the arrival of the Dean of Undergraduate Studies and his assumption of the duties of Accreditation Liaison Officer, you wrote to request an extension of review dates in order to use the time to focus more effectively on student learning, enrollment management, assessment, and program review, and also to restructure the Review Coordinating Committee to include additional members. The extension was granted and the reconstituted coordinating committee subsequently led the University in a review process that was broadly participative and inclusive.

The Review Coordinating Committee identified three major foci for the accreditation process: (1) student learning; (2) the balance among access, retention, and graduation; and (3) undergraduate research. The institutional report for the Capacity and Preparatory Review centered inquiry on eight essays reflecting these foci and illustrating the University's alignment with the Standards of Accreditation and the Core Commitment to Capacity. The exploration of each topic represented an evidentiary exploration of an area identified by SDSU through its own planning processes as being consequential for its future improvement. In addition to writing an exemplary report and including a

significant number of useful supporting data tables and other documents, the Coordinating Committee provided a wide array of relevant materials and studies addressing each of the Criteria for Review in an electronic portfolio on its public WASC Review website. The Commission joined the team in commending the University on writing a report that is fully in the spirit of the new model of accreditation, challenging itself to internal evaluation for its own improvement, and undertaking the entire review process in a spirit of openness, thoughtfulness, and collaboration. San Diego State has been cited in WASC workshops as an exemplar in understanding the intent of the new WASC review process and in developing an effective, campus-wide approach to its own self-study.

San Diego State University, by its own description, is an institution experiencing significant growth and transition set in the context of a rapid-change environment. As noted in the Proposal, and described in the Capacity and Preparatory Review Report, a growing commitment to research and graduate education, changing student and faculty demographics, and significant enrollment growth are currently impacting SDSU. The institution now enrolls some 27,000 undergraduate and 6,000 graduate students, the second largest campus in the California State University system. It employs over 1,600 full-time and part-time faculty.

The University operates at an exceptionally high level of quality, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The campus is notable among the CSU campuses for its growing emphasis on graduate programs and research. It offers 14 joint doctoral degrees and 62 master's degrees, along with 78 bachelor's degrees. The emphasis on graduate education notwithstanding, it was apparent to the team that undergraduate courses and student life receive full attention. The average class size is 32 for undergraduate lecture classes and 15 for labs. There are ample provisions for student life, with 3,600 students living in residence, and a co-curriculum that includes various programs for leadership, community service, Greek life, and recreation and athletics, as well as an active student government association. In its report, the team remarked on the excellence of the University's global education efforts, calling it a "best-in-class program" and noting its well-conceived and supported programs, the number and range of study options available to SDSU students, and the strong bilateral exchange programs with Mexico. The strength of the University's various hallmark programs is such that SDSU may want to consider tracking and analyzing students' educational programs to determine what percentage of students have participated in one of the signature programs, whether research, international study, service learning, or other, to understand better the benefits accrued from the availability of such high-quality educational experiences.

The University's designation as an impacted campus has brought increasing selectivity of matriculating students. The number of applications has increased significantly, up 73 percent in the last five years to 44,000 for 6,500 spaces in fall 2004. In the last five years, entering GPAs have increased half a grade point and SAT averages have increased 110 points. The Commission noted that the University's enrollment management process included careful planning and broad consultation in matriculating an increasingly selective student body, and

in retaining and graduating students at higher rates (although there is still some work to be done here, as discussed below). Particularly instrumental in planning for enrollment was the well-conceived statement *Principles to Guide Impaction*, which was developed through SDSU's commitment to shared governance, participatory meetings with San Diego community groups, and close communication with the Chancellor's Office. The Commission also noted the organizational restructuring of the Admissions, Registrar, and Advising and Evaluations offices into a single unit, Enrollment Services. The team, in its report, recognized several new processes and services that advance enrollment management and exemplify the University's attention to quality student support, including degree audits and four-year Road Maps, online real-time registration, a web portal to permit students to view their progress-to-degree and to receive advising information, the Transfer Admission Planner, and changes in procedures requiring students to register for their required courses in the first two semesters.

In the midst of this growth and change, the team observed strong working relationships and high esprit de corps on campus, as testified to by the WASC Coordinating Committee. Governance is a mature system at SDSU, highly articulated with faculty and students. Employee morale is often difficult to maintain under conditions of budget cutbacks and diminishing resources, and the Commission commends the campus and its leadership for achieving a highly collegial environment with effective and participatory shared governance throughout this time.

The Commission will take its final accrediting action in February 2006, following the Educational Effectiveness Review. At this time, the Commission accepts and endorses the Capacity and Preparatory Review Team Report and urges the University to take into consideration the observations and recommendations offered by the evaluation team. In addition, the Commission highlights the following issues for the University to address:

Sustaining Progress on Assessment and Learning-centeredness. Relevant to the University's review focus on student learning, its Capacity and Preparatory Review Report noted that 85 percent of reporting departments have developed undergraduate learning goals and objectives. Assessment methods for student learning have been adopted in most, but not all, programs and departments. The Report described the recently developed process by which the Provost requests Academic Plans and Annual Reports for each department that incorporate student learning goals and objectives and summarize improvement modifications resulting from the assessment of student learning. The Commission commends the adoption of goals and assessment plans as notable progress in a relatively short period of time.

As the team observed, however, not all departments have articulated learning outcomes, not all have moved into implementation of their plans, and not all are regularly collecting and reflecting on data about student learning. The Commission was glad to hear that the Academic Review process was suspended for one year only, as program review is a cornerstone for educational effectiveness. (See Criteria for Review 2.7, 4.4, 4.7, and 4.8.)

Experience has shown that faculty benefit from ongoing resources, support, communication, and structured opportunities for shared conversations about learning in order to feel fully accountable for the demonstration of student learning and achievement.

The Center for Teaching and Learning, the focus of initiatives on many CSU campuses, has had failed searches and scaled-back activity. Recognizing that the Center is subject to the same budget constraints as the rest of the University, academic leadership will want to be assured that faculty have adequate help and resources to support continued innovation and initiative in the development of assessment strategies, whether through the Center or other means. In addition, the team reported concerns about an overstretched institutional research department that may hinder University progress toward its stated goals of faculty support and development, and its ability to address strategic data needs in a timely manner to inform planning and decision making.

The Capacity and Preparatory Review focused on structure and processes in addressing Educational Effectiveness, particularly in the University's essays on the learning-centered university, global education, assessment of writing, and shifting to a culture based on evidence. In order to continue progress toward its goal of learning centeredness, SDSU will need to demonstrate continued development of a coherent, integrated, resourced, and well-coordinated approach to understanding and improving the educational effectiveness of its program of instruction. The Commission looks forward to further exploration of topics related to student and organizational learning in the Educational Effectiveness Review. The Commission's expectations for assessment of learning and student achievements are further delineated in Criteria for Review 2.3, 2.4, 2.6, 2.7, and 4.6, 4.7, and 4.8.

Continuing Efforts to Extend and Integrate Planning. Since the inception of the shared vision process for learning centeredness that was initiated under your leadership in 1996, there has been continued progress in centralized planning. The Capacity and Preparatory Review Report delineated the approaches used to expand state support, including donor funds, student fees, and auxiliary funding, including \$147.5 million for facility projects, ranking first among all CSU campuses. These successes notwithstanding, the visiting team recommended, and the Commission concurs, that careful continuing attention be given to the integration of budgeting and resource allocation with strategic planning, so that University priorities may be addressed, and operating and capital budgets and the goals of the pending capital campaign may also reflect those priorities. The team underscored the University's own concern that, given the fiscal realities of the state's enrollment funding, SDSU will have an additional onus for careful and proactive planning in its expansion of graduate programs, so as not to diminish the quality of the undergraduate experience. The team commended the University for protecting its services and programs through extra efforts in funding many new initiatives and scholarships through successful fundraising from grants, contracts, auxiliaries, and private donations.

While recommending greater integration of budgeting with strategic planning, the team also commended the work of the campus Budget Advisory Committee. The team recommended, and the Commission concurs, more active involvement of the deans in the planning process, with greater campus-wide priority setting and resource allocation advisory input. Future faculty and staff appointments, or as you and the Provost termed it, the “rebuilding” of the faculty, should be linked to the highest priorities of the University. Further, it is recommended that the campus build into the planning process more review and evaluation of ongoing activities and projects for revision or possible reduction in light of campus priorities.

Assessing General Education Competencies. Further, with regard to the University’s review focus on student learning, the team acknowledged ways in which the general education program at SDSU has been strengthened, including the establishment of an oversight committee and identification of competencies such as critical thinking, civic responsibility, and global awareness. Assessment of general education remains a challenge, however, because as the University’s own report acknowledges, the list of objectives is too extensive and the courses are not mapped against specific competencies. In the Educational Effectiveness Review, the team will want to see the results of the General Education Committee’s work to clarify the outcomes for the program, the number of objectives to be assessed, and progress on shared assignments and course-embedded assessment.

The team praised the improvements in the new assessment program in writing competency, and, at the same time, recommended that the University consider how the Writing Proficiency Assessment links to the learning outcomes for general education, and that the University include assessment of the degree to which students have attained the desired competencies in writing. The team noted that doing so “would provide the university with an excellent opportunity to involve faculty and staff campus-wide in the discussion of what the university actually expects of its graduates with respect to writing proficiency (Criterion For Review (CFR) 4.7). This also would be an opportunity to involve external stakeholders (e.g., employers, alumni) in improving the assessment of the effectiveness of the writing program (CFR 4.8).”

Continuing Analysis in the Balance among Access, Recruitment, and Retention. With regard to this review focus, the team noted careful attention and analysis given to recruitment and access, particularly noting collaborative efforts and faculty leadership that produced the document *Principles to Guide Impaction*. The University has successfully increased its five-year retention-to-graduation rate from 34 percent to 42 percent, but retention for Hispanic students remains low at 33 percent and retention for African Americans still lower at 31 percent, thereby calling into question the University’s success in providing a successful educational experience for all students. The team noted that the retention rate will likely continue to increase as the institution becomes increasingly more selective through impaction; nevertheless, the University’s graduation rate of 42 percent is low, even by its own estimates, and its percentages for Hispanic and African Americans still lower. Given

current entering students' selectivity and in comparison to the CSU six-year average graduation rate of 52 percent for first-time freshmen, the University would seem to have much need for improvement.

Campus conversations concerning access and retention issues would be assisted by better information and analysis about retention by disaggregated student groups, including details related to ethnicity, academic programs, and, possibly, socioeconomic status. The University needs to ask itself the hard questions about which students are succeeding, and why and why not; what happens to students once they have matriculated; whether students are being prepared to function in a diverse society; and what the institution's targets and success rates are in educating all students successfully. The University can and should build greater capacity to assess and learn from its own progress and to provide opportunities to share experiences—in short, to respond to the team's recommendation for greater dialogue around these issues. Retention should receive the same kind of focus that was placed on recruitment, including attention to goals, benchmarks, and priorities for improvement. Close articulation with the work of the Diversity, Equity, and Outreach Committee will be important.

Continuing Progress on Integrating the Imperial Valley and Brawley Campuses. The visiting team in its report noted progress in remedying past concerns with the Imperial Valley Campus (IVC), and strong new leadership for the campus. The team also found, however, that faculty workload remains an ongoing concern, with a minimal number of full-time faculty preparing for multiple courses. The team also identified the need to review student support services as IVC shifts to serve first-time, first-year students. The Commission noted that IVC has been the focus of a number of recommendations of the Commission over the years, and urges continued attention to integrating expectations for faculty workload, clear expectations for research and scholarship in the context of the campus focus on teaching and service, and continued alignment and communication between the campuses. In an addendum or as part of its Educational Effectiveness Report, the Commission requests that SDSU address educational effectiveness at the Imperial Valley and Brawley campuses, including goals for student learning and how learning is assessed and improved.

The Commission acted to:

1. Receive the Capacity and Preparatory Review Report and continue the accreditation of San Diego State University.
2. Proceed with the Educational Effectiveness visit on November 9-11, 2005. The report for the Educational Effectiveness visit is due on August 17, 2005.
3. Request an addendum in the Educational Effectiveness Report with the University's response to the issues enumerated in this letter.

Commission Action Letter – Page 7
San Diego State University
February 28, 2005

In accordance with Commission policy, we request that you send a copy of this letter to Chancellor Charles Reed. Please let me know if you have any questions about the Commission action or this letter.

Sincerely,

Ralph A. Wolff
Executive Director

cc: John D. Welty
Geoffrey Chase
Members of the team
Elizabeth Griego