

## **San Diego State University**

### **WASC Coordinating Council Working Paper Re-Accreditation Process Update**

**December 12, 2002**

In fall 2001, San Diego State University began the process of re-accreditation with the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). This process, which has been extensively revised and now takes several years, requires a self-review of the institution's educational effectiveness. The self-review takes place in two phases: the Preparatory Review site visit (April 2004) and the Educational Effectiveness Review site visit (November 2005). This working paper is the first of a series of communications that will be used to engage the campus in the re-accreditation process and create opportunities to provide input, suggestions, and feedback.

The new re-accreditation process encourages institutions to raise questions and address issues that are most pressing for the campus. Since August, 2002 a group<sup>1</sup> of SDSU faculty, students, staff and administrators have been meeting to identify those issues that are among the most important for us to consider as we move ahead. The issues, presented below, are not the only important ones affecting SDSU, but they speak directly to our effectiveness in educating students now and in the future.

#### **A University in Transition**

San Diego State University is in a period of transition and experiencing rapid change. Enrollment pressures, changing student and faculty demographics, a growing commitment to research and graduate education, and a focus on student learning force us to think about how we can provide the best possible education for our students. While these pressures are not unique to our institution, they will play out in particular ways at SDSU.

#### **Student Learning**

National conversations about higher education emphasize the importance of becoming a learning-centered university where students, faculty, and staff work together to enhance learning. At the heart of the university is the understanding that inquiry, investigation, and discovery are what bind us together. Today's world has become increasingly diverse, technological, and complex, thus making it essential that the university, primarily through its faculty, describe explicitly the knowledge, skills, and abilities that a student should have upon graduation. We can then gather evidence to assess how well our students are learning and use the results as the basis for informed decision-making, planning, and improvement. As a university in transition we recognize that it is critical that we examine our practices and programs for the role they play in improving student learning.

## **Enrollment Pressures**

Like all higher education institutions in California, SDSU is experiencing enrollment pressures that have been labeled “Tidal Wave II.” The university is almost at its physical capacity, and soon will only be able to handle additional growth through an expanded summer term, off-campus centers, and distance education. Enrollment management has become a key issue and source of considerable debate since 1997, when the university became an impacted campus. The university has worked hard to increase the cultural and geographic diversity of our student body, as well as to improve the overall preparation of entering first-year and transfer students. And yet, problems remain with retention and, especially, graduation rates. As a university in transition, we recognize that among the most critical issues at SDSU are the access, retention, and graduation rates of all students.

## **Research and Graduate Education**

The Master Plan states that the mission of the California State University systems is to provide education at the undergraduate and master’s levels, with an emphasis on applied fields and teacher education. It further states that research is consistent with the primary function of instruction and that CSU campuses may award joint doctoral degrees. For more than two decades, SDSU has led the California State University system in carrying out the goals of the Master Plan, especially in the creation of joint doctoral degrees. The university has adopted the Teacher-Scholar as its faculty model, and aggressively pursues funded research and joint doctorates with several institutions. In fact, during the 2001-2002 fiscal year, faculty brought in over \$140 million in grants and contracts, a 13% increase over the previous year and a 65% increase over the past 5 years. This increase in research productivity provides numerous opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students to engage in research, yet it also means that faculty roles are changing. As a university in transition, we recognize the need to explore the impact of these changes on undergraduate and graduate education.

## **Creating the Future: Areas of Inquiry**

These changes—in the student body, the faculty, and our mission and goals—provide the context for our self-review. For several years, campus constituencies have engaged in lively debates over the direction of the university. Now, the WASC re-accreditation process affords us the opportunity to pursue the questions that have been raised in a systematic and evidence-based manner. We propose to focus on three areas of inquiry that are critical to our future development as a university. In addressing these areas, the most important question of all is how to increase our effectiveness and provide the best possible education for all of our students.

- 1. Focus on student learning with special attention to educational experiences that reflect our core values and the needs of an informed citizenry.**

*Student learning is our central purpose as a University and it is critical that students graduate with the knowledge, skills, and abilities that will ensure their success. Moreover, it is essential that they acquire these while taking part in a community with a deep and abiding commitment to academic excellence, diversity and social justice, wise and responsible use of human, environmental, and fiscal resources, and global consciousness.*

*While we have articulated these core values in the mission statement of SDSU, we are still in the early stages of determining the extent to which students do in fact graduate with the knowledge, skills, and abilities we define as essential. Thus, while we have a fairly broad set of ideas about the goals for our students, we are still faced with the challenge of examining our programs to discover the degree to which they are helping students achieve our intended outcomes.*

*Therefore, assessment of our performance as a university and planning for the future must begin with a focus on student learning, seeking answers to such questions as:*

- Do we have clearly articulated expectations for student learning in each course and program, including general education and major areas of concentration?
- How well are our students learning what we expect them to learn?
- How are diversity, interdisciplinarity, international perspectives, research, technological literacy, university and community involvement, and program integrity built into student experiences?
- How might we further promote development of a culture of inquiry at San Diego State University?

**2. Explore the balance among access, retention, and graduation rates so as to provide the highest quality educational experience for our students.**

*San Diego State University is experiencing burgeoning student enrollments from an increasingly diverse population. Applications for Fall 2002 exceeded 41,000, an increase of 13.6% over the previous fall, resulting in a total enrollment of 34,304 students.*

*To address these issues SDSU has instituted a number of practices including enrollment management, increased use of distance learning, the development of off-campus satellite sites, and year-round operation. There are also a number of programs committed to the goal of increasing student retention. However, the impact of these initiatives and programs, singly or jointly, has yet to be systematically examined.*

*To assess the impact of our current strategies related to access, retention, and graduation rates and to move our campus forward in these critical areas we seek answers to questions such as:*

- What are the effects of our policies pertaining to campus and program impaction on access to the University?
- What programs currently exist with a primary objective of improving retention and graduation rates of students? What is the impact of these programs on retention and graduation rates? Are retention and graduation rates different for students who participate in multiple programs? How can we build and strengthen programs for these purposes?
- What mechanisms are in place that encourage the use of evidence to make informed decisions about the issues of access, retention, and graduation rates?

**3. Engage the campus in discussions of how best to ensure that we maintain and enhance the quality of undergraduate programs while pursuing high quality graduate program development.**

*For over two decades SDSU has been expanding its emphasis on research and graduate education, as is evidenced in the increase in masters and joint doctoral programs, the profiles of faculty hired recently, and the extraordinary increase in research funding received by faculty, particularly in the past five years. The Teacher-Scholar model has been embraced by the SDSU community, where research conducted by faculty is viewed as essential to the mission of a major university as well as complementary to teaching. Graduate programs in education designed to prepare the teachers of future K - 12 students are consistent with the traditional teaching mission of SDSU. The significant presence of other graduate programs is also to be expected at a university located in a city with a diversified high-tech economy where businesses seek employees with advanced skills. In the 2001-2002 academic year, of the 7,109 degrees granted by SDSU 1,683 were awarded at the Master's level and 36 at the Ph.D. level.*

*Expansion of graduate programs, however, may have both positive and negative consequences for undergraduate education, leading us to seek answers to such questions as:*

- What are the potential benefits and threats to the quality of undergraduate education presented by increasing emphasis on graduate programs and the associated expectations for faculty engagement in funded research agendas?
- Which students are participating in research projects with faculty?
- Who is teaching lower and upper division undergraduate courses? How can we best use our lecturers, graduate teaching assistants and tenure/tenure track faculty to optimize student learning?
- To what extent does the University have the need and the capacity to support graduate education?

- How do our undergraduate and graduate programs remain contemporary and engaged by addressing local community and global community issues from a research perspective?

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