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PRESIDENT
Ralph A. Wolff

March 8, 2012

Harry Hellenbrand
Interim President
California State University, Northridge
18111 Nordhoff Street
Northridge, CA 91330

Dear President Hellenbrand:

At its meeting February 22-24, 2012 the Commission considered the report of the Educational Effectiveness Review (EER) team that conducted the visit to California State University, Northridge (CSUN) September 14-16, 2011. The Commission also had access to the Educational Effectiveness Review report prepared by CSUN prior to the visit, the institution's December 5, 2011 response to the visiting team report, and the documents relating to the Capacity and Preparatory Review (CPR) visit conducted in spring 2010. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the review with you and Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs Cynthia Rawitch. Your comments were helpful in informing the Commission's deliberations.

CSUN's Institutional Proposal outlined three themes for this comprehensive review: learning as an institution, faculty and staff support for university success, and student success through engagement in learning. This set of themes represented the cohesive culture of CSUN and the University's focus on student learning. Each theme was studied carefully, demonstrating CSUN's commitment to evidence-based analysis and decision making. The Commission commends CSUN for using the reaccreditation process "to further already-established goals" and to re-discover "the value inherent in reflection and the need to incorporate lessons learned into future endeavors."

The Commission's action letter of June 30, 2010 highlighted three major issues for special attention during the interval between the CPR and EER visits: student support, graduation and retention rates, and alignment of institutional and financial planning. CSUN reflected on and analyzed each of these issues and took "purposeful, pragmatic, and intentional actions."

The Commission commends CSUN for becoming a model learning organization characterized by collaborative and evidence-based planning, decision making and problem solving. Among its accomplishments during this review are its financial foresight and commitment to investing in critical functions, finding efficiencies, and allocating funds effectively; and its deep understanding of the characteristics and needs of CSUN students, which has led to programs and activities that promote student success. As noted by the team, "the foundation at CSUN could not be stronger."

The Commission endorses the commendations and recommendations of the EER team and wishes to emphasize the following areas for further attention:

Continuing development of assessment of student learning outcomes. The Commission commends CSUN for expanding outcomes assessment widely across its programs, for its robust and useful annual assessment reports, and for integrating assessment work into the recertification of general education courses. However, variability among departments persists. The team noted that “while all of the programs have clear learning outcomes, the use of measures to assess progress towards outcomes is uneven” and the evidence is “sometimes anecdotal rather than based in systematic learning outcomes data.” The Commission urges CSUN to move forward with its plans to ensure that each program adopts sound assessment methods, especially direct methods, and utilizes the findings to improve learning. The Commission also acknowledges the work that CSUN has done in developing “Fundamental Learning Competencies” as a framework for university-level assessment. (CFRs 2.3, 2.6, 4.4)

Refining program review. The team report encourages the continued development of program review, especially by integrating findings from assessment of student learning into program reviews. As expressed in the WASC Standards, program review is a systematic, periodic quality assurance process that encompasses analysis of a wide range of quantitative and qualitative data, including data on student learning. The Commission encourages CSUN to ensure that all program reviews include findings from the assessment of student learning as one important element of the review. The Commission also supports CSUN’s practice of extending program review to co-curricular activities and is pleased to learn that while co-curricular program review is in the early stages, these programs are well positioned to undertake these reviews. (CFRs 2.7, 2.11, 4.4)

Continuing improvements in advising. The Commission acknowledges the many improvements that CSUN has made to advising, which is critical to student retention and persistence, and it commends the University for survey results that show that a substantial majority of both first-year students and seniors report “excellent or good” advising services. CSUN is employing best practices, offering technology-based workshops and resources, conducting longitudinal assessments, and using data and research to inform and improve practice in advising. The Commission supports this fine work and encourages further steps, as recommended in the team report, including special attention to the quality of advising in all majors, enforcement of advising policies, and enhancements in training of advisors. (CFRs 2.10, 2.12, 2.14)

Raising undergraduate completion rates. CSUN has applied many creative approaches as it has sought to improve rates of persistence, graduation, and time-to-degree. Retention and graduation rates have improved dramatically in the last ten years and the Commission commends the work that CSUN has done to understand, track, and support its students. It encourages the University to continue its focus on addressing the remediation needs of entering students and extending its first-year experience programs to more students. While acknowledging substantial increases in retention and completion, the Commission encourages CSUN to continue to monitor rates, to evaluate the effectiveness of its various initiatives, and to refine approaches so that

continued improvement in retention, persistence and completion can be achieved. (CFRs 1.2, 1.5, 2.4, 2.10, 4.7)

Addressing ongoing state funding challenges. While in no way a reflection on either CSUN's Educational Effectiveness Review or the University's leadership, the Commission noted a sharp decline in the financial resources provided by the State of California. Clearly, the state budget will have both short- and long-term impacts on the California State University campuses. The Commission is especially concerned about the potential consequences of recently proposed education funding reductions on educational programs and student learning, and the ability of the campuses to sustain academic quality and effectiveness.

The Commission is pleased to learn of CSUN's proactive handling of the reduction in state support. The team found that the University had anticipated fiscal challenges as early as 2005 and had predicted that "revenues from government sources would likely continue declining for the foreseeable future." CSUN addressed this challenge by finding efficiencies, reallocating funds, and setting priorities that support student success. "The result is an extremely fiscally conservative organization that invests richly in critical functions." The Commission commends CSUN for creating sufficient reserves to allow the institution to invest in faculty and staff, add classes, and avoid severe negative impacts on the academic programs, and it urges continued diligence in anticipating and planning for changes in the level of state support. (CFRs 3.5, 4.1-4.3)

Given the above, the Commission acted to:

1. Receive the Educational Effectiveness Review report and reaffirm the accreditation of California State University, Northridge.
2. Schedule the next comprehensive review with the off-site review in fall 2021 and the visit tentatively scheduled for spring 2022.
3. Request an Interim Report in fall 2016 on the issues cited in the EER report: (1) expanding assessment of student learning outcomes across all programs and co-curricular areas, (2) incorporation of findings from outcomes assessment in the program review process, (3) improving the quality of advising in the major, (4) continuing to improve graduation and retention rates, and (5) addressing the reduction in state funding support.

In taking this action to reaffirm accreditation, the Commission confirms that California State University, Northridge has satisfactorily addressed the Core Commitments to Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness, and has successfully completed the three-stage 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, particularly with respect to educational effectiveness and student learning.

In accordance with Commission policy, copies of this letter will be sent to Chancellor Charles Reed and the chair of the CSU Board of Trustees in one week. The Commission expects 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.

Finally, the Commission wishes to express its appreciation for the extensive work that the University undertook in preparing for and supporting this accreditation review. WASC is committed to an accreditation process that adds value to institutions while assuring public accountability, and we are grateful for your continued support of our process. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions 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 initial "R" and a stylized "W".

Ralph A. Wolff
President

RW/dh

cc: Linda Johnsrud, Commission Chair
Cynthia Rawitch, ALO
Charles Reed, Chancellor of the CSU System
Herbert Carter, Chair of the CSU Board of Trustees
Members of the EER team
Diane Harvey, WASC Vice President