



**REPORT OF THE WSCUC TEAM  
SPECIAL VISIT  
Sonoma State University March 4 – 5, 2021**

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The team evaluated the institution under the 2013 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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## **I. Context and Process Overview**

Following the spring 2018 Accreditation Visit, Sonoma State University was reaccredited with the understanding that it would schedule a Special Visit in spring 2021 to address the seven recommendations in the action letter. The Special Visit team reviewed the Special Visit report and appendices, annual reports, requested documents, and conducted a Special Visit March 4-5, 2021. Section 2 details progress on the seven recommendations made as part of the last review under the standards. Section 3 provides a new commendation and a revised recommendation to support Sonoma State's efforts towards continuous improvement.

## **II. Progress on Recommendations Made Under the Standards**

### **Recommendation #1: Assuring every degree program has measurable learning outcomes and an assessment plan that identifies where the outcomes are being assessed in the curriculum. (CFR 2.4)**

The institution has made progress in this area. All undergraduate programs now have program learning outcomes, have engaged in curriculum mapping, and assessment of learning is a part of renewed focus on program review. Pilot efforts to assess the general education program are promising. However, this progress is uneven, particularly with regards to assessment in graduate programs.

It is encouraging that all undergraduate degree programs now have program learning outcomes and most have curriculum maps. Discussion with faculty members highlighted promising developments in some departments as well as programs such as the Second Year Experience and Summer Bridge. These same discussions suggested that the new program review process has started to shift the focus of assessment from outputs that say little about what students actually learn (such as simply earning a degree), to outcomes linked to more direct evidence of student learning. The campus has now completed an assessment of each of the five core competencies at the campus level. Other encouraging

developments include a change to the curricular revision process to include a clearer focus on program learning outcomes as well as inclusion of assessment as a component in the renewed focus on program review.

At the same time, assessment practices are clearly still uneven. For example, some programs have program learning outcomes clearly stated in measurable terms while others do not; some programs gather direct measures of student achievement and use analysis of that evidence to inform improvement, while others do not; some programs indicated that program learning outcomes are stated in the catalog and in syllabi while others indicated that was not yet the case. Program Chairs commented, “We have an uneven development of program learning outcomes. Some are very strong, and others less developed” and “The process of developing program learning outcomes [is making us] talk about the big picture and how the parts fit”. To understand fit and overlap, programs may find it helpful to identify in the curriculum maps which measures are used to assess particular outcomes.

To further develop assessment practices, it will be important to provide feedback to programs about their assessment plans and practices. The follow up report mentions plans to develop and implement a meta-assessment process in AY 2020-2021 and this will be a key mechanism to strengthen assessment practices. The program review process is another area where departments will engage with assessment and should receive constructive feedback to further develop. At the same time, a broader acceptance of the importance of assessment requires a shift in Sonoma State culture. Assessment processes need to be seen as routine job duties – not in addition to them – and the institution needs to work to link assessment to the institution’s vision of student success. Professional development for faculty, meaningful support for the actual work of student learning assessment, and recognition of those who are doing it well will be important. It is worth noting that the team heard encouraging statements during interviews with faculty, such as “our goal is to create a culture of assessment”; and “[We as faculty] need to dig into our craft of research and apply findings to curriculum and program review”.

In the area of graduate assessment, progress appears limited. While discussions with faculty and assessment leaders mentioned some work to develop graduate learning outcomes, it was also clear that this work was limited (for example, with confusion about if program learning outcomes apply to degrees or tracks within degree programs) and the Special Visit report said little about assessment at the graduate level. The institution is encouraged to leverage work developing assessment practices at the undergraduate level to build assessment practices at the graduate level. Comments about how to nurture a culture shift in the previous paragraph could be repeated; at the same time, the nature of graduate education means some thought must be put into translating (not necessarily reinventing) these practices to make them suitable for assessment at the graduate level.

Reports on a pilot to assess general education are encouraging. This pilot was set against the backdrop of CSU-system-wide policy changes concerning general education (not to mention the COVID-19 pandemic), which, understandably, limited progress. The institution, nevertheless, carried out an assessment of three outcomes in the summer of 2020. This involved concrete steps - like developing rubrics and having faculty assess a diverse, if not large, sample of direct student work – as well as learning about the process itself – for example, gaining awareness of the difficulty of developing rubrics and norming them across reviewers. In conversation, the General Education Assessment Committee was also able to lay out a reasonable plan, in which standardized rubrics would be used to assess two or three general learning outcomes each year, so that all learning outcomes would be assessed over a seven-year cycle and then the general learning program would undergo a holistic review. The General Education Assessment Committee was clear-eyed about a number of difficulties, including confusion among faculty and students about new general education policies, a lack of bandwidth and reluctance on the part of faculty to engage in assessment in areas outside of their own expertise. The General Education Assessment Committee had also thought about some solutions. For example, thinking about a place outside the committee to house assessment work and by linking some departmental program

learning outcomes to general education learning outcomes. (Note this works both ways: if program learning outcomes are thoughtfully aligned with general education, efforts to develop departmental level assessment practices can also pay dividends in the general education program.) At the same time, efforts to help faculty understand that they can, and should, engage in parts of general education that are not linked to their disciplinary specialization will be key for broader acceptance of these efforts.

**Recommendation #2: Adhering to the recently approved program review policy 20061. (CFR 2.7)**

The team noted progress in program review. In fall 2017, the University Program Review Subcommittee revised the Program Review Policy and Program Review Self Study Guide. During 2018-19 the University Program Review Subcommittee revised the Self Study Guide based on feedback from faculty who had used it. In 2019-20, the University Program Review Subcommittee created a template for a new Findings and Recommendations Report to guide conversations about program review findings and provide more consistent feedback on program review from administrators and external reviewers to program faculty. During the current academic year, the University Program Review Subcommittee is focused on aligning the program review guidelines with the current Sonoma State strategic plan. Additional evidence of progress is that the recently formed (2018) Division of Student Affairs has already commenced a program review process.

As noted in Recommendation #1, the team found unevenness in the quality of program reviews. Interviews with faculty and administrators indicated they recognized a need for ongoing professional development to enhance the quality of program review. An example of currently planned professional development is workshops on signature assignments. The team encourages continued attention to program review policies and practices in the hopes that this will help achieve the deeper meaning of program review: engagement with a process of continuous improvement

**Recommendation #3: Fully implementing a comprehensive strategic planning process that identifies measurable goals and aligns financial resources with those goals. (CFR 4.6)**

At the conclusion of the 2017 Reaffirmation of Accreditation Process, under the leadership of a new president, Sonoma State was poised to launch a strategic planning initiative. This was happening against the backdrop of a history of weak planning efforts, as noted in several prior WASC reviews, which meant that leadership faced the additional challenge of transforming a planning-resistant institutional culture into a planning-receptive environment.

During the 2017-2018 academic year, Sonoma State implemented a broadly collaborative planning process, co-led by the provost and academic senate chair. The resulting plan—Sonoma State Strategic Plan 2025—identifies four strategic priorities for institution wide focus, and measurable goals for each priority area. During the process, the institution also embraced three core values that it has sought to find reflected in each strategic plan goal.

The strategic priorities identified in the 2025 plan consist of the following: student success, academic excellence and innovation, leadership cultivation, and transformative impact. Interviews with administrators, faculty, and staff revealed broad enthusiasm for these priorities, with many individuals stating that the planning process helped to focus or refocus their areas in meaningful and beneficial ways. For example, some academic departments found opportunities for curricular revision and program learning outcomes modifications as they sought to align department programs and priorities with the institutional strategic priorities. In one student affairs area, funding proposal forms require a requestor to link the request to one or more institutional strategic priority. The benefit, according to student affairs staff, is having a transparent framework for decision making. Some of the other benefits cited included shifting from purely transactional perspectives towards the transformative and having a common “vocabulary” with respect to institutional priorities that helped cross-unit collaborations.

Sonoma State has also linked its strategic priorities and goals, as articulated in its strategic plan, to a new transparent budgeting process. This process transforms a previous top-down process to one that incorporates individual unit planning. The ultimate goal, with the help of the integration of the

process into Questica, is to have a campus-wide all-funds budgeting approach that links financial resources to strategic goals and outcomes. Impressively, even during a time of budget reductions due to COVID-19 impacts, the institution seems receptive, perhaps even enthusiastic, about the way in which planning and budgeting is being integrated. Units reported getting meaningful help in thinking through strategies for better aligning their budgets with goals and priorities.

The team was very impressed with the progress that Sonoma State has made with respect to recommendation #3. The institution has not just developed a comprehensive strategic plan and effectively linked it to budgeting processes, but it has also created a real shift in campus perceptions about the value of strategic planning.

**Recommendation #4: Effectively using newly implemented data tools (like the CSU data dashboards) to enhance student learning and success. (CFR 4.2)**

Since the team's last visit the campus has developed and deployed a number of tools to provide data and analytic support for planning and decision making. The team was impressed with what Sonoma State has been able to accomplish in such a short time from a technological point of view, but hearing individuals from various parts of campus talk about actually using the tools speaks to encouraging changes in the way the campus thinks and works.

Demonstrations of these tools showed they appeared to be fully functional and presenting data that was both up to date and relevant to important issues. More importantly, however, conversations with members of the campus uncovered evidence of widespread use: academic administrators talked about using tools for planning seat allocations, faculty mentioned using them to make adjustments in the classroom and staff spoke of using them to address roadblocks caused by academic holds and helping remove departments from impacted status. The team also noted various members of the



Sonoma State community have taken it upon themselves to use these tools to address equity issues, for example attempting to close gaps in graduation rates.

One area of weakness, however, seems to be the relative lack of data tools designed to support graduate education. Staff members working with undergraduate students spoke of how tools made their work easier and allowed them to do things they had not previously been able to do. Extending use of the data tools to graduate educators may provide similar dividends.

Of course, there is no guarantee more data will solve a problem and information overload is real. The institution's progress to date, however, suggests Sonoma State has the expertise to build the right tools and the commitment to develop culture that supports data driven decision making.

**Recommendation #5: Creating an IT strategic plan to improve the student experience and advance the mission and vision of the institution. (CFR 4.6)**

The *2018 WSCUC Accreditation Team Report* commends Sonoma State on launching efforts to consider how to better align technology resources and services to support the instructional mission of the institution. The Sonoma State Special Visit report notes that much progress has been made on this recommendation. Technology resources and services have been clearly delineated into two units: Information Technology and Center for Teaching and Educational Technology. Both units now report directly or indirectly to the provost and are a part of the academic affairs planning and budgeting processes. The integration is evidenced by unit's new missions and strategic plans that aligned to the divisional and institutional mission and goals that allow for project prioritization and gauging success. Information Technology's primary focus is on how to better support student success priorities and system-wide mandates, while the Center for Teaching and Educational Technology's is on how to support diversity initiatives and engagement of faculty in pedagogically driven course design. In addition, both units formed advisory groups inclusive of key partners inside and outside academic affairs

to continuously prioritize short term projects, consider progress and impact, expand services, and allocate limited resources.

The Sonoma State Special Visit report provided lists of expanded services for both units and preliminary input data such as the number served by the Center for Teaching and Educational Technology, and the visit provided the team with a fuller view of the enormous impact of this shift. Those providing technology resources and services have a better understanding of the instructional role of the university and technology's important role in enhancing student learning and success. Examples from the team's meeting with Information Technology include recruitment of a new CIO that fit with the new mission and strategic plan, new partnerships to develop eSports and facilitate mission related work in advancement, a broader adoption of smartsheets, and enhanced communication on how projects are prioritized and milestone achievement for current projects. Those benefiting from the technology resources and services now see these units as more than merely maintainers of technology, and are beginning to explore some exciting new partnerships to enhance student learning and success. Projects around student success have become less transactional and more iterative as both groups incorporate another key set of technology tools and services (Tableau and LOBOconnect) to make decisions and gauge success, which are supported by a third academic affairs unit, institutional effectiveness. Examples from the team's meeting with Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Center for Teaching and Educational Technology include: work around the Sophomore Experience; course redesign that considers pedagogy and modality; lifting and adjusting financial holds to facilitate time to degree; targeted interventions using equity gap data; considering DFW rates to add sections, and; the development of a core dataset to inform program self-studies.

As Sonoma State looks forward to the next reaffirmation visit, continue to consider how technology can help the institution track, and gauge the impact of, data informed change to improve student learning and success. The challenges in this area include maintaining momentum and

prioritizing support for all the different diversity, retention, and graduation initiatives given finite resources. At the same time, technology offers ways to leverage data to facilitate processes like aligning learning outcomes across programs and tracking gains in student outcomes.

**Recommendation #6: Creating and implementing a comprehensive diversity plan. (CFR 1.4)**

Sonoma State lists diversity and social justice as one of its four core values. The institution has historically operated with a decentralized approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion; however, diversity, equity, and inclusion is now a key element of strategic planning. The team was pleased to see the broad range of diversity initiatives taking place across the campus. Evidence of the priority placed on diversity, equity, and inclusion since the team's last visit includes:

- President Sakaki's hiring of an AVP for strategic initiatives and diversity (2019)
- Creation of a faculty fellow for anti-racist curriculum design (2020).
- Establishment of a Hispanic-Serving Institution Task Force to better serve Latinx students as well as other underserved student, staff, and faculty groups (2020).
- A Strategic Planning Process that emphasized diversity, equity, inclusion, and community (2017-2018).
- Participation of four cohorts of Sonoma State University faculty in the CSU/University of California anti-bias training series (2020).
- An initiative by the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to provide campus-wide teaching and guidance on diversity-related issues (2020).
- Creation of the Center for Academic Success and Student Enrichment to support underrepresented and underserved students in persisting through graduation (2018).

The institution is developing a framework for a comprehensive diversity, equity, and inclusion initiative. During interviews, the team learned that some elements of the framework have already been

introduced on campus, and that a campus climate survey will be administered in April of 2021. Findings from the survey will inform further development of the diversity, equity, and inclusion framework, expected to be presented to the campus community in the fall of 2021.

In response to interview questions about whether the Sonoma State community is satisfied with progress on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, the response from staff, faculty, and administrators was “Yes”. The team did not hear dissatisfaction with progress during any interviews.

Comments included responses such as:

- In the last six months there has been a shift in culture across the campus.
- There is a collective understanding on the campus about what is needed to be done.
- Leadership is committed to diversity being more broadly embedded. and
- Money is sometimes an issue [in what we would like to do] but not a deal-breaker. We all need to hold each other accountable and keep strategic priorities ... and our values in the forefront.

The President’s Advisory Council on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion showed 438 diversity initiatives across the campus, 326 of which have been initiated by the recently rebuilt Division of Student Affairs. In response to a probe about how the institution will know what is working and what requires change, the team heard that planning had not yet been done in that area. The team encourages the Sonoma State community to identify measures for each diversity initiative so that there will be evidence of what is working and what may need change. The evaluation of initiatives could parallel the program review process and possibly be a fertile area for faculty scholarship.

**Recommendation #7: Formally articulating what it means to be a SSU undergraduate or graduate student. (CFRs 1.2 and 2.2-2.4)**

The Special Visit Report evidences the campus community has engaged constituents to formally articulate what it means to be a Sonoma State student. Institutional distinctiveness, the Seawolf

Experience, will center on experiential learning, interdisciplinary connections, and outward engagement in a community, and having clear general learning outcomes for undergraduate and graduate students. Bachelor's degree graduates will be expected to meet thirteen learning outcomes in addition to disciplinary program learning outcomes. Master's degree students will be expected to meet six learning goals. The team heard example after example of how faculty and staff were intentionally aligning and operationalizing the Seawolf Experience for undergraduates, but the same cannot be said for graduate students, despite graduate programs with existing experiential, interdisciplinary, community opportunities. Therefore, it will also be important to consider what the Seawolf Experience means for graduate education.

The Special Visit Report describes efforts to improve the experience and address unique student success needs. The newly created Student Affairs division has created a military and veteran resource, a lead leadership program, an integrated academic and personal intervention team, an expanded food pantry, unlimited therapy sessions as a result of the pandemic, and a new online orientation. The team also heard about how units across campus are using data to diversify admissions and remove barriers to timely graduation for undergraduates. The team did not see the same collective institutional understanding of time to degree issues for graduate students, nor cross-institutional initiatives to support them academically or personally. Initiatives that supported graduate students seemed to be developed, measured, and discussed within the newly formed area of graduate studies and the faculty that coordinate graduate programs. It will be important, however, to harness the power of the entire campus community to truly achieve the goals of integrating graduate program development strategy for fundraising and program-specific projects and creating integrated support services across state-supported and self-support programs. The Special Visit Report includes the final goal for graduate education, "the needs of graduate students differ in important ways from undergraduates, including career services, professional development, IT support, and mental health." Care will need to be given

not silo graduate studies and the --Sonoma State-- students it serves. It will take more than those delivering graduate courses to accomplish that before the next accreditation visit based on the feedback the team received during its meeting with graduate students.

The Special Visit Report efforts to develop graduate specific scholarships, student awards program, student handbook, and community-based graduate assistantships. The director of graduate studies has worked to anchor extended education academic programs to degree and use data for improvements. The meeting with graduate students confirmed pre-pandemic progress, including a graduate student community, alumni and career mixers, expanded opportunities for applied culminating projects with community partners, and the benefits of a director for graduate studies. Student feedback indicated that there continues to be a need to articulate how graduate education fits in the overall mission of the institution. Students feel most connected to, and receive their academic support from, their advisors and program faculty. They described passionate faculty that seem stretched thin due to primary responsibilities to undergraduates. Students talked about connections to faculty, internships, alumni networks and the broader community outside of campus. However, students also spoke of difficulty finding academic or student support services, or understanding what state-support vs. self-support means to their education in terms of services. That is, while they did not feel totally adrift they also did not sense the kinds of strong and overlapping connection typical of a true community. This was evidenced by graduate students describing struggles that are also common for undergraduate students. These included frustrations related to “first generation” navigation and supports, mental health in the time of the pandemic, financial supports, administrative barriers such as forms and signatures, and desired academic supports (i.e. writing, statistics, research, etc.).

### **III. Findings, Commendations and Recommendations**

#### **A. Commendations**

1. We commend Sonoma State University for implementing a comprehensive strategic plan with aligned budget processes that have had multiple transformative impacts on the campus.

#### **B. Recommendations**

1. The team recommends continued attention to policies and practices to achieve the deeper intent of program review: a thoughtful engagement with a process of continuous improvement. The Sonoma State University program review policy and template for self-study highlight the need for program learning outcomes that, in combination with external review, and reflection, provide evidence to inform continuous improvement.