

March 11, 2021

To: WASC Senior College and University Commission

From: Judy K. Sakaki
President, Sonoma State University

Karen R. Moranski
Interim Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs and Accreditation
Liaison Officer

RE: Response to WSCUC Special Visit Team Report for Sonoma State University

Thank you for the opportunity to share our impressions of the WSCUC process, the review experience, and the team's judgments. We thank the team for its thoughtful review. We found it especially useful that the same committee was represented in 2017 and 2021. The timing of the recent review during the COVID pandemic ironically offered our campus an important opportunity to come together (albeit virtually) as a community and celebrate our progress in recent years, even as we strategize continuous improvement efforts. We found that the virtual process of review worked well.

Overall, the points raised in the report resonate with our own assessment of our campus's strengths and areas for improvement. In particular, we appreciate the teams' comments on our program review and assessment status and take seriously the recommendation for "continued attention to policies and practices to achieve the deeper intent of program review: a thoughtful engagement with a process of continuous improvement." Since the team's site visit, we have adopted a seven-year program review cycle. This will allow us to develop meaningful Memoranda of Understanding with programs and integrate annual reporting on progress. We believe the incorporation of annual reporting will foster greater connectedness with the process and a culture of continuous improvement.

In reference to our Sonoma State Strategic Plan, page 6 of the report indicates that "the institution also embraced three core values that it has sought to find reflected in each strategic plan goal." We thought it important to note that our strategic plan includes *four* core values: Diversity & Social Justice, Sustainability & Environmental Inquiry, Connectivity & Community Engagement, and Adaptability & Responsiveness.

We were struck by the considerable focus of the review on graduate education, which was part of Recommendation #7. While graduate students currently comprise only 8% of our

student population, we do indeed aim to enhance our graduate education experience and found the team's perspectives generally consistent with our goals and assessment of gaps. Some of the team's feedback may not fully take into account efforts made over the past two years which lay important groundwork for ongoing improvement.

With respect to Sonoma State's newly implemented data tools (Recommendation #4) the report commented on the "relative lack of data tools designed to support graduate education." Our Office of Graduate Studies has been working with our Office of Institutional Effectiveness in a partnership since October of 2019 to establish an initiative to collect, organize, and provide data specific to Master's Degree programs at Sonoma State University. Although there has been turnover in the Office of Institutional Effectiveness during the intervening time, the new Associate Vice President of Institutional Effectiveness has carried this key initiative forward. As a result, a new Data Dashboard was released on April 30, 2021 in a Tableau format that provides data on degrees awarded in Master's programs for all years from 2013 through 2020 and incorporates demographics (gender, race/ethnicity and URM status), and degree metrics such as average units earned. This Data Dashboard was added to prior data recently released on admissions trends (including applicants, enrollments and yield) that include information for graduate programs. These recent advances represent part of an ongoing effort to develop a greater campus-wide culture of consideration and support of graduate programs and graduate student activities at Sonoma State.

Referencing Recommendation #7, the report urges us to further consider and articulate "what the Seawolf Experience means for graduate education." The Seawolf Experience, as designed by the General Education Revision Subcommittee, was explicitly designed as an undergraduate experience. Nevertheless, we believe it is crucial to demonstrate a clear path forward for integrating and enhancing the graduate student experience. Despite pandemic delays, we have made considerable progress on this front, and point out the following milestones towards that goal, some of which were discussed in the Special Visit Report and some of which were discussed during the team's virtual visit:

- In 2019, Sonoma State University held its first University-wide Graduate Student Orientation to allow newly admitted students to get together across disciplines. During this event, incoming graduate students were introduced to student support structures including the Library, the Writing Center, Financial Aid, Disability Services for Students, Student Services, Student Involvement, and the Career Center. The graduate student orientation was moved to an online format during the pandemic in Fall 2020.
- In 2019, we also initiated graduate student mixers in order to get students from different programs together and to allow members from Graduate Studies to engage directly with students from across our programs.

- In March of 2020, Sonoma State established Institutional Graduate Level Learning Goals for graduate programs that are distinct from undergraduate learning outcomes and are aligned with the institution's strategic priorities. Beginning in Spring 2021, the individual departments and graduate programs have begun to incorporate alignment of their Program Learning Objectives with these Institutional Learning Goals as part of the program review process and in proposals for new graduate programs.
- In addition, in 2020, the Office of Academic Programs brought all graduate programs online for access to an Academic Records Report (ARR) for each graduate student. This up-to-date, online reporting process can be accessed by each graduate student as well as appropriate faculty and administrators to facilitate establishment of academic records, monitoring of degree progress, and aid in improved graduate student advising.

This system, that was previously only available for undergraduates, is being piloted for all graduate programs currently and is expected to be fully implemented for monitoring and approving graduate level degree coursework and milestones beginning Fall 2022.

- In 2020 and 2021, the Office of Graduate Studies worked with the Registrar's Office as well as with each individual Graduate Programs to develop program-specific documents that will streamline the documentation and signature processes related to Advancement to Candidacy and to Completion of Degree Requirements. Wherever appropriate, we have been converting to digital signature processes that allow students, faculty, and administrators to access and sign these documents remotely.
- Sonoma State has developed and implemented new policies regarding tuition waivers for Graduate Student Teaching Associates and Graduate Assistants. In addition, as of April 2021, Sonoma State has redesigned guidelines for the Graduate Equity Fellowship to ensure that all potential graduate student applicants have the opportunity to construct competitive applications. We are currently establishing paid paraprofessional internships supported by external funding supported by the ongoing budget line of a local municipality. As of Spring of 2021, the range of opportunities for financial support for graduate students is now collated and promoted, through notifications and through the Graduate Studies website, in an effort to provide greater transparency and potential access for all graduate students.
- In 2021, we initiated our first ever 3 Minute Thesis competition to bring together graduate students and members of the SSU community to see short presentations on the scholarship being done by students across our different graduate programs.
- In 2021, we are launching our first-ever Graduate Studies Graduation Celebration. Through this event, we will provide an opportunity to bring all graduating graduate students together to celebrate their collective and distinct Master's level achievements. Although this will be a virtual event this year, this initial event is part of a broader

initiative to integrate a formal Graduate hooding process as part of the larger collection of university-wide Commencement events in the post-pandemic future.

Again we thank the team for a highly productive visit and report. We are grateful for Chair Dorothy Leland's insights and leadership of this review team. We appreciate the nuanced perspectives on how we can continue to grow as an institution. We take pride in the notation that we have made progress in each of the 7 areas and that the culture change on campus was seen as impressive. We were delighted that the review team noted not only our accomplishments but also our spirit and our caring campus community.