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Ralph A. Wolff

March 7, 2012

Sharon Diaz
President and CEO
Samuel Merritt University
450 30th Street, Suite 2840
Oakland, CA 94609

Dear President Diaz:

At its meeting February 22-24, 2012, the Commission considered the report of the Educational Effectiveness Review (EER) visit team that visited Samuel Merritt University (SMU) November 16-18, 2011. The Commission had access to the institutional report for the EER visit, the team report from the visit, and the response submitted by the institution to the team report. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to speak with you, Academic Vice President and Provost Scot Foster, and Executive Director and Accreditation Liaison Officer Stephanie Bangert. Your comments were very useful in helping the panel understand the University and its work on this reaccreditation review.

SMU selected two themes for the EER to ensure meaningful outcomes from the review process. Building on its mission statement, the vision to “become a premier, nationally recognized multi-specialty health sciences institution” comprised the first theme. The team found this theme to have focused and energized many initiatives, noting also that the institution is in the early stages of achieving the goals set for these initiatives.

With regard to the second theme, “strengthening the culture of assessment,” the team viewed the institution as “having made great strides” even since the 2009 CPR visit. In this regard, the team found the self-study to be inquiry-based and representative of broad institutional engagement. It was richly supported by relevant data, reflecting a comprehensive data management system anchored in student learning outcomes at the institutional, program, and course levels. These data had supported program reviews in nine of ten professional disciplines. The team was particularly impressed with the *Curriculum Mapping Initiative*, by which the faculty and deans track the extent to which each program reinforces the institution’s Core Learning Competencies, a potentially exemplary process. Overall, the team was impressed with the consistently high levels of informed faculty engagement with all aspects of assessment, particularly the use of assessment information to improve student learning.

The Commission action letter of March 30, 2010, following the 2009 Capacity and Preparatory Review (CPR) visit, identified two issues for continuing attention. First, the role of the various Sutter Health entities in the governance processes of the University had threatened its academic autonomy, necessitating productive conversations between its administration and the Sutter Health leadership. At the time of this visit, the core issues of this concern had yet to be resolved; a matter that will be further addressed below.

The second recommendation from the CPR visit related to the institution’s rapidly evolving assessment information system and the need for more extensive training of the

faculty and staff in order to exploit the rich potential of this endeavor fully. The team found the institution to be making impressive progress in this regard; a finding that permeates much of its report.

As key measures of institutional effectiveness, the team considered the University's retention and graduation rates to be "impressive for all programs" and also noted that employment rates for graduates exceed 90%. The team also commented favorably on the recent hiring of a Chief Diversity Officer and the mandate that has been given to her to implement a well-developed vision for moving all stakeholders forward toward the institution's diversity goals.

The Commission endorses the team's commendations and recommendations and wishes to draw the institution's attention to the following areas for continuing attention:

Addressing governance structures. As noted in its 2010 action letter, the Commission remains troubled by the lack of resolution regarding the role of Sutter Health as it exercises superior authority on many key SMU decisions. The University leaders' lack of delegated authority in such core academic activities as capital expenditures for library collections, class and lab space utilization, and launching new academic programs, threatens to compromise the institution's academic mission. The Commission urged the institutional leadership and board to make every effort to negotiate terms that will protect SMU's interests, but the EER team reports that "satisfactory conclusions have yet to be reached." The fact that clinical placements for SMU students are more readily found in hospitals outside the Sutter system seems indicative of the hesitance of the Sutter leadership to appreciate the character and value of an outstanding educational institution within its domain. The Commission does not wish to revisit this issue in a future review and trusts that the urgent tone of this letter will garner the attention of Sutter Health leadership at a sufficient level to achieve a resolution in keeping with WASC principles concerning governance and related entities. (CFRs 1.3, 3.8, 3.9, Policy on Related Entities, and draft Policy on Independent Governing Boards)

Implementing diversity initiatives. The University has set ambitious goals for creating an even more welcoming and effective learning environment for every subpopulation of student. This commitment has been further operationalized by retaining a qualified Chief Diversity Officer who brings an informed vision for mobilizing the entire institution toward inclusive excellence. As noted by the team, SMU's community engagement and outreach initiatives are "only possible with the dedication of appropriate resources and an embrace of the principles of diversity by all administrative and clinical leaders." The Commission commends SMU's vision and urges a high level of ongoing support for its fulfillment. (CFRs 1.5, 2.10, 2.13)

Sustaining the focus on assessment of student learning. The institution has invested much talent and creative energy toward the creation of a comprehensive assessment infrastructure. The risk, of course, is that this complex system could become the victim of its own carrying costs. Because this assessment system is a centerpiece of the University's vision of becoming a nationally recognized health sciences institution, the Commission urges the academic leadership to ensure that assessment priorities are set and key personnel to support the system are retained, as this core dimension of SMU reaches full maturity. The Commission noted the team's many thoughtful suggestions for further refinements to assessment and encourages SMU to consider these ideas as it continues the fine work on assessment that is underway. (CFRs 2.6, 3.5, 4.1-4.4, 4.6, 4.8)

The Commission acted to:

1. Receive the team report and reaffirm the accreditation of Samuel Merritt University.

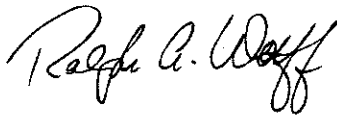
2. Schedule the next comprehensive review with the off-site review in fall 2020 and the visit tentatively scheduled for spring 2021.
3. Request an Interim Report in fall 2014 to address the following issues:
 - a. Clarifying governance concerns with Sutter Health related to strengthening institutional autonomy in matters such as capital expenditures, human resources, payroll, library acquisitions, facility upgrades, and space and program implementation.
 - b. Building stronger synergies with Sutter Health in areas such as placement of interns.
 - c. Expanding diversity effectiveness, infusing diversity awareness throughout the enrollment management sequence as an inclusive SMU effort.

In taking this action to reaffirm accreditation, the Commission confirms that Samuel Merritt University 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, a copy of this letter will be sent to the chair of SMU's governing board 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,



Ralph A. Wolff
President

RW/rw

cc: Linda Johnsrud, Commission Chair
Stephanie Bangert, ALO
Tom Drese, Board Chair
Members of the EER team
Richard Winn, WASC Liaison