

**REPORT OF THE WSCUC VISITING TEAM**

**SEEKING ACCREDITATION VISIT 3**

For Institutions Seeking Initial Accreditation

To Cal Northern School of Law

September 4-6, 2019

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The team evaluated the institution under the WSCUC Standards of Accreditation and prepared this report containing its collective judgment for consideration and action by the institution and by the WASC Senior College and University Commission. 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. Once an institution achieves either Candidacy or Initial Accreditation, the team report and Commission Action Letter associated with the review that resulted in the granting of either Candidacy or Initial Accreditation and the team reports and Commission Action Letters of any subsequent reviews will be made available to the public by publication on the WSCUC website.

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## **Section I: Overview and Context**

### **Description of the Institution and Visit**

Cal Northern School of Law (CNSL) is a small for-profit institution offering a Juris Doctor (JD) degree and a Master of Legal Studies (MLS) degree. Established in 1983, CNSL has been accredited by the Committee of Bar Examiners of the State Bar of California (CBE) since 1992.

CNSL is owned by Cal Northern Educational Development Corporation (EDC), established in 1983 as a private, for-profit corporation (Subchapter S), to support the creation of a local law school. It is not affiliated with any governmental or religious organization. EDC leases 20,000 square feet of a larger building to CNSL. The building includes additional space that is leased to long-term tenants. After electing to seek WSCUC accreditation in 2011, Cal Northern Educational Development Corporation's board of directors amended its bylaws in 2015 to create CNSL's board of trustees to govern CNSL.

As of spring 2019, 41 students were enrolled in the JD program, of which 31 are concurrently enrolled in the JD and MLS programs. Staff includes two full-time employees: the chief executive officer, who holds the titles dean and president (referred to in this report as dean); and the assistant to the dean. There are also four part-time administrators: the dean of students, the director of academic support (formerly known as the director of student services), the assessment and institutional research (IR) coordinator, and chief financial officer; three part-time office/library staff members; and 20 adjunct faculty members. CNSL offers a program of study designed to accommodate part-time students who are working or have other personal commitments. CNSL has a reputation for its impressive results on the difficult California Bar Examination (CBE).

CNSL was granted WSCUC Eligibility in May 2014. The first Seeking Accreditation Visit (SAV1) was conducted in November 2015. In its March 2016 action letter, the Commission scheduled a Seeking Accreditation Visit 2 (SAV2) to review compliance with those Standards and Criteria for Review (CFR) that the Commission determined were not sufficiently met for Candidacy or Initial Accreditation. In the March 2018 Commission action letter (CAL) following the September 2017 SAV2, the Commission scheduled a Seeking Accreditation Visit 3 (SAV3) to review compliance with those Standards and Criteria for Review (CFR) that the Commission determined were not sufficiently met for Initial Accreditation. As it had previously for the SAV2, the institution engaged in the pursuit of Initial Accreditation with seriousness and thoroughness. The institution's intentional focus on operationalizing the core principles of the Standards was evident to the SAV3 visiting team.

### **The Institution's Seeking Accreditation Visit Report: Quality and Rigor of the Review and Report**

In the period following the SAV2 visit, CNSL undertook a self-study led by the dean to consider, and make plans to act on, the recommendations of the Commission. In the SAV3 institutional report, CNSL described a process through which faculty, staff, students, and alumni participated in report preparation and review. The team found that CNSL's SAV3 report would have been much stronger had it included analysis and explication of the evidence provided in the appendices. CNSL missed an opportunity to effectively frame its efforts in the report.

### **Response to Issues Raised in Past Commission Letters**

CNSL has made significant progress in response to the recommendations articulated in the Commission action letter of March 9, 2018, in which the following issues were identified as in need of further development:

- Amend bylaws to ensure that removal of CNSL staff and administration, other than the dean, is not solely the purview of the board of directors. (CFR 1.5)
- The board of trustees should appoint the auditor and review that appointment annually. (CFR 1.7)
- Periodic program reviews should include student learning assessment results, retention and graduation rates, bar pass rates, and other relevant data to inform decision-making. (CFR 2.6 and 2.7)
- Regularly collect and analyze aggregated and disaggregated data related to student satisfaction and student achievement to inform decision-making. (CFR 2.10 and 2.13)
- Regularly assess the effectiveness of efforts by the dean of students and the director of student services to support students' academic, personal, and professional development, and use those results for improvement. (CFR 2.11)
- Develop and implement strategic enrollment management plans that are integrated with other institutional planning and resource allocation to ensure the institution's long-term financial viability. (CFR 3.4)
- The board of trustees should empower the dean to charge the chief financial officer (CFO) and director of student services with the appropriate responsibility to allow them to provide effective leadership and management in their functional areas. (CFR 3.6 and 3.8)
- Develop and implement systematic quality assurance processes that integrate the results of existing and emerging academic, fiscal, and co-curricular inquiries. (CFR 4.1)
- Develop a comprehensive strategic plan that goes beyond assessment of student learning to include evaluating the alignment of purpose, core functions, and resources in order to define the future direction of the institution. (CFR 4.6)

This report details the visiting team's findings and recommendations related to the Standards and accompanying CFRs referenced in the 2018 CAL. After reviewing the institution's materials and meeting with CNSL faculty, staff, students, and alumni, the team found that the institution has demonstrated considerable growth in its understanding and application of the Standards, notably the areas identified in the SAV2 CAL. Each of the Commission recommendations, as noted below, was considered and acted upon in an appropriate and timely manner reflective of those processes associated with a regionally accredited institution of higher learning. The team agrees that these actions reflect an institutional shift in mindset, discussed in more detail below. For example, as a result of their pursuit of accreditation,

CNSL now gathers, analyses, and uses data they previously had not considered (e.g., persistence and retention data) to inform improvements to services for students; CNSL now complements its exemplary minimum cumulative pass rate MPR on the California Bar with additional lines of evidence generated for program review purposes when evaluating its effectiveness related to student learning outcomes.

While onsite, the team gathered necessary qualitative evidence of CNSL’s sustained and intentional inquiry about educational effectiveness, which had not been effectively conveyed in the institution’s SAV3 report. The site visit provided team members with opportunities to observe the palpable culture of assessment that has taken root at CNSL.

## **Section II: Evaluation of Institutional Compliance with WSCUC’s Standards & Identified CFRs from Prior Seeking Accreditation Visits**

The team recognizes the institution for its efforts to review, evaluate, and resolve the noted areas of concern with regard to integrity and transparency under Standard 1, and for doing so in an effective and comprehensive manner. The following section describes CNSL’s responses to each of the Commission recommendations related to Standard 1.

### **Standard 1: Defining Institutional Purposes and Ensuring Educational Objectives**

CFR 1.5: Amend bylaws to ensure that removal of CNSL staff and administration, other than the dean, is not solely the purview of the board of directors.

The SAV2 team recommended that “the board amend the bylaws to ensure the removal of CNSL staff and administration, beyond the president, is not solely the purview of the board of directors.” The institution provided evidence of its action related to this recommendation. The minutes of the August 24, 2018 shareholders meeting confirm an amendment to the bylaws to “narrow the board’s power to remove employees, other than the dean of the Law School.” was

approved. According to Article V, Part B, Section 6 of the revised bylaws: “All of the officers, faculty, agents and employees of the School of Law shall be subject to the control and direction of the CEO and shall serve at the pleasure and discretion of the CEO.” In addition to the change to the bylaws, the team gathered additional evidence during the site visit that the institution has embraced the principle of autonomous governance, which was identified as a concern by SAV2 team and in the Commission Action Letter.

Meetings with the board of directors, board of trustees, the dean, and other members of the CNSL community confirmed that each administrative body is operating independently under the revised roles and in accordance with Standards. Faculty indicated that the trustees were responsive and supportive. The trustees have understanding and ownership of their roles and responsibilities, as do the directors, and the line dividing each is both clear and respected. The dean functions as the conduit for communication between the directors and the trustees, ensuring that each operate independently while maintaining the appropriate level of engagement with the institution. Collectively, all parties demonstrated a commitment to the mission and best interests of the institution and its students.

CFR 1.7: The board of trustees should appoint the auditor and review that appointment annually.

The 2018 CAL recommended that “The board of trustees should appoint the auditor and review that appointment annually” (CFR 1.7). CNSL acted upon that recommendation at its February 7, 2018 board of trustees meeting at which the board discussed the annual review and appointment of an independent auditing firm to conduct the annual audit of the Law School independent of the corporation. The meeting minutes reflect nomination and approval by the audit committee of Barry Glasser and Company. This action leads the team to conclude that the institution considered and acted upon the recommendation of the SAV2 team satisfactorily.

CNSL implemented a number of new and/or revised methods to evaluate institutional performance, including the Populi student information system, learning assessment efforts (CFR 2.6-4 and 2.6-5), graduate surveys (SAV3 appendix CFR 2.10-3), and reports from the dean of students (SAV3 appendix CFR 2.11-4) and director of academic support (SAV3 appendix CFR 2.11-5). While thorough analysis of this data was not provided in the SAV3 report, ostensibly because these are relatively new sources of information for the institution and because the report focused on the development and implementation of these new processes, the team observed in meetings and conversation that the faculty, staff, and various committees utilize the data in discussion of institutional performance, strategic planning, and as part of its developing culture of evidence-based decision-making. Each group was able to articulate how the data is used.

Meetings with the faculty senate, strategic planning committee, assessment committee, and campus leadership provided evidence that each group is aware of its responsibility to the school and engaged with continuous improvement. There is a strong sense of pride in the collaboration and work that led to the revised assessment programs and ability to use the results of learning assessment in evaluating institutional performance and building its strategic plans.

Based on the changes implemented by the institution, the team concludes that CNSL meets this Standard at a level sufficient for Initial Accreditation. Only the Commission is authorized to make the final determination as to whether or not an institution is in compliance with the Standards.

## **Standard 2: Achieving Educational Objectives through Core Functions**

The team commends CNSL for its response to the Commission's recommendations related to Standard 2. In the two years since its SAV2, the institution has implemented processes and mechanisms to evaluate its educational effectiveness and promote student success. The

following section describes CNSL’s responses to each of the Commission recommendations related to Standard 2.

CFR 2.6, 2.7: Periodic program reviews should include student learning assessment results, retention and graduation rates, bar pass rates, and other relevant data to inform decision-making.

The 2018 CAL recommended that “Periodic program reviews should include student learning assessment results, retention and graduation rates, bar pass rates, and other relevant data to inform decision-making” (CFR 2.6 and 2.7). It is clear CNSL has taken concrete steps in conducting periodic programmatic reviews of both their JD and MLS programs that include student learning assessment results, retention and graduation rates, bar pass rates, and other relevant data.

For example, the Program Review Report showed an increase in retention within the first academic year of the law school from 36% in 2016 to 65% in 2017 (SAV3 appendix CFR 2.7-3). In a conversation with the DAS, first-year retention was identified as an issue, and explained that the establishment of tutoring program was informed by concerns about retention. In response to the concern, CNSL made a data-guided decision to expand its tutoring program by adding an additional tutor. As CNSL continues to consider the impact of the tutoring program on retention, the team notes that analyses should take into consideration the institution’s size as a factor. The inherently small sample sizes will be more effectively analyzed for correlations between interventions (i.e., tutoring) and results.

In the JD Program Learning Assessment Report (included as an SAV3 appendix CFR), CNSL presented results of program learning outcomes (PLO) assessment of first-year law students (1L) in the JD program over a period of four years. Student work was evaluated against three of CNSL’s PLOs: Knowledge of Law (PLO1); Critical Thinking (PLO2); and

Communication (PLO3). The work was scored at four performance levels: beginning, developing, proficient, and highly proficient.

In 2015-2016, the assessment of PLO1 yielded the following results. Twenty-two percent of student work met the criteria for beginning; 56% was scored as developing; 22% was scored as proficient; and 0% at highly proficient. In 2016-2017, the assessment of PLO1 yielded the following results. Twenty-five percent of student work met the criteria for beginning; 44% was scored as developing; 17% as proficient; and 3% was rated as highly proficient. The JD Program Learning Assessment Report includes the results of its assessment of student work in reference to the other PLOs. In the SAV3 report, CNSL notes that the results “provide a baseline for further analysis” of student learning outcomes as students move to their second, third, and fourth years of law school. As a first step toward that longitudinal analysis, CNSL compared the results drawn from Academic Years (AYs) 2015-2017 with data drawn from AY 2017-2018 and concluded that the comparison “shows the progress CNSL is making toward achieving its Program Learning Outcomes” (SAV3 report, p. 18).

The team notes that, because the student work was collected at the same time—albeit from different classes, the conclusions about progress are challenging to support. However, now that CNSL has established its baselines, future comparisons will be more compelling. Finally, it is important to note that the results described above were not integrated into the SAV3 report, but were found in the report appendices. The team recommends that as CNSL continues to gather and analyze evidence of student learning outcomes its future reports include deeper analyses of the data as well as descriptions of decisions that were directly informed by the results of learning outcomes assessment.

In the SAV3 report, CNSL describes the process with which faculty considered the results of the assessments with a goal of “closing the loop.” This is particularly true of CNSL faculty members’ use of formative assessment strategies in their courses as part of a developing culture of inquiry and evidence-based decision-making. Of particular note were the many CNSL faculty, who described how a focus on assessment has changed their perspectives and their teaching practices. In response to a question from a team member about what makes them curious, faculty provided myriad concrete questions about student learning that they regularly consider now. One faculty member said: “I’m trying to teach them to become lawyers.” Another said his goal is that students leave his course with “the practical tools they need to be successful lawyers.” Throughout the visit, the team heard faculty members describe how thinking about student learning has prompted them to adjust their teaching to provide more opportunities for students to develop experiential and practical knowledge. The team commends CNSL for fostering this culture shift.

One faculty member told the team that incorporating multiple formative check-ins with students made it possible to identify when students “got lost and bring them back.” Another described a shift in response to students’ critique about the clarity of an assignment. In the next class meeting, the faculty member modeled a different way to approach a particular legal problem. “I want to provide opportunities that are NOT like what I experienced in law school,” he said. CNSL faculty explained that their attention to *how and whether* their students learn distinguishes their teaching from accepted practices at other law schools. As one faculty member proudly declared: “I used to say ‘I teach at a law school.’ Now I say ‘I am a legal educator.’” In the SAV3 report, CNSL described an example when a faculty member acted on results of a test on which a majority of students would not have passed. The faculty member brought his concern

about the reliability of the results to CNSL’s assessment coordinator. As a result, the faculty member concluded that one of the exam questions “was poorly written,” and that it would need to be rewritten to more accurately assess students’ knowledge of course content.

Historically, CNSL looked to its graduates’ California Bar passage rates as the primary indicator of learning. In fact, while the team was onsite, the institution received notice<sup>1</sup> that, at 73.9%, its Cumulative Minimum Bar Examination Pass Rate (MPR) for California-Accredited law schools is the highest in the state. Multiple faculty confirmed that, before pursuing WSCUC accreditation, they might not have looked beyond the MPR for evidence that their students are learning.

CFR 2.10, 2.13: Regularly collect and analyze aggregated and disaggregated data related to student satisfaction and student achievement to inform decision-making

The 2018 CAL recommended that CNSL “regularly collect and analyze aggregated and disaggregated data related to student satisfaction and student achievement to inform decision-making.” CNSL collected indirect evidence related to campus climate, the results of which show an overall positive level of student satisfaction, although the campus climate data itself was not presented in a disaggregated form due to the small sample size (7 of 17 students participated). Accordingly, disaggregating the data could allow for the identification of individual students, which is problematic. Members of the team who met with the institutional research coordinator had a productive conversation about potential limitations of sample size. As a result evidence of its commitment to continuous improvement, CNSL has begun to realize that traditional IR practices, such as those undertaken at much larger schools, could yield potentially misleading results. This is especially true with disaggregated data. For example, there may be only one

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.calbar.ca.gov/Portals/0/documents/admissions/Education/MinimumPassRateStandardCumulativePassRates.pdf>

student in a disaggregated category, which would yield a result of 100% or 0% for the category of analysis, e.g., retention, graduation, or bar passage. CNSL is engaged in a process of organic evolution of its capacity to gather additional lines of evidence to produce results that strengthen future evidence-based decision-making.

One example of its expanded data-gathering efforts is the focus group (n=4) CNSL conducted. The focus group was conducted by a mediator, who provided a narrative report, which included general conclusions about students' opinions about the sense of community at CNSL; their appreciation of a supportive administration and responsive faculty. The SAV3 reported that the participants "all had positive comments about their CNSL experience" (p. 25). While very positive, the team suggests that the small sample size limits the validity of conclusions about overall student satisfaction. Overall, the team commends CNSL for expanding its data gathering efforts. Convening focus groups can provide valuable information for the institution, not only about students' perceptions of their educational experiences, but also can yield direct evidence of student learning with the right questions. Going forward, CNSL may want to consider how focus groups might yield evidence that can inform decision-making.

As described above, CNSL made a data-informed decision and instituted a tutoring program in 2016 for students identified as in need of academic support (i.e., receiving a midterm score of less than 70). The tutoring approach was designed to help students improve their "general exam writing skills and knowledge of substantive course material"; the program also intended to address students' anxiety related to test-taking (SAV3 appendix CFR 2.11-6). In its evaluation of the tutoring program, CNSL concluded that "students who receive tutoring are more likely to improve their test scores, and at a higher percentage" (SAV3 appendix CFR 2.11-6, p. 5) than students who had not participated in tutoring. The evidence upon which CNSL bases

the claim of improvement derives from students' exam scores. In future assessments of the effectiveness of the tutoring program, CNSL may want to gather evidence aligned with its stated goals in addition to looking solely at exam results. These additional lines of evidence are likely to yield useful information about future programming. As CNSL considers additional approaches to describing the results of inquiry about effectiveness, the team suggests that case study methodology might allow the institution to tell its story with rich narrative detail.

CFR 2.11: Assess the effectiveness of efforts by the dean of students and the director of student services to support students' academic, personal, and professional development, and use those results for improvement.

CNSL has taken steps toward being able to assess the effectiveness of the efforts by the dean of students (DOS) and the director of academic support (DAS) to collectively support the students' academic, personal, and professional development. To that end, CNSL took the necessary first step towards clarifying expectations and revised the job descriptions for both the dean of students (DOS) and the director of academic support (DAS). The changes in title and job descriptions were not superficial but rather point toward the institution's shifting focus to student learning-centered planning.

A primary responsibility of the DOS is to "meet regularly with the DAS and institutional research coordinator to assess the effectiveness of student services to support the students' academic, personal and professional development" (SAV3 appendix CFR 2.11-1). The DAS's primary responsibility is to support "student development, retention, and self-advocacy" (SAV3 appendix CFR 2.11-2). Given the relatively recent articulation of the roles and responsibilities of the DOS and DAS, the SAV3 report and its appendices provide limited evidence of evaluation efforts. Among the evidence provided, CNSL described its evaluation of the tutoring program, which led to the hiring of an additional tutor and to the refinement of the tutoring program to

allow up to three hours of tutoring rather than mandating three hours of tutoring as not all students needed that much time. The team suggests that as CNSL grows its capacity to support students' academic, personal, and professional development, the institution consider gathering and analyzing additional lines of evidence to inform future decision-making.

Based on the changes implemented by the institution, the team finds that CNSL meets this Standard at a level sufficient for Initial Accreditation. Only the Commission is authorized to make the final determination as to whether or not an institution is in compliance with the Standards.

### **Standard 3: Developing and Applying Resources and Organizational Structures to Ensure Quality and Sustainability**

Since the SAV2, CNSL has taken steps to improve its financial planning capacity, including developing a proactive plan for enrollment, which is the key driver for revenue. Further they have hired a new CFO, which is an important addition to the team. The following section describes CNSL's responses to each of the Commission recommendations related to Standard 3.

#### CFR 3.4: Develop and implement strategic enrollment management plans that are integrated with other institutional planning and resource allocation to ensure the institution's long-term financial viability.

CNSL has taken concrete steps to improve its budgeting and financial planning. There is a regular budgeting process which commences in October and culminates with budget review and approval by the board of directors and board of trustees each January. The school has consistently been financially stable; however, its financial model is tuition driven, and the number of students is quite small, making enrollment and retention a key factor to long-term growth.

The institution has produced a strategic plan through fiscal year (FY) 2021, which includes a focused effort on enrollment. Maintaining affordability is a key component, and the institution has projected a modest 10% increase in tuition every four years. Based on the strategic plan, CNSL now has a multi-year financial plan (through FY 2022) which shows enrollment growth and increased resources to accompany such growth. The enrollment growth modeled is 26% over the next two years. The financial plan is based on a proactive enrollment management plan, which was not in place at the time of the SAV2. The financial plan also assumes new fundraising for scholarships, which is underway.

The enrollment plan has four components: marketing, enrollment, diversity, and retention. CNSL monitors, assesses, and adjusts its enrollment activities as new data and information becomes available. In the last two years, CNSL has increased its enrollment, despite previously experiencing enrollment volatility and increased competition among law schools. The institution has taken proactive steps with respect to marketing and recruiting (in particular targeted advertising and recruitment), and, evaluates which marketing outlets provide not only the most reach, but also whether the institution's efforts convert interested students into enrolled students. The implementation of the enrollment plan is too recent to provide significant, measurable results.

As the institution considers its enrollment management plan, it will be important for the financial plan to model various scenarios, to include possibilities such as, but not limited to: a) current students taking leaves in anticipation of securing future federal financial aid; b) the institution not meeting enrollment goals; c) the institution meeting enrollment goals with a higher-need student population which demands additional resources beyond what current

students require; and d) the institution exceeding enrollment goals, thus requiring additional infrastructure.

The institution is making an intentional effort to recruit students from previously underrepresented areas and now provides one 100% tuition reduction scholarship to help support its diversity efforts. CNSL also hopes that, with Initial Accreditation, students will have access to federal financial aid, which could lead to a more economically, geographically, and racially diverse student population.

To improve retention, CNSL now provides an improved orientation, encouraging students to understand what resources are available and to develop relationships with faculty early. As part of their retention efforts, CNSL offers tutoring and mentoring. Strong student retention, in particular, between years one and two will provide for a more robust financial model. Therefore, not only in order to grow enrollment, but also add to the stability of their financial model, the institution may need to allocate additional resources, beyond tutoring, to student support services such as additional advising or mental health services that facilitate academic and professional success for a larger and increasingly diverse student population.

To date, this enrollment management effort appears to be successful; however, as it is a new initiative and the sample size is small, results will need to be evaluated over time. As the institution is able to increase its student population, it will need to ensure there are sufficient resources available to meet the needs of these students. In an effort to be prepared, some staff have engaged in professional development to better understand the expectations and requirements related to offering students access to federally-funded financial aid. Along those lines, the team recommends that the institution proactively consider a variety of scenarios which

might result from a changed accreditation status and student access to federal financial aid, and plan accordingly for those possibilities.

Finally, the financial model is highly tuition dependent; as the institution grows and builds an infrastructure based less on volunteer support and more on paid, full-time support, it will need to diversify its revenue sources to withstand volatility in enrollment. Based on feedback from various meetings during the visit, and the very small amount of fundraising done to date, the team recommends that CNSL grow its fundraising efforts in a more formal way, and as appropriate, with professional support; related, in an effort to further grow enrollment, CNSL might test marketing strategies, such as search engine optimization, a more robust social media effort, and increased advertising, to determine the most effective way to increase enrollment and donations.

CFR 3.6, 3.8: The board of trustees should empower the dean to charge the chief financial officer (CFO) and director of student services with the appropriate responsibility to allow them to provide effective leadership and management in their functional areas.

Since SAV2, CNSL has hired a CFO, who is fully engaged in financial and budgetary planning. The CFO comes with significant financial and accounting experience, and, was a former student of CNSL. The CFO regularly advises the dean and provides reports to the board of trustees. The CFO will also ensure compliance with requirements associated with federal financial aid programs, often referred to as “Title IV funding.” Title IV of the Higher Education Act (HEA) authorizes programs which provide financial assistance to support students in obtaining a postsecondary education at eligible institutions of higher education (IHEs). Among the requirements for eligibility to provide access to Title IV funding is accreditation by an agency recognized by the US Department of Education. WSCUC is one such agency.

Additionally, CNSL has reorganized their student services department, creating a new position of director of academic support (previously known as director of student services). The director of academic support is focused on providing tutoring and other academic support. The dean of students is responsible for counseling students, addressing student complaints, assessing student disabilities and necessary accommodations, providing orientation to first year students, and regularly assessing the effectiveness of student services. He is supported by a director of academic support, who is responsible for implementing strategies to retain students and support them in completing their degree program, providing specialized student support services, and ensuring the tutoring program is effective. The dean of students reiterated in his annual report, that one of his priorities was to be available to CNSL's students and to get to know the first-year class to better support their academic, personal, and professional development. While the student services program is still evolving, the institution has implemented a tutoring program, which it expects to dramatically improve retention rates going forward. To date, students have responded positively to these additional services.

As the institution looks to grow its enrollment and accept Title IV funding, its student population may change in demographics to include those who currently are not able to fund law school without federally-backed student loans. As such, CNSL may want to anticipate and plan for a diversified student body, including taking into account that students whose socioeconomic backgrounds may create potential barriers not currently identified by the institution. It will be important that the dean of student services continue to professionalize the program, evaluating the need to scale student support, as additional higher-need students are enrolled.

CNSL is fortunate to be able to rely on volunteers who share a commitment to the institution and its students. They, along with several administrative support staff, have been with

the institution for a long time and have deep institutional knowledge. As the institution grows, it will become even more important that the board of trustees consider succession planning, especially as it relates to key members of the team. The team recommends that CNSL develop a formal succession plan as an important step toward sustainability.

In summary, the institution continues to improve its long-range financial planning and continues to build its team; both of these efforts will allow CNSL to increase its capacity to anticipate and plan for additional enrollment. The team finds that CNSL meets Standard 3 at a level sufficient for Initial Accreditation. Only the Commission is authorized to make the final determination as to whether or not an institution is in compliance with the Standards.

#### **Standard 4: Creating an Organization Committed to Quality Assurance, Institutional Learning, and Improvement**

As mentioned above, the team observed a notable shift in perspectives among CNSL stakeholders, particularly in relation to the assessment of student learning and use of assessment results to inform programmatic decision-making. This emerging culture of inquiry informs the CNSL's approach to quality assurance (QA). In one meeting, a member of the board of directors queried the visiting team about whether pursuing WSCUC accreditation would ultimately be "worth" the effort CNSL has put forward. When the team turned that question to CNSL faculty, students, and alumni, the answer was resoundingly positive. In meetings with the team, members of the CNSL community regularly used the phrase "before WSCUC..." to distinguish past practices from current perspectives and behaviors. The following section describes CNSL's responses to each of the Commission recommendations related to Standard 4.

CFR 4.1: Develop and implement systematic quality assurance processes that integrate the results of existing and emerging academic, fiscal, and co-curricular inquiries

The QA process described in the SAV3 report pertains primarily to CNSL’s efforts to assess student learning outcomes and other data described above. Among the appendices provided in response to the CAL recommendation related to CFR 4.1 are plans and reports also referenced as evidence for CFR 2.7 and CFR 2.10. Therefore, the team recommends that CNSL consider ways to describe their efforts to integrate results of inquiries related to fiscal and co-curricular processes, per the CAL recommendation and WSCUC Standards. The team acknowledges that, at an institution the size of CNSL, the sustainability of QA processes depends on individuals’ willingness to participate. While CNSL did not take full advantage of the opportunity to describe its QA processes, the team gathered evidence of CNSL’s attention to inquiry about student learning (described above).

CFR 4.6: Develop a comprehensive strategic plan that goes beyond assessment of student learning to include evaluating the alignment of purpose, core functions, and resources in order to define the future direction of the institution.

CNSL responded to the recommendation by revising their 2017-2022 Strategic Plan (SAV3 appendix CFR 4.5-1).

The team recommends that CNSL continue to grow its capacity to engage in meaningful and sustainable evaluation of its educational effectiveness. Based on the changes implemented by the institution, the team finds that CNSL meets this Standard at a level sufficient for Initial Accreditation. Only the Commission is authorized to make the final determination as to whether or not an institution is in compliance with the Standards.

### **Other Changes or Issues the Institution is Facing**

CNSL notes in Section 5 of its SAV3 institutional report that, “with the CBE change that will eliminate “registered” law schools, distance-learning JD programs will soon become accredited. CNSL may want to consider whether changes should be made in its programs or

practices to stay competitive and will periodically review opportunities. Should CNSL decide to offer online programs we will need to seek training in good practices in online pedagogical approaches and curriculum development.”

Although CNSL is cognizant of the potential for competition, the institution should begin additional planning in light of increased future competition from online accredited law schools, in light of its student population of 44 students as of spring 2019.

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

#### **Findings**

The team observed that CNSL made significant progress in its efforts to address the issues identified by the SAV1 and SAV2 teams. An emerging culture of evidence-based decision-making is apparent as are the results of organizational changes that ensure the appropriate level of autonomy and governance. Based on provided evidence and the team’s direct observation, the institution understands and embraces the Standards effectively.

CNSL notes in Section 6 of their SAV3 report that it “has improved significantly as an institution in the process of preparing for the SAV3” visit. Throughout the process of seeking accreditation, CNSL took the recommendations of the SAV1 and SAV2 teams to heart and employed significant exercises in self-evaluation and reinvention. This pattern of institutional behavior continued in its preparation for the SAV3 visit as the recommendations of the SAV2 team were carefully considered in context of the institution’s mission, resources, and objectives. Changes in organizational structure, processes, governance, and evaluation were planned, actions taken, and the appropriate evidence documented. CNSL has demonstrated its willingness to evolve in its quest for accreditation and has done so in a remarkable manner for an institution of its size and scope.

The effort to embrace a system of learning outcomes, assessment, institutional research, and the use of the data it produces in evaluating institutional effectiveness is noted for the profound impact it is having. The SAV3 report states that, “Faculty are changing the way they teach.” This is apparent when interacting with the faculty and assessment committees. There is a high degree of excitement and engagement present throughout the institution as it evolves in its use of data and analysis, which “will be refined to improve the value of the data and expanded to increase understanding of student achievement.” Collaborative work between faculty, administration, institutional research, and the assessment committee is developing more sophisticated methods of measuring teaching and learning as a means to continuous improvement. Utilizing increasingly complex data gathering processes and resources, such as its new Populi SIS, the institution has enhanced opportunities for expanding the culture of evidence-based decision-making that is referenced throughout its SAV3 report.

The institution is operating with an appropriate level of autonomy, as evidenced by the changes in its committee and governance structures and processes. The board of trustees and board of directors adopted new bylaws that establish appropriate, well defined roles to ensure that the institution serves its students and mission. The faculty senate, strategic planning committee, and assessment committee demonstrate clear understanding of their responsibilities to the institution. Staff, faculty, students, and alumni uniformly reflect a high level of ownership and satisfaction with the institution and its continued improvement. It is worth noting that although it is a small, tightly knit community, the appropriate level of formality, process, and rigor exists within each position and committee.

The SAV3 report closes with the statement, “While still tethered to tradition, the board of trustees, faculty, and staff have changed their way of teaching and thinking and are ready to join

the ranks of WSCUC regionally accredited institutions” This change is evident throughout the report and the team found it equally evident onsite. Based on the changes implemented by the institution, the team finds that CNSL provided evidence of a sustained commitment to the core principles of WSCUC’s Standards and meets Standards 1, 2, 3, and 4 at the level sufficient for Initial Accreditation. Only the Commission is authorized to make the final determination as to whether or not an institution is in compliance with the Standards.

### **Commendations**

The team commends Cal Northern School of Law for:

1. The faculty, staff, and governing boards’ alignment with and commitment to the institution’s mission of providing an affordable, quality, and practitioner-oriented legal education.
2. A culture of inquiry and evidence-based decision-making that exemplifies a learning organization.
3. Exemplary cumulative California Bar pass rates.
4. A commitment to developing students as ethical practitioners of the law.
5. A committee structure that is appropriate for the institution’s current culture and is scalable to accommodate future growth.

### **Recommendations**

The team recommends that Cal Northern School of Law:

1. Seek appropriate professional expertise to develop an effective and sustainable financial aid program. [CFR 1.7, 2.13, 3.4]
2. Improve first- to second-year juris doctorate student retention. [CFR 1.2, 2.10, 2.11]
3. Refine the enrollment management plan to consider best- and worst-case scenarios related to student access to federal financial aid, including support for a larger and potentially more diverse population. [CFR 1.4, 3.4]
4. Develop a comprehensive succession plan for key institutional personnel. [CFR 3.6, 3.8]
5. Anticipate and proactively plan for the impact of potential changes to the institution resulting from accreditation and access to federal financial aid. [CFR 4.7]