

REPORT OF THE WASC VISITING TEAM

SPECIAL VISIT

To La Sierra University

October 1-2, 2013

Team Roster

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The team evaluated the institution under the 2008-2013 WASC Senior College and University 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.

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 WASC website.

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SECTION I – OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

A: Description of Institution and Visit

Background Information

La Sierra University (LSU) was founded in 1922 as a religious educational institution. Initially named La Sierra Academy, the school offered primary and secondary education. By 1939, the institution became known as La Sierra College and offered a college curriculum. In 1967, La Sierra College merged with Loma Linda University to become Loma Linda University La Sierra Campus. La Sierra provided primarily the undergraduate degree programs that led to the professional programs delivered on the Loma Linda campus. In 1990, the relationship between La Sierra Campus and Loma Linda University was dissolved and in 1991, the Board of Trustees voted to adopt the name La Sierra University, with intentions and plans to become a university, moving beyond just undergraduate education. According to its bylaws, “the University is an institution of higher education sponsored and maintained by the Pacific Union of Seventh-Day Adventists . . . The University is operated by its Board of Trustees as an integral part of the Pacific Union.” (Article 4).

Degree Offerings and Accreditation

La Sierra University is a small, comprehensive, coeducational institution in Riverside, California that is sponsored and maintained by the Pacific Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. As La Sierra Academy, it opened its doors in 1922 in the city of Riverside. In

1923, with the addition of teacher-training coursework, it became La Sierra Academy and Normal School. As its range of offerings expanded, it became Southern California Junior College (in 1927) and then La Sierra College (in 1939). It was accredited by WASC as a four-year liberal arts college in 1946.

In 1967, La Sierra College merged with Loma Linda University; the programs based on the La Sierra campus became the university's College of Arts and Sciences. The School of Education was created in 1968, followed in 1986 by the School of Business and in 1987 by the School of Religion. The Evening Adult Degree program (currently known as the Division of Continuing Studies) also began operation in 1986. What had been Loma Linda University's La Sierra campus became an independent institution, now La Sierra University, in 1990. La Sierra University offers 124 degree programs from bachelor to Ph.D. for about 2400 students, 75-80% of whom are undergraduates.

The university offers five undergraduate degrees (Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Fine Arts, Bachelor of Music, Bachelor of Social Work) and nine graduate degrees (Master of Arts, Master of Arts in Teaching, Master of Business Administration, Master of Divinity, Master of Ministry, Master of Science, Master of Pastoral Studies, Master of Theological Studies, Doctor of Education and Specialist in Education).

In addition to WASC accreditation, the university enjoys affiliation with a number of collegial organizations as well as other accrediting bodies. For example, the University is a

member of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, and the Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities. Accreditation of programs in education is maintained with the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTE) and the business programs are planning to seek accreditation through the Accredited Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP). The undergraduate program in Social Work is fully accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the music degrees are accredited by the National Schools of Music (NASM), the School of Religion received notification in 2011 that it has been granted full candidate status and is in the process of seeking accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). Finally, the Accrediting Association of Seventh-day Adventist Schools, Colleges, and Universities (AAA) also accredits La Sierra University.

Recent accreditation history

LSU's accreditation with WASC was reaffirmed for eight years following the completion of the CPR visit in the fall of 2008, the EER visit in the spring of 2010 and Commission action in June of 2010. Even though LSU was awarded a renewal of their accreditation, the Commission scheduled a special visit for the spring of 2011 to follow up on some concerns about controversy and pressure directed toward the university over the teaching of evolution and creationism. In addition to the Special Visit, the Commission also scheduled an Interim Report due November 1, 2014. The Interim Report is to focus on the issues of strategic planning, assessment, student success, information technology, institutional

research, and “any unresolved matters related to the controversy about the teaching of science.”

La Sierra University had come under criticism from some segments of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church because of the perception that some LSU faculty teach the biological sciences in a way that could be viewed as inconsistent with church teachings. The spring 2011 Special Visit looked at this issue especially as it pertained to the WASC CFR standards of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and organizational structure and decision making (CFR 1.4, 1.6 and 3.8 -note: These 2008 CFR designations have since changed in the 2013 WASC Handbook). The WASC Commission received the spring 2011 Special Visit report but issued a Notice of Concern regarding issues of governance related to the structure and function of the Board of Trustees and the appropriate roles of the trustees, administration and faculty at La Sierra University. They scheduled a second Special Visit for the spring of 2012 to follow up on these issues which was later postponed until the Fall of 2013. The fall 2013 Special Visit was to address recommendations in Special Visit team’s April 18-19, 2011 report as well as the concerns raised in the Commission action letter of July, 2011:

- Resolution of governance issues raised by the Commission, “including changes to the bylaws and other operational documents necessary to create an independent governing board” (CFR 3.9);

- Steps taken to clarify understanding of the appropriate roles of the governing board, faculty, and administration to ensure adherence to “appropriate scope of authority in keeping with WASC Standards” (CFR 1.3, 3.8-3.11);
- Steps taken to ensure the appropriate autonomy of La Sierra as an educational institution (CFR 1.6);
- An update on the ongoing work of the faculty to address the curricular issues that gave rise to the controversy over the teaching of evolutionary biology and creationism (CFR 2.1, 2.2a & 1.4).

Unrelated to WASC, but related to the issue that triggered the spring 2011 Special Visit, LSU has also been undergoing visits for the Adventist Accrediting Association (AAA) during a similar time window as the latest round of WASC visits. A 10 member AAA team visited LSU in November of 2010 and recommended the AAA Board award LSU full accreditation to match the WASC accreditation term extending to December of 2018. At its March 2011 meeting, the AAA Board voted to amend the AAA Visiting Team’s recommendation, voting to award an extension of LSU’s accreditation through December of 2012. The main reason given for this action centered on the perception by AAA that while LSU was working on this issue, it had not yet come to a resolution on the controversy regarding how creation and evolution are taught in the LSU Biology curriculum. La Sierra hosted a AAA special visit in the spring of 2013 where it was recommended that LSU make sure that a range of voices are heard in La Sierra classrooms, that “the board and administration develop and implement a strategy to deal with the creation/evolution controversy, rebuild the

reputation of the university, and regain the confidence of the constituency.” In the fall of 2013, the AAA awarded La Sierra University a 3 year renewal on their AAA Accreditation.

B. Quality of the Special Visit Report and Supporting Evidence

The La Sierra University special visit report was originally submitted in January of 2013 in advance of the scheduled spring 2013 Special Team Visit. For a variety of reasons, this visit was postponed until October of 2013. At the Special Visit team’s request, LSU submitted a supplemental update in August prior to the October visit. The Special Visit team took these two reports together to constitute the LSU Special Visit report.

The LSU Special Visit report focused on both the recommendations from the Spring 2011 Special Visit Team report and the concerns raised in the July 2011 Commission action letter. They collected and addressed these together into two main categories relating to 1) appropriate oversight of curricular matters (CFR 2.2) and 2) issues related to institutional autonomy and governance (CFR 1.6 and 3.8). It should be noted that the LSU self-study only noted these three CFRs, though in content, they addressed the CFRs mentioned in the 2011 Commission Letter.

Appropriate Oversight of Curricular Matters

The spring 2011 Special Visit team report and July 2011 Commission action letter commended LSU faculty and administration for attempting to address concerns that had been raised by outside influences through the appropriate faculty governance policies and processes. At issue was how, by whom and where in the curriculum conflicts between the denomination's doctrine and certain theories in the scientific disciplines should be addressed. LSU was encouraged to address these curricular issues through the existing faculty governance structures and policies by proposing appropriate curriculum and learning outcomes to accomplish with integrity and effectiveness its commitments to both its educational and faith based mission (Standards I and II).

The LSU Special Visit report described and discussed how this issue was addressed through the formation of a task force made up of three members from the School of Divinity, two members from the Biology Department (one of whom is the chair of the department), two members from the Psychology Department, the Dean of the Divinity School and the WASC ALO. This task force, chaired by the Associate Provost and Director of University Studies, worked to review the University's beliefs and values and identified curricular recommendations associated student learning outcomes. In addition, the Special Visit report supplement described some of the curricular changes that were made and the plans that were put in place to assess student learning regarding the learning outcomes that had been developed. The Special Visit report provided ample details of broad faculty

involvement and use of appropriate faculty governance structures and processes in place at LSU suggesting compliance with WASC expectations around academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and effective decision making based on appropriate lines of authority (CFRs 1.4, 1.6, and 2.1-2.4).

Issues Related to Institutional Governance

The spring 2011 Special Visit team report and July 2011 Commission action letter identified several areas of concern around governance and institutional autonomy including 1) the structure and function of the Board of Trustees, 2) clearly defined and appropriate roles for the trustees, administration and faculty, and 3) autonomy as an educational institution from the related entity of its sponsoring denomination (CFRs 1.6 and 3.8-3.11)).

The LSU Special Visit report described and discussed how these issues were addressed, including: the hiring of a consultant in board governance, participation by the Board of Trustees in two multi-day training sessions and a complete review and revision of La Sierra University's Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws to bring them into compliance with WASC standards and expectations. The Special Visit report contained a description of the process the trustees went through as well as highlighted the significant changes that were made in the Bylaws that were related to independence of a governing board, autonomy from related entities and clear and appropriate roles for trustees, administration and faculty in the governance process. While it was clear to the Special Visit team that the report addressed all of the concerns that were raised in the Special Visit team report and Commission action

letter of 2011, it was unclear to the Special Visit team by reading the report just what was being proposed vs. what had been adopted. There was also some confusion about the processes involved in the formation and adoption of the Articles and Bylaws and the role of the Constituency and how this group relates to the Board of Trustees and the institution. Clarifying documents and minutes from both trustee and Constituency meetings were requested and provided by the LSU ALO. In addition, there was some uncertainty on the part of the visiting team about what, if any, role the Adventist Accreditation Association (AAA) or the denominational roles of *ex officio* members of the Board of Trustees had in developing or approving the Bylaws of La Sierra University.

C. Description of the Team Review Process

The WASC Visiting Team had an initial pre-visit conference call to discuss the LSU Special Visit report and identify lines of inquiry to pursue during the special visit as well as additional resources or materials needed from LSU for the digital or physical evidence room. The team had a very thorough and engaged visit to La Sierra University.

There were two areas of focus for the Special Visit as detailed in the WASC Commission Letter of July 5, 2011:

- To examine issues of university governance to assure that there is appropriate independence, autonomy, and responsibility at all levels of the University in terms of both decision making and oversight of academics affairs (CFRs 1.3 1.4, 1.6, 3.8-3.11);

- To examine the structures and processes that are in place by the faculty and administration to address issues of curriculum development and academic assessment of course and programs with regards to how biology is taught at LSU, particularly with regards to the correlation of the teaching of evolution in biology courses and the SDA denominational commitments beliefs about the origins of creation (CFRs 1.3, 1.4, 2.4 ,3.8, 3.11).

The Visiting Team met with all of the principal constituencies with regard to these issues. Meetings were held with the Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO), the Biology Department, the LSU Faculty Senate, the President, the Provost, and most of the Board of Trustees. Each of these meetings was substantive, candid, and thoroughly addressed the relevant issues.

The Visiting Team also reviewed the following documents related to the above areas of focus:

- 2013 WASC Special Visit Report, Supplement and Appendices;
- 2013 Bylaws approved May 23, 2013;
- Minutes from recent Board of Trustees meetings;
- Draft minutes from the May 2013 Constituent Membership meetings; and
- May 2013 list of Constituent members and Board membership.
- Trustee Conflict of Interest Form
- Biology Assessment Report
- Syllabi from new or affected courses described in the Special Visit Report
- AAA LSU Final Report Spring 2013

SECTION II – TEAM ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUES

It was clear to the Visiting Team that the WASC Letter and the Formal Notice of Concern served as an extremely important notice to the La Sierra community that emphasized the need to correct the out of compliance issues. Each of the constituent groups that team interviewed described a remarkable shift in direction and a deep commitment to making sure that LSU was in compliance with WASC standards, policies, and expectations. The shift was evident based on decisions and actions including implemented policies and protocols. There was a notable shift in attitude and morale and a commitment to the highest standards of performance.

This report is divided into the two area of focus;

- **Institutional Autonomy and Oversight of the Effectiveness of Academic Programs:**

the autonomy of academic decision-making with regards to the denominational commitments to the mission of LSU as a SDA affiliated college and the oversight of the curriculum with regard to what to teach, where to teach it and how to assess its effectiveness (CFRs 1.4, 1.6, 2.1, 2.2a, 2.4, 3.11)

Governance Issues: the role, composition and governing documents of the LSU Board of Trustees and how they address the concerns raised in the 2011 WASC Commission letter (1.3, 1.6, 3.8-3.11).

A. Institutional Autonomy and Oversight of the Effectiveness of Academic Programs

The visiting team was most impressed with how the LSU faculty, together with the Provost and President, have been able to clarify how the commitment to presenting understandings of evolution and creationism can be presented in ways that both affirm the teaching of science in a responsible way consistent with the standards of the discipline as well as be clear about the SDA views and beliefs on creationism. The decision to distribute responsibility for making the faith and science connection a focus of the general curriculum, and not have it solely as a focal point in the Biology Department, has had a positive and clarifying effect on the science and University Studies curriculum as whole, and the Biology Department in particular.

The visiting team was enormously impressed with the evident change in outlook of the Biology Department. The positive energy of the faculty about teaching and research was palpable and the enthusiastic embrace of the mission of teaching science at an SDA school was clear. The morale of the Biology Department was extraordinarily high.

The Biology Department has also demonstrated progress in developing outcomes for assessing student learning in its courses. The commitment of the faculty to assessment was clear and strong and the faculty seem to the team to be moving from assessment as compliance to assessment as a means of continuous improvement.

The Faculty Senate has done considerable work in making sure that decisions about academic issues are made by the appropriate academic officers and the faculty, and that there is no overlapping influence by the governing board or denominational bodies on academic decisions. The visiting team observed an appreciable change on these matters since its initial visit in 2011 and it was clear to the team that the WASC expectations of academic freedom and autonomous academic decision making (CFRs 1.4, 1.6, 2.1, 2.4 and 3.11) were being met from the perspective of all faculty members interviewed.

Much of the change in academic autonomy decision making is attributable to the change in the By-Laws that were developed by the LSU Board of Trustees to come into compliance with WASC standards and expectations (CFR 1.3, 1.6, 3.8 & 3.11). While the bylaws, which were adopted in May of 2013, won't go into effect until May of 2014, they seem to have already created greater clarity throughout the school at all levels. As a result, the Visiting Team observed an appreciable change in the morale, commitment, and overall enthusiasm for the work of LSU in its curricular and academic pursuits.

B. Governance Issues

The Commission action letter of July 2011 articulated strong concerns regarding whether the Board of Trustees, as configured, represented an independent governing board and whether it functions autonomously from the sponsoring denomination. Circumstances surrounding the resignations of three faculty members and a member of the Board of Trustees only heightened these concerns. The Commission indicated its expectation that the *"LSU Board engage outside assistance and provide training to ensure a clear and*

comprehensive understanding of the duties and responsibilities of governing board members, including the protection of institutional autonomy and adherence to WASC Standards (CFRs 1.3,1.6,3.8, 3.9 and the Policy on Related Entities)’’.

The Special Visit report gave indication that the LSU Board of Trustees took this expectation seriously as they hired a consulting expert and performed a complete review and revision of the Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws. However, as indicated above, the visiting team had questions and concerns after reading the report and supplementary documents that needed to be pursued for clarification. The concerns raised in the WASC Commission letter of July 2011 regarding related entities caused the visiting team to look closely at the roles of the Constituent membership and the denominational *ex officio* members of the Board of Trustees.

Article 5 of the University Bylaws describes the establishment, function, and make up of a body called the Constituent Membership (Sections 5.1-5.3). This body is made up of the 48 member executive committee of the Pacific Union Conference (PUC, a related entity) and 45 members of the La Sierra University community, including the entire Board of Trustees (10 of which overlap with the PUC executive committee). This means there are 83 unique members making up the Constituent Membership, only 24 of which are members of the Board of Trustees.

The minutes of the May 23, 2013 Constituent Membership meeting indicated that the Constituent Membership adopted the revised Board of Trustees Bylaws to be effective May 23, 2014. Analysis of the bylaws confirms that the Constituent Membership, not the governing Board of Trustees, is granted the right to approve and change the bylaws. Therefore, according to the bylaws and the Constituent Membership action, the newly revised bylaws are the official bylaws of the institution effective May, 23, 2014. The visiting team was initially uncertain from the documentation provided whether the relationship of the Constituent Membership and the LSU Board of Trustees met the WASC Standards of an Independent Governing Board as it appeared the LSU Board of Trustees was subservient to this Constituent Membership. According to the bylaws, this body approves the bylaws and performs key governance functions including receiving the auditor's report, electing members to Board of Trustees, amending the Articles of Incorporation, disposing of the institution's assets, approving mergers, and dissolving the University. Additionally, the Constituent Membership is chaired by the sponsor's president (Bylaws, Section 5.5). However, after the team completed its interviews with the Trustees and Administration, it became clear that the Board of Trustees was the group that was in charge as the Constituent Membership had appropriate and yet limited authority. Authority for the central function of proposing amendments, making nominations or initiating actions resides within the Board of Trustees.

The interviews with the Board members revealed substantial changes and training to insure that a Board acts independently from inappropriate external influence and that it is

operational within WASC expectations as outlined in CFRs 1.6 and 3.8-3.10). The entire revised bylaws are available in appendix A, but specific changes of note to the visiting team as they relate to the concerns expressed in the WASC Commission letter of July, 2011 are as follows:

- the Board chair is now elected by the Board and is no longer automatically the president of the Pacific Union (Section 6.4)
- clarification of the roles of the Board (Section 6.7) , its officers (Article 7) and the President (Section 7.2)
- a clear process for removal of a board member (Sections 6.5)
- a majority (14 out of 23) of board members are now elected rather than appointed ex officio (Section 6.2)
- the adoption of a Board Policy Manual “to guide the Board and its committees, as well as Board relationships with University staff, and to facilitate assignment of responsibilities among them. “ (Section 6.7q)
- the inclusion of a conflict of interest policy and the annual signing of a conflict of interest statement for each board member (Section 6.16)

Upon review of the documentation, and based on the interviews listed above, the visiting team concluded that there does not appear to be any inappropriate influence being exerted *by the religious denomination (CFR 1.6)*. The Board of Trustees understands its authority and responsibility and articulated convincingly how it exercises independent judgment in its decision making. There was further evidence that the work of the Board has provided clarity for appropriate roles and lines of authority in the governance of the institution. The Biology

faculty members were able to articulate their governance role with respect to curriculum and confirmed that they are no longer being inappropriately influenced by individual members of the Board of Trustees. Finally, the Faculty Senate also articulated that it was clear with respect to its role and it too confirmed that their work is not inappropriately influenced by the Board of Trustees or the administration.

SECTION III – FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

La Sierra University is to be commended for the seriousness with which it has taken the concerns raised in the WASC Commission letter of July 2011 and the considerable work it has undertaken while the addressing them. It was clear to the visiting team that there exists a high level of investment, commitment and loyalty from faculty, administration and board in service to the development and maintenance of a high quality learning environment for their students.

Commendations:

LSU is to be particularly commended for:

1. Developing a serious, intentional, and constructive process to address the issues at the interface of faith and science that seeks an appropriate balance between the faith-based commitments of LSU and the requirements, standards and expectations of responsible academic inquiry.

2. Consistently following the institution's established policies and procedures for faculty governance and decision making, while also demonstrating responsible institutional governance on the part of the LSU administration and Board.
3. Executing and implementing a process whereby salient curricular issues in Biology and General Studies could be addressed and assessed in a way that honors both an academically sound science program and instruction in Church doctrine.
4. The faculty for being appropriately engaged in curriculum development and the development of measures that assess student learning for outcomes which are important to courses, programs and the institution.
5. The involvement and commitment of the President and Provost to strengthen both an academic and institutional culture at LSU that has assured the existence of continued academic freedom and a robust and vibrant community with a significantly engaged Faculty.
6. The Board developing, approving and implementing the necessary changes in the University By-Laws that provide greater clarity regarding the scope of responsibilities appropriate to the Board, the President and his administration and the faculty. The process of doing this work has already led to demonstrated improvements and more effective decision making at all levels.
7. The Board of Trustees for its significant efforts in developing practices, and policies that have refocused, stabilized and clarified the roles and responsibilities of the Board members in terms of governance at LSU.

Recommendations: The visiting team recommends:

1. That the Board continues to monitor and revise its By-laws and Board Policy Manual as may be needed in the future to assure it continues to function as an Independent Board in compliance with the expectations articulated by WASC CFRs 1.6 and 3.8-3.10) and best practices in higher education governance.
2. LSU continue to honor its commitments to both its educational and faith based mission in compliance with CFR 1.6 and the WASC Related Entities policy.
3. That the LSU Board update its Conflict of Interest Statement forms to reflect other forms of conflict inherent in CFRs 1.6 and 3.9 besides just financial ones.
4. That LSU act to increase clarity regarding the lines of authority and involvements that exist in the shared governance model that emerge through the implementation of and transition under its new bylaws such that it continues to comply with CFR 1.3 and 3.8-3.11
5. That the faculty continue its work with the establishment of learning outcomes and measures of assessment while also maturing in these efforts through the identification of key metrics that define success and as well as means of internal or external benchmarking of results to demonstrate educational effectiveness (Standard IV).