

California Southern University
Seeking Accreditation Visit 2

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1. Institutional Context, Report Preparation, and Previous Recommendations

California Southern University (CalSouthern) applied for initial accreditation in 2012, hosted a WSCUC visiting team in December 2013, and requested a second review for Initial Accreditation. Staff transitioned CalSouthern to the new accreditation process; therefore, this report reflects a *Seeking Accreditation Visit 2*. Given that the university offers all of its academic programs in an online delivery format, the review included the completion of the required *Distance Education Form*.

Ten (10) Criteria for Review (CFRs) were identified in 2013 by the WSCUC visiting team as being in minimal compliance. The institution's report was organized around these ten Criteria, as is the report by the 2015 team. CalSouthern responded well to the recommendations made by the Commission and have focused on improving performance so as to elevate ratings from minimal to substantial compliance for the ten CFRs under review. The tangible examples provided during the site visit were useful in understanding the extent of improvements.

The WSCUC Capacity and Preparatory Review team made the following recommendations during its prior review:

- Continue to develop coherent, integrated, and comprehensive assessment plans. These academic and co-curricular assessment plans should be used throughout the institution;
- Pursue the university's goals for raising the standards of summative measures of student success such as board exam passage rates;
- Further define and develop the relationship between the Institutional Effectiveness Plan and the Strategic Plan;
- Promote more reflection, interpretation, and robust analysis of evidence to support improvement in learning outcomes achievement;
- Continue to develop a culture of continuous quality improvement at all levels with transparency; and
- Give increased attention to enrollment as the primary means of ensuring a sustainable future.

2. Compliance with Identified Criteria for Review

Teaching and Learning

CFR 2.4: *The institution's student learning outcomes and standards of performance are developed by faculty and widely shared among faculty, students, staff, and (where appropriate) external stakeholders. The institution's faculty take collective responsibility for establishing appropriate standards of performance and demonstrating through assessment the achievement of these standards*

CalSouthern's faculty members demonstrate their active and collective responsibility for the assessment of student learning outcomes at institutional, program, and course levels in multiple ways.

Since the previous visit, the university created and filled the positions of Director of Institutional Research and Assessment and Academic Effectiveness Coordinator and established a university-wide Assessment Committee. The Committee's purposes are to review ongoing implementation of the Institutional Effectiveness Plan (IEP), to recommend modification to assessment processes and the institutional plan based on analysis of data, and to promote the effective use of the most relevant and accurate information in support of decision making.

The Assessment Committee has multiple accomplishments, but two are most notable. The Committee completely revised the Institutional Effectiveness Plan that resulted in the systemic and coordinated alignment of department action plans (DAPs) with both the annual budget and concrete targets in the Strategic Plan. It also oversees and provides data for the Academic Program Review (APR) process, updates the APR Guide, and evaluates the APR process itself.

As part of the revision of the Institutional Effectiveness Plan, the university committed to assess one Institutional Learning Outcome (ILO) each year according to an ILO Assessment Schedule, while continuing to collect indirect and direct assessment data on student learning for all ILOs. The findings of the ILO assessment are presented as a comprehensive report to the Chief Academic Officer and actions are then taken accordingly.

The first assessment focused on the ILO of Communication in January 2014 and revealed the need to clearly distinguish between "oral" and "written" communication outcomes. This revision/division of the Communication outcome is aligned with the WSCUC General Education competencies that distinguish between oral and written communication. The two distinct, revised Institutional Learning Outcomes now are: "Students should effectively communicate orally demonstrating well organized thoughts, ideas and opinions in a coherent presentation" and "Students should effectively communicate in writing across settings, purposes and audiences." As a result, all program learning outcomes (PLOs) and course learning outcomes (CLOs) were also revised and aligned with the two new ILOs. The university implemented new rubrics to assess oral and written communication signature assignments and undertook the norming of the new rubrics in Live Text across degree programs to ensure consistency of the assessment of these signature assignments. Further, the university's online education model ensures that students have the opportunity to demonstrate competence in oral communication so that direct assessments can occur. This institution-wide effort was completed in March 2015.

The university uses Live Text to collect evidence of student learning outcomes. Faculty members are initially trained to use Live Text in the Mentor (i.e., Faculty) Orientation

process, and additional assessment training is also available in the Live Text Help Center for faculty. CalSouthern uses these data on learning outcomes to inform the improvement of programs and courses. For example, as a result of the 2014 program review of the MA in Psychology, faculty revised the mid-term practicum survey, as well as the final practicum evaluation, to more closely align them with the program learning outcomes and enhance the program's capacity to collect information about students' learning in the program.

Signature assignments are in place within courses to provide direct assessment of the achievement of student learning outcomes at the program level. Faculty use analytic assessment rubrics to evaluate the signature assignments on a four-point rating scale. The university presented the finding that its target of at least 80% of students in the sample scoring at or above competency level 3 (proficient) was achieved across all program learning outcomes.

Faculty continued to develop assessment plans and the university presented examples of how assessment is being used to drive improvements. In one example, according to the CalSouthern Institutional Report and on site interviews, the Assessment Committee reviewed the site supervisor evaluation clinical practicum survey to ensure the alignment with practicum goals. As a result of this review, faculty revised the learning outcomes in the practicum courses (MFT 86704 and PSY 87704). Further, faculty updated the individual practicum assignments to align with the updated course learning outcomes.

Teaching and Learning

CFR 2.7: *All programs offered by the institution are subject to systematic program review. The program review process includes, but is not limited to, analyses of student achievement of the program's learning outcomes; retention and graduation rates; and, where appropriate, results of licensing examination and placement, and evidence from external constituencies such as employers and professional organizations.*

Starting in 2013, CalSouthern implemented the Academic Program Review process for all degree programs. The APRs are currently completed on a three-year cycle and in the future they will be completed in five-year cycles. The Director of the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning provides faculty with demographic data for the program reviews, and the Director of Institutional Research and Assessment and her staff provide all other program review data, such as a summary of the results of assessment of signature assignments, retention and graduation rates, enrollment numbers, and grade distributions, in a user-friendly format.

In 2014 the university completed four program reviews: Master of Arts in Psychology, Master of Science in Psychology, Doctor of Business Administration, and Master of Science in Law. While the program reviews are required to include one external member, they do not go through a formal external review process. However, the program review is a collaborative process and input from multiple stakeholders is captured within the program

review self-study process. Some examples of stakeholder input include: members of the School Advisory Boards served on the DBA, the MSL, and the MA PSY program reviews; alumni served on the MSL and DBA program reviews; and a student advisor contributed to the DBA program review. Completed program reviews go through five levels of approval: APR chair, Dean, Faculty Senate Curriculum Committee, Chief Academic Officer, and Academic Committee of the Board of Trustees.

Common action items that have resulted from program reviews are the revision of program learning outcomes and thus the revision of CLOs and course content to align with the updated PLOs. For example, as a result of the DBA program review, improvement plans included the hire of three more doctoral program faculty, a recommendation to hire a department chair, revised course learning outcomes, a SMART goal-setting sheet for new students was developed, and development of a Plan for Academic Success for DBA students who are on academic probation. The School of Business implemented these improvements in November 2014; however the impact of these measures has not yet been assessed.

The university responded to the 2013 recommendation of WSCUC by continuing to pursue its goals for raising the standards of summative measures of student success such as board exam passage rates. The university reported a 100% pass rate on the Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT), as well as a 100% pass rate on the Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor (LPCC). The PsyD program exceeded its external benchmark of 59% with a 67% pass rate on the Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology (EPPP) by tailoring vignettes and adjusting the Taylor Study Method used to prepare students. The passage rates for the California Bar Examination by CalSouthern law students (43.3%) exceeded those of 18 months ago (33.3%) and closely approached the state average of 43.4%.

Scholarship and Creative Activity

CFR 2.8: *The institution clearly defines expectations for research, scholarship, and creative activity for its students and all categories of faculty. The institution actively values and promotes scholarship, creative activity, and curricular and instructional innovation, and their dissemination appropriate to the institution's purposes and character.*

Professional development for innovation and creativity in curriculum and instruction is supported by the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning. Its Director oversees monthly scheduled training sessions for faculty and also provides on-demand training in the "Mentor Portal." Data, such as those from the post-course student surveys, the Graduate Survey, and the Institutional Effectiveness Survey, inform specific training events. For example, the results from the post-course student surveys pointed to the need to improve faculty feedback on students' work. Consequently, the Center provided training on quality feedback to students and the Faculty Senate Personnel Committee developed a Faculty Feedback Evaluation Rubric to guide the deans in their evaluation of faculty on this aspect

of faculty instruction. Other examples of training topics are work/life balance and the dissemination of Live Text information. As faculty requested a more comprehensive faculty training program, the university plans to expand offerings in the future.

The Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning also provides a monthly report to faculty with regular feedback on performance to help them modify and adjust teaching techniques as appropriate. These data include such statistics as the numbers of retained students, average graded assignment turnaround time, number of assignments sent to Turnitin (a tool to identify plagiarism), outstanding assessments of assignments in Live Text, and number of forums in discussions. Additionally the Deans provide faculty with quarterly reports on student post-course reviews for their use in adjusting instruction.

There is a SharePoint site for faculty portfolios that allows for the collection of faculty artifacts such as transcripts, training certificates, student testimonials, and evidence of professional development and scholarship. This allows for more accurate self-assessment by and evaluation of faculty. The Director of the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning provides faculty with a quarterly update on their professional development activities.

Two conflicting references to faculty scholarship appeared in the evidence presented to the visiting team. The Institutional Report states a general assertion, "Faculty at all levels regularly contribute to their field and add to the body of knowledge through research and publishing, presenting **and** (*emphasis added*) participating in interactive training sessions geared to improve innovation in teaching..." (page 13). However, the Faculty Mentor Handbook states, "California Southern University values research, scholarship, and creative activity for students and all categories of faculty. ... The University requires faculty to participate annually in scholarship, professional research **or** (*emphasis added*) attend at least one professional development workshop, seminar, professional organization, conference or convention" (page 5).

The difference in emphases is important because, when asked in interviews about the quote from the Institutional Report regarding the extent and nature of professional contributions currently being made, every faculty response referred only to particular faculty members' scholarly accomplishments or to the singular expectation of engaging in professional development offerings. There was no evidence presented in the interviews with faculty of an expectation, even with a very broad definition of scholarship and for doctoral faculty members, that all faculty would regularly contribute to their profession and engage in research and scholarship. Further, interviewed faculty could not provide examples of how research or scholarship informed their curriculum or instruction.

The deans reported that they encourage faculty to give back to their professions and ask about professional contributions and for evidence of faculty scholarship at the time of the annual evaluations. However, there is no mention of scholarship or research on the Faculty Mentor Performance Review sheet used for the annual faculty evaluations.

While the Institutional Report described exemplary scholarship by six faculty members, the list of 95 faculty presented as evidence of the Scholarship and Creative Activities in “research, publishing, professional development, or professional associations” contains six who reported no activity in 2014 and approximately 35 who reported only attending university training sessions, such as Live Text, Assessment and Plagiarism, or engaging in university service, most often the Faculty Senate and its committees. Thus the expectation of university service appears to further confound the faculty’s understanding of and expectations for research, scholarship and creative activity.

This lack of clarity about the definitions of and expectations for research, scholarship, creative activity, and university service poses potential difficulties for evaluating faculty and demonstrably valuing their professional contributions. This is compounded at an institution conferring masters and doctoral degrees.

Student Learning and Success

CFR 2.10: *The institution demonstrates that students make timely progress toward the completion of their degrees and that an acceptable proportion of students complete their degrees in a timely fashion, given the institution’s mission, the nature of the students it serves, and the kinds of programs it offers. The institution collects and analyzes student data, disaggregated by appropriate demographic categories and areas of study. It tracks achievement, satisfaction, and the extent to which the campus climate supports student success. The institution regularly identifies the characteristics of its students; assesses their preparation, needs, and experiences; and uses these data to improve student achievement.* (related to CFR 3.4 and CFRs 4.1, 4.3 and 4.4)

The university’s Institutional Research and Assessment Department (IRAD) has the responsibility for tracking and disseminating the data regarding the needs and progress of students. In addition, the university uses representative committees or task forces to initiate or improve particular assessment strategies. For example, throughout 2014 the Assessment Committee reviewed all institutional and program surveys to ensure their alignment with desired outcomes and the university mission. Surveys were revised to more accurately measure these outcomes. One of these, the Institutional Effectiveness Survey, is used to collect data on the campus climate and student satisfaction and the Graduate Survey assesses a variety of satisfaction measures of recent alumni.

CalSouthern benchmarks retention and graduation rates against its own aspirations, as well as the rates of peer institutions, and disaggregates data according to ethnicity, gender, age, and employment status. To investigate and understand the withdrawal and retention rates across programs, the university established a Retention Task Force in March 2014. Deans, advisors, the Director of Institutional Research and Assessment, IT staff, and several students participated in eight months of work, with subcommittees researching and analyzing retention data, student profiles, student contact protocol, reasons for

withdrawal, faculty feedback, and graded assignment turnaround time. This culminated in a Summary Assessment Report (SAR) submitted to the University Steering Committee in October 2014. The Report highlighted areas to improve, such as shorter turnaround time for grading assignments, improved engagement of students, increased advisor-student contact, and better first-year experiences for students. Almost all interviewees, including faculty, deans, staff, students, and administrators, mentioned the positive impact of the Retention Task Force.

However, the Task Force itself determined a need to “improve the collection of demographic data in order to have more conclusive data to support decisions” (page 10, Retention SAR). Such data would also aid in better analysis of withdrawal trends and determination of success indicators. It is important that these refinements to data collection be made to more effectively identify the achievement of learning outcomes by subcategories of students, design and implement appropriate interventions in curriculum, instruction, or support services for those students who are struggling, and then assess the impact of the interventions.

Student Learning and Success

CFR 2.11: *Consistent with its purposes, the institution offers co-curricular programs that are aligned with its academic goals, integrated with academic programs, and designed to support all students’ personal and professional development. The institution assesses the effectiveness of its co-curricular programs and uses the results for improvement.*

CalSouthern charged the Assessment Committee to assess the effectiveness of two co-curricular activities each year and each activity every three years according to a calendar in the Institutional Effectiveness Plan. The activities, which are defined as those that support student learning outside the classroom and enhance the student experience, are: CalSouthern Master Lecture Series, Learner Orientation, the First-Year Law Students’ Exam Workshop, the Doctoral Project Boot Camp, clinical case conferences, alumni services, and doctoral colloquia.

In 2014 co-curricular subcommittees of the Assessment Committee assessed the Master Lecture Series (MLS), Doctoral Colloquium, and Learner Orientation. The Director of Institutional Research and Assessment provided training to the subcommittees and they developed assessment plans that included the goals of the co-curricular activity, alignment of goals with Institutional Learning Outcomes, stakeholders to be engaged, timelines, evidence to be used, data requests, and plans for sharing the results. The Co-Curricular Summary Assessment Reports are submitted for a quality review to the Director of Institutional Research and Assessment and are then presented to the University Steering Committee for prioritization and resource allocation.

Co-Curricular Summary Assessment Reports capture the recommendations of the co-curricular assessment of both targeted activities. The Master Lecture Series is a

particularly outstanding example of a co-curricular program that is not only aligned with the Psychology and Business program outcomes, but is also assessed in a regular and effective manner. According to the MLS Co-Curricular Assessment Committee, comprised of academic, assessment, technology, publications, and marketing representatives, the Series has been effectively assessed and modified through surveys of student needs, customized exit surveys, and increasingly sophisticated counts of attendance by students, alumni and others. The outcomes go well beyond increases in attendance and the ability for students to earn extra credit to such advancements as mobile distribution, incorporation of the resulting videos into the CalSouthern curriculum, and exportation to other universities.

As a result of the Learner Orientation assessment, the Learner Orientation Services developed an APA orientation for students as well as an orientation for students on how to upload documents to Live Text. The Learner Orientation co-curricular assessment committee also learned that it was necessary for all advisors to be trained to be able to conduct the Learner Orientation.

The First-Year Law Students' Exam and Doctoral Project Boot Camp will be assessed in 2015, and Alumni Services and Clinical Case Conferencing will be assessed in 2016.

Fiscal, Physical and Information Resources

CFR 3.4: *The institution is financially stable and has unqualified independent financial audits and resources sufficient to ensure long-term viability. Resource planning and development include realistic budgeting, enrollment management, and diversification of revenue sources. Resource planning is integrated with all other institutional planning. Resources are aligned with educational purposes and objectives.*

In the Institutional Report, CalSouthern stated that it is financially stable. Its assets significantly exceed its liabilities as reflected in its 3.96 ratio as per the California Code of Regulations. The university shows a composite score of 3.0; anything above 1.5 indicates financial responsibility, using the US Department of Education composite scores for federal financial aid programs.

On the enrollment side, CalSouthern expressed that it will likely lose up to 5% of future enrollments when it decided not to participate in Title IV funding supporting active military members accessing DOD Tuition Assistance Program benefits. University Steering Committee members stated in interviews that they had researched, studied, and analyzed the pros and cons of receiving Title IV funding and decided against participating in the program. However, as enrollment is the primary means of ensuring a sustainable future, CalSouthern has enhanced its enrollment efforts with added admissions staff, improved infrastructure, and increased training to improve lead sources. A review of the lead sources outlines high and low conversion rates for different sources.

However, according to the Marketing Director, overall lead generation has increased by 22% with an approximate 9-10% in lead-to-enrollment conversion. The focus on acquiring more lead volume and staff to deal with the 9% lead-to-enrollment conversion rate has held firm in the last three years and the expectation is that the consistent conversion and enhancements provide predictability in projecting and managing enrollment growth.

Further, retention directly impacts budget. The first year retention rates for the 2012 Enrolled Learners retention rates were 89%, the 2nd year retention rates were 74%, and 3rd year retention rates were 70%. In 2013, the average retention rates for all CalSouthern degree programs had increased to 90%, according to the university's posted consumer information. As outlined in CFR 2.10, although the retention rates at CalSouthern were on the stable and higher side, the university commissioned the Retention Task Force with positive outcomes.

CalSouthern has also diversified its revenue stream by the sale of its proprietary learning management system (Compass) for \$6 million dollars and reported continued growth in its investment portfolio, specifically designed to provide a hedge against times when tuition revenue goals are not realized. That said, the CFO reported that the last annual financial performance summary yielded an increase in revenue of 7.8 %, compared to an increase in expenses of 2.2%.

Organization Structures and Decision-Making Processes

CFR 3.10: *The institution's faculty exercises effective academic leadership and acts consistently to ensure that both academic quality and the institution's educational purposes and character are sustained.*

The visiting team focused on the faculty's ability to exercise effective academic leadership and act consistently to ensure that both academic quality and the institution's educational purposes and character are sustained. Since the last WSCUC visit, CalSouthern's Faculty Senate has evolved and matured. When asked to characterize the Senate's role, there were varying responses ranging from "an advisory group" to "an extreme level of influence." Faculty highlighted some of their proudest and most effective accomplishments, such as incorporating online video presentations in courses, modifying courses, creating the faculty feedback evaluation rubric, modifying extra credit assignments, assessing the two new Communication ILOs, and using the Mentor Portal. As an example of faculty authority in program review, the Senate Curriculum Committee reviewed and sent back two programs for revisions.

Even though there was consensus on the maturity and impact of the Faculty Senate on academic quality, elevated engagement with faculty, and leadership on curriculum and academic program review, there were a significant number of responses on the Senate's role characterizing it as a purely advisory body with regard to university decision making.

Whether acting as a body with influence or authority, there was no evidence found that the Senate's role was codified.

One of the previous WSCUC team recommendations focused on engaging all levels of faculty into the Faculty Senate. CalSouthern has matured in this area by engaging adjunct, core, and full-time faculty in the Senate's subcommittees in curriculum, technology, personnel, general education, and library services. Several Senate committee members mentioned that all levels of faculty participate in Senate committees, course modifications, and program reviews and serve in elected positions within the Faculty Senate.

Quality Assurance Processes

CFR 4.1: *The institution employs a deliberate set of quality-assurance processes in both academic and non-academic areas, including new curriculum and program approval processes, periodic program review, assessment of student learning, and other forms of ongoing evaluation. These processes include: collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data; tracking learning results over time; using comparative data from external sources; and improving structures, services, processes, curricula, pedagogy, and learning.*

Reporting in its prior visit, the WSCUC team indicated that California Southern University's compliance was minimal with respect to CFR 4.1, describing the quality assurance processes as "new." The report further indicated that the quality assurance processes "formed the basis for an infrastructure that can ultimately improve the institution." The report also expressed that "faculty in particular seemed confused about their roles in regard to ownership of data collection and analysis...." The 2013 visiting team also had difficulty in identifying how the institution conducted quality assurance activities in non-academic areas. As a result, the 2015 visiting team paid particular attention to the quality assurance processes in place to collect, analyze, and interpret data, as well as to track the results over time and provide evidence of making improvements.

Using the newly established, representational Assessment Committee, the university worked on aligning the Institutional Effectiveness Plan with its Strategic Plan (See CFR 2.4 for details). Interviews with several institutional stakeholders demonstrated that the recently installed assessment activities help to determine whether the university is meeting its goals. For example, faculty familiarity in the fundamentals of assessment of student learning was formerly identified as a deficit, and therefore an improvement plan was created which included increased training, more frequent alerts sent to faculty regarding the timing of assessment submissions, and the work of faculty bodies to create signature assignments to assess student performance to identified learning outcomes. In addition, the university decided to send the Director of Institutional Research and Assessment and the Chief Academic Officer to WSCUC Assessment Leadership Academies in order to gain expertise to share with other administrators and faculty.

These improvement initiatives were included in the Institutional Effectiveness Plan, which in turn informed the long-range Strategic Plan and the university's budget process. In an interview with the Chief Financial Officer, it was learned that strides have been made to more clearly align the budgeting process to the planning process, which is itself driven by assessment. She indicated that the revised IEP not surprisingly led to more improvement initiatives than the budget will afford, but that the approach is systematic and based on evidence. It is the responsibility of senior leadership to then review and resource each request within the context of its ability to further the mission of the University.

The university cited the following examples of evidence in support of its intentions to continuously improve:

- Increasing faculty training pertaining to assessment, development of signature assignments, and the need for improved feedback to students both in terms of the quality and timeliness of response,
- Hiring academic advisors as a means to stay better connected with students, when the university learned through its assessment processes that retention challenges were at least in some measure due to students feeling disconnected,
- Automating the transcript evaluation process to move it into a digitized environment and streamline the amount of time taken to examine a student file,
- Holding APA writing style meetings in online communities, which built greater connectedness for students to the university and to one another, while reducing the fear that students allegedly had about the topic, and
- Orienting new students in online group settings to help establish a greater sense of community from the outset of their experience with California Southern University.

All of these improvement initiatives were born out of assessment activities that identified the need to address particular problems or deficits. In multiple interviews, faculty, staff, and administration expressed that the university had developed a "growing culture of assessment."

The visiting team also explored CalSouthern's process of collecting, analyzing and interpreting data. While the university has made progress in this respect, several interviews during the site visit pointed to the fact that there are still data elements within the student information system that are either missing or need further clarification. It will be essential for these issues to be addressed for the university to have greater confidence in its ability to aggregate, disaggregate, and make meaning of data.

Institutional Learning and Improvement

CFR 4.3: *Leadership at all levels, including faculty, staff, and administration, is committed to improvement based on the results of inquiry, evidence, and evaluation. Assessment of*

teaching, learning, and the campus environment in support of academic and co-curricular objectives is undertaken, used for improvement, and incorporated into institutional planning processes.

During the prior visit in 2013 the team reported difficulty in making a comprehensive evaluation of established policies and practices in the assessment of learning due to the newness and limited implementation of these processes. The team encouraged CalSouthern to take further steps to align learning outcomes at the course, program, and institutional level and to pursue direct evidence of student learning across all academic programs. In this visit, the team found that the university has made progress in that it conducts assessment in academic programs, support services, and co-curricular activities and makes improvements accordingly.

Faculty collaborated with academic leadership to create the Institutional Learning Outcomes, which were subsequently affirmed by the Board of Trustees' Academic Committee. ILOs are aligned with PLOs and CLOs; these relationships are expressed through the use of curriculum maps. The comprehensive evaluation of the Communication ILO, described in CFR 2.4, and the comprehensive revisions of PLOs and CLOs to align with two new Communication ILOs is a good example of commitment at all levels to improvements based on data.

The university reports that academic program reviews are intended to determine whether graduates demonstrate acceptable levels of proficiency in all levels of student learning outcomes, what is an acceptable level of proficiency for program learning outcomes, and how the program learning outcomes compare with those at similarly accredited institutions. These reviews also evaluate the quality and rigor of the degree. Several faculty members reported that one of the ways in which rigor was evaluated was by doing side-by-side comparisons with similar courses and programs at similar levels in regionally accredited institutions. Others commented, "Quality is defined by your clients/customers," and in this context identified clients and customers broadly to include program advisory boards, employers of graduates, accreditation agencies, state licensing boards, faculty, and students. California Southern University has made an effort to ensure that graduates from its programs meet the definitions of quality offered by these various stakeholders. Further, it was reported that alumni are surveyed by the institution to get feedback on the level of preparation their education provided for their chosen professions.

California Southern University's academic programs use direct measures from thesis, capstone or doctoral projects. Several programs require licensing exams as a culminating event. In the prior visit, concern was expressed that programs using licensing exams had not engaged in benchmarking activities or established clear achievement goals. On this visit and, as reported in CFR 2.7, the team was encouraged to learn that those programs using licensing exams were able to identify benchmarks in the form of state passage rate averages and their own established goals, and speak to positive trends of student

performance against those goals. In each case, outcomes exceeded program board exam passage rate goals and showed favorable trends.

It was apparent in multiple interviews that university faculty and administration had committed themselves to change. While there were reports of pockets of initial skepticism about the new emphasis on assessment, the vast majority of those interviewed cited the advantages of decision making based on assessment and resulting evidence. Subsequently, each program is responsible for maintaining its own learning outcome assessment plans and developing a pattern of collecting and analyzing data. For example, members of the Psychology faculty described calibration exercises intended to create greater inter-rater reliability with respect to faculty evaluation of student work products. They described the process as challenging, but informative and highly beneficial, as they learned that there was greater initial variability of faculty evaluation of student work than anticipated.

All functional areas, including academic programs, are responsible for self-reflection and planning on an annual basis and for preparation of a Summary Assessment Report. SARs focus on action steps emanating from an analysis of a multiplicity of assessment data pertaining to the function. Program and school SARs are based in part on assessment of student learning outcomes, but include other factors as well. SARs are consolidated into eight Departmental Annual Plans that are reviewed by the University Steering Committee for actions to be incorporated into the Strategic Plan and, as the action steps require financial resources, into the budget process.

Institutional Learning and Improvement

CFR 4.4: *The institution, with significant faculty involvement, engages in ongoing inquiry into the processes of teaching and learning, and the conditions and practices that ensure that the standards of performance established by the institution are being achieved. The faculty and other educators take responsibility for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes and use the results for improvement of student learning and success. The findings from such inquiries are applied to the design and improvement of curricula, pedagogy, and assessment methodology.*

The university expects its faculty to be actively involved in the evaluation and revision of curriculum, based on both indirect and direct assessment data. They cite the use of quarterly post-course student surveys as an indirect assessment as well as a variety of direct assessment measures such as mid-term and final exams or papers, theses, doctoral projects, and embedded signature assignments. Additionally all curriculum maps and signature assignments are reviewed and revised by faculty to ensure they effectively measure the expected outcomes. Signature assignments are developed to specifically provide formative and summative measures for each program learning outcome based on a modified four-point analytic rubric from the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) to define the criteria for assessing student work.

Courses are described in interviews as being “revised regularly” and faculty are expected to review and update assigned courses, according to the January 2015 CalSouthern Faculty Mentor Handbook and the Faculty Mentor Performance Review sheet. The course revision process was described in several independent interviews as being two-fold. First, a systematic approach is aligned with the Academic Program Review (APR), in which student learning is assessed on a programmatic level and deficits in student learning are then evaluated on a course-level basis. Program faculty described the manner in which the APR process identified specific content areas that were troublesome for students, the curriculum map was consulted to determine in which courses the content area of difficulty was associated, and appropriate changes were made.

Second, faculty also update courses on an ongoing basis as they determine needs for change, such as updated course reading materials, based on their subject matter expertise, awareness of industry standards, or student requests. For example, a hypnosis class was modified in response to student request and the subject matter expert decided to place a synchronous team assignment within it, unlike any other assignment found throughout the online classes.

In order to recommend revisions, faculty must complete and submit a course review form. A course “faculty owner” and the dean approve minor changes. Major changes (i.e., 25% of a course) are sent to the Faculty Senate Curriculum Committee for approval. Before the Curriculum Committee approves major changes in a course, it confirms that the course changes are congruent with the Institutional Learning Outcomes, as well as the Program Learning Outcomes. A record of course revisions is tracked in the customized university learning management system (Compass).

Deans described the course evaluation process as one that explores whether a student learning deficit was a function of the course design and content, faculty inability to effectively facilitate learning in a well-designed course, and/or student-related issues. In other words, the process is thoughtful and systematic.

With regard to improvements in pedagogy, the Faculty Senate recommended revisions to the discussion forums to improve their functionality in terms of instructional design and its Personnel Committee developed and recommended for implementation a rubric to assess the quality of faculty feedback to students. There are university-sponsored external professional development activities to improve teaching and learning and faculty are afforded ample opportunity for internal training on university tools. New faculty members are trained to provide substantive and consistent feedback as part of the orientation process.

At this time, it is too early to determine whether these assessment activities and related plans for improvement will lead to improved summative outcomes for students. The ability to comprehensively determine with confidence whether the plans lead to intended

outcomes will need close monitoring and further assessment, as will the capacity for making adjustments when improvement plans do not achieve their intended results.

3. Distance Education Review

CalSouthern has been accredited by the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) since 2010 and its accreditation will be reviewed for reaffirmation in 2019. The university has been dedicated to providing “a rich and dynamic educational experience to those who choose the freedom and flexibility of distance learning to satisfy their educational and professional goals” (University Mission Statement). CalSouthern uses the credit hour policy as a guideline to translate online learner activities into seat hours. This is included in the Academic Program Review guidebook, Faculty Handbook, and syllabi with a breakdown of the credit hour verification form tied to student activity.

Student verifications are conducted at CalSouthern to ensure that the student who registers in a distance education program is the “same student who participates in and completes the course or program and receives the academic credit:”

- New students show government issued photo IDs to enrollment team members in order to obtain a CalSouthern Student ID.
- Student examinations are proctored by ProctorU, which verifies students by using a web camera to identify individuals and asking various questions of them.

4. Commendations

The following commendations were made by the visiting team on the basis of evidence review and the subsequent site visit:

1. Preparations for the visit were very well organized, punctuated by excellent communication in advance as well as timely access to the information the visiting team requested.
2. The university has taken the accreditation process very seriously. For example, the university effectively defined and developed the relationship between the Institutional Effectiveness Plan and the Strategic Plan as a direct response to a recommendation from the prior visit.
3. The university has developed a demonstrable culture of evidence, spanning all programs and departments.
3. There are multiple examples in which the institution has progressed in its use of data and metrics. First, the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning provides a monthly report to faculty with regular feedback on performance to help them modify and adjust teaching techniques as appropriate. These data include such statistics as the numbers of students retained, average turnaround time, assignments sent to Turnitin, outstanding assessments in LiveText, and number of forums in discussions. Also, the team was impressed by the smart and copious use of rubrics, as well as the use of a SharePoint site for faculty portfolios that allows for the collection of artifacts.
4. The university has a remarkable culture of cooperation and collaboration.

5. There is a clear sense of shared governance with faculty. Faculty and administrators provided ample evidence of the Faculty Senate's influence on academics, curriculum, assessment, technology, and personnel matters. The faculty members also take their responsibilities seriously for establishing student learning outcomes and standards, and then assessing student learning. This is especially noteworthy given the number of adjunct faculty who substantively participate and contribute to assessment.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations were made by the visiting team on the basis of evidence review and the subsequent site visit:

1. The team recommends that the university continue to develop and refine elements of the student information system to most effectively aggregate and disaggregate data in support of improved student outcomes. (CFRs 4.1, 4.3, 4.4)
2. The team recommends that the university continues to test the strength and value of their new assessment processes including IEP, APR, co-curricular, and ILO related assessments, to ensure they result in desired long-term student learning outcomes and inform strategic decision making. (CFRs 4.1, 4.3, 4.4)
3. Although there is a clear sense that the Faculty Senate has matured and been impactful, documentation of current collaborative and consultative processes and practices may be necessary to protect the faculty "voice" from possible changes in leadership and working relationships in the future. (CFR 3.10)
4. It is recommended that the university establish clear expectations for broadly defined scholarship for every level of faculty and program. Further, these expectations should be reflected in the annual evaluation process and documentation. (CFR 2.8)

6. Concluding Comments

In conclusion, the visiting team focused extensively on the ten Criteria for Review identified in the December 2013 visit as needing further focus, attention, and improvement, and was pleased to find the university had made significant improvement in each. While continued emphases on these and other portions of the standards will be required, the team believes that CalSouthern has improved on the basis of its response to the recommendations made by the Commission from the prior visit.