

REPORT OF THE SPECIAL VISIT SITE TEAM

To
Sofia University

Date of Visit
November 14 – November 17, 2016

Team Roster

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The team evaluated the institution under the 2013 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 (WSCUC). 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 WSCUC website.

Section I: Overview and Context

A. Description of the Institution and its Accreditation History

For several years Sofia University has faced periods of turmoil and uncertainty, provoking threats of closing its doors more than once. The last WASC review (April 15, 2015), found the university in the very early stages of a transition. Leadership had identified bold plans to confront the challenges of running a sustainable graduate institution devoted to transpersonal psychology by diversifying its offerings in ways to capture the tech-centric environment of Silicon Valley and to capitalize on strong international student interest in U.S.-based educational offerings in business and technology. The task of this site visit team is to determine if, in the sixteen months since the WASC action letter, Sofia has initiated programs, policies and procedures that provide evidence of progress to date which can be expected to continue.

Sofia began as the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, a small, private, non-profit institution located in Palo Alto, CA dedicated to graduate education in this focus area of psychology. The Institute was granted candidacy by WASC in 1992 and achieved initial accreditation in 1997. Between this point of initial accreditation and 2006, the Institute had a special visit (2000) and two reviews, one for Capacity and Preparatory (2004) and one for Educational Effectiveness (2006). WASC accreditation was reaffirmed in 2007 with the next comprehensive review scheduled for 2013-2014.

In June 2012 under new presidential leadership and with WASC approval, the institution changed its name to Sofia University and expanded its mission beyond the single discipline of psychology and into undergraduate education.

In December, 2013, Sofia University entered a fiscal and administrative crisis which threatened its very survival. By 2014 this led to a change of ownership and legal status with a new president, board of trustees and many new administrators.

As a result of the 2015 reaccreditation process, the Commission reaffirmed the accreditation of Sofia University for a period of seven years. In taking this action, the Commission confirmed that the University had satisfactorily addressed the core accreditation commitments to student learning and success; quality and improvement; and institutional integrity, sustainability and accountability. At the same time, the Commission issued a notice of concern requesting a special visit in fall, 2016.

B. Description of Team's Review Process

The dramatic pattern of change that has been an integral part of this institution since at least 2011 is showing signs of stabilizing. The present special site visit originated with the notice of concern looking for progress in: (a) grounding a new vision and mission; (b) student success; and (c) strategic planning. An integral part of these issues originated from the need for the institution and its various constituents to find ways to build a culture of trust, to find common ground, and to manage the tension inherent in the new mission of integrating transpersonal psychology with technical fields such as business administration.

For this on-site review, in addition to previous WASC information and the institution's self-study, the team utilized a combination of interviews; available institutional data about personnel, marketing, and recruitment; and on request of the Site Visit Team prior to the visit, financial statements and audits for 2015 and 2016; and an enrollment plan for the next five years. Interviews, in person and via Zoom, were held

individually and in groups with administrators, board members, faculty, staff, and students including those leading the Strategic Planning Committees, Faculty Senate, and Staff and Student Liaison Groups. The few anonymous comments received were considered and, as relevant, incorporated into our consideration.

All members of the Sofia community were helpful in making their time, information and observations available throughout the team's visit for which we are most grateful.

C. Institution's Special Visit Report and Update

Sofia's self-study and the work of the present site visit team followed the organization of issues identified as the basis of the Commission's notice of concern.

Section II: Team's Evaluation of Action Issues

A. Grounding a New Vision and Mission

Process of Grounding the Mission and Vision

Since the last visit, Sofia University has taken many steps to strengthen and ground its mission throughout the institution and among its constituents. Sofia has coordinated collaborative experiences and activities to ground a new mission and vision (CFR 1.1) that consist of formally approved, appropriate statements of purpose to define its values and character including:

- Grounding conversations with Sofia alumni, students, faculty and friends;
- Town-hall meetings with key Sofia stakeholders;
- Surveys to faculty, staff and students;

- Weekly Institutional Planning and Communications Committee (IPC) meetings, which invite administration, faculty and staff to create shared goals and language, and to share important communications updates.

The university conducted strategic planning workshops and a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis of the refined mission and plans with the IPC. Sofia also participated in WASC training on standards/CFRs as relevant for the president, the Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO) and the IPC. Updating the Sofia University website to include the new mission and vision has allowed the university to broadly disseminate the message of the Sofia values and differentiators.

This work is translated structurally through a new organization into “Four Schools of Learning: Transpersonal Psychology, Technology and Engineering, Business and Leadership and, Transformative Education.” And it is embedded in the further development of the institutional learning outcomes of transformation, integration, and application (CFR 2.2b).

The hiring/promoting of key leaders to implement the new mission and vision is observed especially in the new hires into the positions of vice president of academic affairs and accreditation liaison officer, vice president of operations (chief operating officer -- COO), registrar, director of information technology (IT) and data analytics, marketing director, and outreach specialist. Much has happened in the last sixteen months. But these positions central to the running of the institution are just now coming into place. For example, the COO arrived only four weeks prior to our visit.

Also quite new are these welcomed initiatives to build structures for shared governance (CFR 3.10):

- Re-establishing a Faculty Senate and a Student Liaison Group
- Continued weekly meetings of the Institutional Planning Group with representatives of administration, academic program chairs and staff which is serving as a Management-Staff Senate.

These steps are significant, albeit beginning, efforts that require additional time to demonstrate their effectiveness and Sofia's sustained commitment to them. The faculty and staff report that they have appreciated being included in communications, conversations and planning. Yet they can be surprised by fast-breaking, poorly detailed, top-down decisions as happened just days before the team's visit regarding an enrollment management strategic plan (CFR 3.7). (Note: in response to viewing the Site Visitor's Report, Sofia indicates that the enrollment management plan was distributed earlier than planned and without the desired vetting because the Site Visit team requested a copy of it. They report that work is now underway.) Especially in these early stages of creating a safe culture of consultation, trust and transparency the need for clear, consistent decision-making structures and processes is particularly important.

Further developing collection and use of data and evidence in planning and decision-making (CFR 4.1) will strengthen Sofia's initial success in establishing a culture of trust and transparency. The newly established, staffed and resourced office of institutional research (IR) is a welcome step towards this goal. But the recently arrived IR director, although experienced in information management, is new to the culture, needs and demands of higher education. In order to realize the investment in IR, the office must quickly increase its capacity to collect, analyze and interpret relevant data, track results over time, use comparative data to understand progress and make

improvements, and incorporate the results into relevant planning and decision making processes with appropriate administrators and governing groups (CFRs 4.2, 4.5). These data should include clear educational objectives, indicators of student achievement, program and course levels, retention/graduation data, and evidence of student learning. (CFR 1.2) In addition to stronger use of data, establishing clear lines of decision-making authority and broadening communication will increase buy-in and continue the progress being made in overall morale. (CFRs 3.6, 3.7)

Sustained commitment to such an evidence-based culture of continuous improvement (CFR 4.3) is especially needed during this time of building new academic directions and programs. It is required to meet the curricular dimensions of the strategic enrollment plan. And, making the results available broadly in a practical, timely and meaningful fashion is necessary for Sofia's success in this changing educational landscape. (CFR 4.7).

B. Student Success

Campus Morale

Interviews with faculty and staff suggest that there have been measureable improvements in the overall morale at Sofia, but that there is more work to be done. According to the human relations director, staff turnover has been reduced from 48% to 13% year-to-year. While loss of key faculty has continued over these sixteen months (three departures we are aware of), it appears that this area is beginning to stabilize. The institution has turned to faculty well-being and workload as priorities (e.g., adding a 401K option to the benefits plan). Department directors who were wearing many hats on

our last visit happily informed the interviewers that their responsibilities have diminished and become more manageable (CFR 3.7).

One thing that emerged in the conversations was the continuing problem of low student morale as suggested by the low attendance at student town hall meetings and difficulty in engaging students in available work-study opportunities. The ALO reports that this trend may be a symptom of low morale or it may be a trend in fewer students now enrolled in on-site classes. The student service director remains optimistic that new attempts to engage students (e.g., Student Appreciation Day) will yield positive results. Further, one administrator observed that Sofia understands that efforts underway to plan for future programs lives in concert with the institution's commitment to its current students. Administration is mindful that supporting student success in the currently extant programs is a major commitment. (CFR 2.10, 2.13)

Faculty Governance

Interviews with core and adjunct faculty presented a mixed picture. While there is definitely improvement in faculty morale and sense of ownership in their programs, there was some residual dissatisfaction around difficulties in working with administrative styles that seem at odds with the founding transpersonal ethos of relationality (CFR 3.1). The newly established faculty senate has had only a single meeting; however, the senate president is optimistic that this body, which includes both core and adjunct faculty, will be able interface directly with the administration over issues of program development, curricular development and faculty well-being. Several core faculty members evidenced enthusiasm for the changes and are beginning to feel "empowered." Resolution of the underlying difficulties in communication and decision making processes will take

continued effort from both administration and the newly formed faculty body. (CFRs 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.10)

Student Services

The team observed revitalization of the advisement/mentoring program for students across all programs (CFR 2.13). With a “transformational whole-person” mission and curriculum, the role of interpersonal consultation, guidance and inspiration is essential. While the departure of some key faculty in the clinically oriented programs presented a short-term challenge, remaining faculty and new hires are dedicated to supporting student success by guiding students through their educational experience and insuring that they matriculate through the program in a timely manner. Newly hired faculty are particularly enthusiastic in their commitment to the role in mentoring and student advisement. They report very positive student response. (CFRs 2.10, 2.12, 2.13)

The university has made a bold attempt to revitalize the Sofia counseling center. Beginning this fall, staff and students reopened this valuable resource to support practicum students in the counseling and clinical programs. The clinical director, a former faculty member, has returned to Sofia based on the positive changes she observed during the past year. She has completely revised the counseling center handbook into a student friendly document. And students are currently serving a growing patient population at the center. (CFR 2.11)

Library services which support graduate education and doctoral research are constantly being reviewed in terms of adequacy of both research librarian staff and electronic resources. Increases in staffing are linked to increasing enrollment numbers.

Students are encouraged that previous deficits in staffing and training programs will be mitigated by the institution's commitment to supporting student research. (CFR 3.5)

There are several areas in which Sofia can embark on value added initiatives. Expansion of the career resource center and the development of an active alumni outreach program seem important steps to engage at this point in time. (CFR 2.11)

Program Growth and Changes

The university described the new program development approach as one of "piloting" a variety of clinical and non-clinical offerings to see which gain traction and have the potential to become self-sustaining. While these programs are related to the expanded mission and have been approved by WASC, they seem to lack the in-depth, long-range strategic planning necessary to support their successful implementation and overall quality. Further, this approach raises the question about whether or not the focus on these potential new offerings comes at a cost of support of and engagement with the current students (CFR 2.1).

C. Governance and Strategic Planning

In April, 2015 the WSCUC team report, followed by the Commission's July, 2015 action letter, highlighted the critical importance of progress in developing a broadly-based institutional strategic plan. The recommendations encompassed achieving greater clarity and depth in articulating institutional priorities and goals and an evidence-based set of milestones/metrics to support implementation and realization of strategic goals. Of particular concern were essential instructional capacity issues including student

success strategies and enrollment growth plans buttressed by a multi-year financial plan and institutional research to support those goals.

Since that time Sofia has made a strong effort to continue its strategic planning work. The planning process was documented in the self-study report, and confirmed and further described in conferences with staff and board members during the site visit. It was a broadly consultative program that addressed mission and vision, identified major priorities, and presented a set of action steps and departmental accountabilities for each priority. (CFRs 4.5, 4.6)

While this document is a good start on planning, it falls short of a best practices, evidence-based guide able to ensure Sofia's successful development. Enrollment growth continues to be the lynchpin in Sofia's strategy for building sustainability and expanding educational impact. In documents presented at the time of the visit, the team learned that Sofia is targeting enrollment of 5,000 students by Fiscal Year 2021, up from the current enrollment of about 350 (an enrollment level observed since at least 2007). The projected financial impact of this plan would increase revenue from about \$6 million annually to about \$100 million. This rapid growth is to be achieved primarily by implementing new degree programs at the bachelor's and master's levels, focused reputation-building and image development, increasing the proportion of online students, and expanding international enrollments both residential and online. This is a bold vision that needs better grounding in market research, macro trend analysis, and consultative planning across the institution. It requires more nuanced consideration of its impacts on student learning outcomes, faculty capacity and engagement, and demand for other institutional resources. The team acknowledges that this plan is mainly the work of the

just-arrived new COO. We also recognize, as did many faculty and staff, that there is urgency to increase enrollment and to realize the revenue that this will bring. Yet we have concerns that this plan represents exciting big ideas without the underpinnings to make it achievable, even if the target were less ambitious than the 5,000 students number. (CFR 3.4)

This plan has been referenced in each of the prior sections reinforcing the importance and need for evidenced-based planning, for attention to communication and its impact on campus morale, and for comprehensive academic analysis before implementing new programs and evaluating present ones. The team recommends that the enrollment plan currently in hand be reframed as a working proposal to next be recast at a more granular level with stronger supporting evidence and research, and then processed more thoroughly through the university's various consultative and deliberative bodies. (Note: Given this observation, we are pleased to learn from the ALO's response to reviewing this report in draft form, that this is "something we intended to include as we finished the plan.")

The overall institutional plan, though built on a more consultative model than the enrollment plan, is itself not yet sufficiently developed to serve as a guide for further institutional growth. It assigns many accountabilities, but is missing metrics, milestones and, for the most part, the goals identified are to be achieved in the last calendar quarter of 2016. There are very few longer-range targets. Sofia has made a strong start on which to build a fully formed strategic plan but this plan is not yet achieved. (CFR 3.7)

Notably missing from planning is a foundation of broad, evidence-based institutional research and accompanying analysis of gathered data as described in earlier

sections of this report. Sofia's planning decisions thus far have relied mostly on surveys conducted among students, faculty and staff. Substantiation for strategies rests mostly on anecdotes gathered from surveys and on numerical summaries of ranked responses to internal surveys. (Many examples of these surveys are provided in appendices section 3.A.2 in the self-study). Institutional data gathering and analysis, introduction of external trend data and resulting environment scanning, and SWOT reviews based on peer/competitor analysis are limited. This broader review of Sofia's environment appears to have been part of the intended scope of the recent strategic planning program (described in Sofia's Sub-Committee 3 Report, page 1, in appendix 3.A.2). However, elements such as market trend analysis do not appear in the documentation for Sofia's plans. While the strategic planning sub-committee's first work, as described in the Sub-Committee 3 document--understanding who Sofia is and where it wants to go -- is foundational, external forces, best practices and peer comparisons are also critical to effective planning. The SWOT document included in the self-study appendices is an example of this largely inward-facing approach to planning.

Similarly, to date there is limited evidence of delving into what the collected data mean – the kind of analyses and use of data that provide decision-makers with projections and recommendations. Sofia has only recently appointed a director of institutional research and this executive's first, very important, task has been to improve the quality and quantity of internal data. While practiced in information management, this executive is new to higher education and needs a better and more advanced framework for institutional research (IR) to meet the needs of the institution.

As noted in earlier sections of this report, we again recommend that Sofia build a stronger culture of evidence to support planning and management. This perspective includes learning and adopting best practices in institutional research throughout the higher education sector, building the skills of the institutional research team, and, at the senior executive level, building an array of metrics and analytics that enable informed decision-making, timely course-correction and long-term strategic thinking. (CFRs 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.6, 4.7).

Central to strengthening and further stabilizing Sofia is the need for full-time, experienced, sure-footed strategic financial management. At this time the university does not have a qualified, full-time senior financial executive. The president serves as the de facto CFO while the new accounting manager is designated as the CFO-in-training. Consistent with an accounting manager's position, she has restructured the budgeting process and made the financial reporting process more timely. However, responsibility for top-line financial strategy, planning and management has been in flux intermittently since 2006 as noted in earlier site visit reports. Although many of the recommendations in the auditors' report for FYE 2015 have been addressed, the university still does not have the expertise of an executive functioning at the strategic/analytical level of a CFO to serve as senior advisor to board and administration about financial conditions, reliable financial practices, and future planning. (CFR 3.8)

In part as a result of this void in the CFO position, the university's strategic plan and its enrollment plan, are not supported by a financial plan. Planning is initiative-based; it is not tied sufficiently to an allocation of resources or a grounded projection of appropriate revenues. We recommend that, as soon as possible, Sofia appoint a full-time

qualified CFO who can assure that financial management meets best practices for higher education and that the planning and management work of board and administrative leaders are supported by financial analysis and strategic thinking about revenue, expense, and balance sheet management. (CFR 3.4)

Section III. Findings and Recommendations

Since the last site visit, much effort and good will across the institution have supported important steps to expand Sofia's mission. Attention has been given to keeping grounded in Sofia's history of transpersonal psychology while integrating with the technical disciplines of the surrounding community – technology, business and education. These assets are serving as the basis for strengthening existing programs and developing new ones. From these collaborative steps in strategic planning, key hires were made, position descriptions and responsibilities clarified, shared governance structures developed, and communication across the institution progressed. But, like any new, big idea, much remains to be done before its promise can be realized and the envisioned institution firmly established.

Commendations

1. We commend the spirit of collaboration and good-will that characterize the considerable time and effort of the many planning groups spanning the board, administration, faculty, staff and students who worked long and hard over the past sixteen months, holding campus-wide discussions and gathering input to build a consensus for grounding an expanded mission and vision that demonstrates progress in and serves as the foundation for the further development of the institution's present strategic plan. (CFRs 1.1, 4.5, 4.6)
2. We commend the people of Sofia – the board and its experienced leadership, senior administration, and its faculty, staff, students, and alumni for their commitment to the institution's success as manifest in their continued work to support students by

clarifying expected outcomes and making progress in providing needed clinical (e.g., counseling center) and research (e.g., library and technology) services while still challenging the institution to grow in ways aligned with the unique mission. (CFRs 2.2b, 2.11, 2.13, 3.5)

3. We commend the progress that has been made in the reorganization of the institution into its four school structures; filling key administrative and faculty positions; building shared governance groups through the newly formed Faculty Senate and Student Liaison Group; the continuation of the Institutional Planning and Communication Group that serves as a management/staff senate; and taking important steps toward development of a culture of collaboration and trust. (CFRs 3.10, 4.6)

Recommendations

After setting its mission and aspirations for the future and filling key administrative and faculty positions, the people of Sofia must now embark on the exciting but even more difficult task of translating their aspirations into a real, viable and strong academic institution of higher education. To this end, we offer the following recommendations

1. For an institution such as Sofia that is still emerging and developing, growth can be expected to come in different places and at different rates. Yet, to be successful, balance must be achieved between academic excellence and operating and fiscal needs. At this time the team is concerned that management considerations are overtaking academic interests. The academic mission and vision must be the drivers

of Sofia's growth; the determiners of needed student support services; and the targets against which to measure overall quality and progress. (CFRs 1.5, 2.10, 2.13, 3.7))

2. Since the team's last visit, Sofia has engaged in a multi-year strategic planning process to articulate its mission and paint a broad landscape of its goals and programs. This plan has been the foundation for key administrative hires. While a good beginning, it falls short of the best practices needed to build and direct a successful and vibrant university. Now it is essential to fill the gaps by hiring a full-time, qualified chief financial officer, training new administrators in the best practices of higher education and their application to Sofia's mission, and crafting a comprehensive strategic plan that delineates specific priorities and integrates them across enrollment, academic, operation and fiscal plans. The implementation program for the resulting plan should include metrics, milestones, timelines and clear accountabilities. Such a plan should use data, evidence, and analysis and is essential to creating an evidence-based culture for continuous improvement and long term strategic thinking. (CFRs 2.10, 3.1, 3.8, 4.1,4.2, 4.3, 4.6)
3. As noted in the self-study, communication continues to be a goal in Sofia's efforts to work collaboratively and to continue building trust and campus morale. The issues inherent in these communication challenges include the style of the exchanges, transparency of the content, the timeliness of the delivery, and the top-down nature of the dissemination. Instances of communication breakdown continue between all levels of the institution. These may be exacerbated by the present focus on business needs, hasty decision-making, and lack of a clear, evidenced-based strategic plan known throughout the institution. (CFRs 4.4, 4.5, 4.6)

We present the above observations to challenge and build this new and vibrant idea so that Sofia University continues to stabilize, develop its programs and begins to flourish.