

**REPORT OF THE WSCUC TEAM
SPECIAL VISIT**

To: California Southern University

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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.

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SECTION I – OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

A. Description of the Institution and Accreditation History

California Southern University is a private, for-profit institution based in Costa Mesa, California. Founded in 1978, the university began offering education as “Southern California University of Professional Studies” and changed its name to California Southern University (CalSouthern or CASU) in 2007. From its inception, CalSouthern has served adult students using primarily a distance learning education delivery model. Some programs have an on-ground experiential component as a required portion of the curricula.

CalSouthern offers both non-degree certificates and degree programs. There are several pre-baccalaureate and post-baccalaureate certificates in psychology and business. The degree programs cover multiple levels: associates, bachelor of science, bachelor of arts, master of science, master of arts, and doctorates in psychology, business, and law. These certificates and degree programs are housed in one of six schools listed highest to the lowest order of student enrollment: behavioral sciences, business and management, law, criminology and criminal justice, education, and nursing.

The institution currently does not offer federal financial aid to its students, but it is in the process of seeking U.S. Department of Education approval to participate in Title IV.

WSCUC initially accredited CalSouthern in 2015. There were several substantive change applications and approvals between 2015 and 2017. A reaffirmation visit was conducted in March 2020, but the Commission decision was deferred until after the May 2021 Special Visit.

B. Description of Team’s Review Process

Due to the ongoing challenges associated with COVID-19, all aspects of the special visit were planned and performed remotely using video conferencing. The team reviewed all materials provided by the institution and approximately 20 emails that were sent to the WSCUC confidential email account. Two of the emails shared electronic messages that were written to administrators and, occasionally, to one or two board members by the former president that raised questions and concerns about her continuing role at the university (which is discussed in detail in section II.A below). Given those concerns, the team took a few precautions as it attempted to gain clarity. First, during the interview process, the team chair met discretely by phone with the current president, board chair, and the owner. Second, the team chair and assistant chair formally met with the former president during the visit with the permission of the current president and board chair. The goal was to maximize the team members' focus on the formal visit and minimize their exposure to the complicated process of discerning the institution's relationship with the former president. However, the entire team debriefed about what was discovered, and each team member had an equal say in the recommendations made to the Commission.

C. Institution’s Special Visit Report: Quality and Rigor of the Report and Supporting Evidence

The team found California Southern University’s Special Visit Report Spring 2021 (special visit report) to cover the appropriate issues as identified by the Commission:

- A. Establishment of a Stable and Effective Staff and Senior Administration
- B. Efforts to Address Sharply Declining Graduation Rates
- C. Clarification of Expectations for Faculty Scholarship

- D. Closing the Loop on Use of Assessment of Student Learning
- E. Building Board Independence and Expertise
- F. Improving Communication and Transparency with WSCUC

Three additional issues were contained in the March 2020 team report and addressed in the special visit report:

- A. Design the Educational Model to Ensure Faculty Initiated Regular and Substantive Interaction with Students
- B. Strengthen the Faculty Senate by Continuing to Develop a More Engaged Role in University Decision Making
- C. Implement a Functional, Valid, and Reliable Data Collection, Analysis and Reporting System that Supports a Culture of Evidence and Improvement

CalSouthern provided evidence of improvement in relation to all WSCUC recommendations, including documentation to corroborate statements made in the special visit report with 17 original appendices. After reviewing the special visit report, the team made requests for additional information which were provided in a timely manner with 16 new documents which addressed the requests to the team's satisfaction.

SECTION II – TEAM’S EVALUATION OF ISSUES UNDER THE STANDARDS

A. Establishment of a Stable and Effective Staff and Senior Administration

The university addressed multiple issues under this topic area and the team focused on four in particular: Stable and Effective Senior Administration; Staff Administration; Transparency and Climate; and University Governance.

Stable and Effective Senior Administration

CalSouthern addressed this issue in its special visit report by asserting that the President's Executive Cabinet (PEC) is a "well-qualified and high-performing collaborative team of individuals with established stability who support the mission of the organization" (pages 7 – 8) (CFRs 1.8, 3.6). It appears all members have been in place since the March 2020 review with the exception of the new director of institutional research and assessment (IRAD) who began in May 2020. The report also noted the hiring of Dr. Glenn Roquemore as chancellor in April 2019, reporting to the president Dr. Gwen Finestone-Hecht, and then as president in April 2020, reporting to the board of directors (board). The report outlined his responsibilities for the "overall health and financial stability of the university, proactively managing risk and conflict resolution, and integrating the university's mission statement into everyday practice and application" (special visit report, page 8) (CFRs 3.6, 3.8). Further, a July 1, 2020 announcement titled "Delegated Authority and Independence of University President" (appendix U) was issued by the board to the university community. Its language about presidential authority was based on WSCUC policy guidelines and reassuring to the team.

However, due to (1) lack of clarity in the special visit report itself, (2) contradictions among several documents, and (3) the numerous emails written by the former president which were shared via the WSCUC confidential email account, the team questioned both the organizational reporting structure of the university and the authority of the current president Dr. Roquemore vis a vis the former president Dr. Gwen Finestone-Hecht. Dr. Finestone-Hecht purportedly resigned on April 20, 2020 and was named president emeritus. She is a shareholder/owner of the university due to her marriage to the founder and owner Dr. Donald Hecht, but is not a member of the board of directors.

The initial sources of the team's questions prior to the visit included the following:

- Within the special visit report, there was discussion of a proposed organizational change which reflected the departments of finance, human resources (HR), legal, and operations reporting to “Dr. Gwen Hecht, a shareholder of the University” and only the academic and institutional research departments reporting to Dr. Roquemore, the current president (page 21). The university sought counsel and input from the WSCUC liaison, but the team was unsure of the status of the proposed change going into the visit.
- Similarly, the board's July 1, 2020 announcement included a statement: “Changes in the Organizational Chart: Beginning today, Human Resources and Finance is reporting to the President.” But there was no mention of legal and operations functions reporting to the president in that document.
- The team received two organizational charts, the first dated February 2021 and a second issued to the team upon its request on May 6, 2021 during the visit. It also received a CASU Staff Interview List that, viewed together with the charts, presented the team with varying titles and unclear reporting lines within the legal services and human resources functions.
- The WSCUC confidential email site shared a number of the former president's emails written to various university personnel, eight of which (dated from August 2020 through March 2021) revealed an alarming pattern of her regular involvement in university operations.

The team pursued answers to its questions about the reporting structures and presidential authority through team interviews with the president and board at the visit and individual interviews by the team chair with the university founder and owner, current president, and board

chair in advance of the visit. The team chair and assistant chair requested and conducted an interview with the former president on May 6, the day of the visit. In that interview, Dr. Finestone-Hecht did not deny the existence or contents of the emails as they were described to her. The results of those interviews clarified the senior administration at CASU to a certain extent, but raised serious concerns for the team in regards to four areas: legal matters, human resources, budgeting, and academic affairs.

Legal Matters

In her interview with the team chair and assistant chair, the former president stated she had an agreement with the board chair and two other board members to handle all lawsuits related to reductions in force (RIFs). (For a discussion of the agreement, please see section II.F Improving Communication and Transparency with WSCUC below.) The visiting team was informed during the visit that the last of the major legal issues pertaining to personnel terminations were settled on Friday, April 30, 2021 and that Dr. Gwen Firestone-Hecht had again retired via an email announcement addressed to the university community dated Tuesday, May 4, 2021.

It was explained in the February special visit report that Dr. Kathryn Hamel, the senior vice president of the office of human resources and organizational development, had “moved into a short-term role as a consultant to the President to resolve pending legal cases” (page 8) and she was shown in the February 2021 organization chart (appendix C) with a dotted line to the current president. That consultant role ended on May 31, 2021 and she joined the Hecht Trauma Institute as CEO in June 2021. In August 2020, Ms. Zina Gleason was appointed as General Counsel (special visit report, page 9) with a dotted line reporting to the board in the February organization chart.

However, the reporting relationships of legal functions and the scope of the former president's involvement appeared problematic to the team after reviewing emails of August 17 and September 21, 2020, especially as Dr. Finestone-Hecht regularly refers to herself in writing and orally as an owner and a shareholder. In these emails she reminds university personnel to speak with Dr. Hamel about their legal questions or needs for subsequent referral by her to attorneys on retainer. Dr. Firestone-Hecht also refers to herself in writing as the agent charged by the board and shareholder of managing all legal matters. Of particular interest to the team was the statement, "In summary, Kathryn Hamel [Consultant and HR), ...work[s] directly, solely, and only for me (as per [her] contract), both now and in the future."

These statements belied the report's claim that Dr. Hamel reported to the current president. Further, in the May 6, 2021 interview with the former president, Dr. Finestone-Hecht stated that the general counsel, Ms. Gleeson, reported to the owners and that she, the former president, worked with both the general counsel and the consultant Dr. Hamel. In summary, the team concluded that the dual roles of former president and shareholder/owner usurped the authority of the current president and raised concerns about undue third party influence over the operations of the university (CFRs 1.5, 3.8).

Human Resources

In addition to the contradictions in the evidence the team observed on the reporting relationships Dr. Hamel had in her role as legal consultant, her roles in the current senior administration and HR were also unclear. After resigning as senior vice president of human resources in February 2021 to resolve pending legal matters, she was titled "consultant, HR" in the CASU Staff Interview List and included by CASU in the final May schedule of team interviews with the WSCUC Steering Committee, PEC, Budget Development and Resource

Planning Council (BDRPC), and the HR team. After the team raised Dr. Hamel's status in the May 6 morning interview with the current president, he explained that Dr. Hamel had remained as an "historic" member of major administrative committees. Soon after, the university determined that she would not take part in any team interviews that day. She also did not appear in the May 6 organization chart under any title.

The phenomenon of a senior administrator reporting to a former president while serving on key decision making bodies in the current administration was worrisome to the team. Further, team has continuing concerns about the possibility of other "historic" members from the previous administration having dual reporting obligations, whether formal or informal, and not focusing solely on their currently assigned duties.

It also appeared from September 21 and 22, 2020 emails that the former president and Dr. Hamel together exercised considerable HR authority, determining some administrative contracts and monitoring and restricting all hiring and salaries. Further the team learned that, as recently as Friday, April 30, 2021, the former president had weighed in with recommendations on demotions and pay increases of certain administrative personnel. When questioned about those actions in her interview, the former president did not deny them and explained her reasons for doing so.

The team is concerned that the current president does not have full authority over the day-to-day operations affecting the human resources of the university and that he will not have that authority going forward.

Budgeting

The special visit report stated, "The President plans and manages the University's budget and collaborates with the Executive Vice President and Vice-President of Finance in preparing the university budget (CFR 3.8)" (page 9). However, the current president reported in his

interview that he had very little input to the budget until three months prior to the May 2021 visit. It appears the prior budget had been commingled with that of the owners, specifically their philanthropic activities: Hecht Trauma Institute and a Pakistani school. Further, the former president continued to engage herself in budgetary matters as shown from emails in the WSCUC site. In a September 21, 2020 email to the board chair, a board member, the current president, and 12 administrators and staff members, she emphasized that she was the person who was watching the money to ensure that the university could hire new employees, pay vendors, meet payroll, continue to grow intelligently, and stay solvent. In a March 23, 2021 email to the board chair, president, executive vice president, and vice presidents, Dr. Firestone-Hecht wrote that it was imperative that they knew and understood the university financial situation and proceeded to provide them with an accounting of revenues, expenditures, enrollments, and taxes.

Academic Affairs

The academic affairs of the university were also the subject of the former president's attention. The emails in the WSCUC site revealed multiple directives sent by her to academic administrators and, in one case, copied the current president and the chief academic officer. In an August 14, 2020 email she demanded "right-sizing" of courses and the elimination of textbooks and tests. In a September 2, 2020 email regarding the status of a doctoral student who is also a board member, she ordered a refund of tuition and fees, the application of a master's degree and five electives to the degree plan, scheduling a written exam, and acceptance into the first doctoral dissertation course, all with deadlines. In two March 31, 2021 emails, Dr. Firestone-Hecht wrote of her commitment to a future in academic leadership for a particular adjunct faculty member and insisted on the assignment of students and committees to him. She wrote, "No one, and that

includes you, Bonny [chief academic officer], and Glenn [president], has the authority to override my commitments.”

In her interview, the former president defended these actions as unfinished bits of business and follow-ups on personal commitments she had made to a few individuals. The current president explained in his interview that he discussed her academic involvement with the board’s Academic Affairs Committee, reinforcing to the team that curriculum is only changed through the program review process. He stated that steps have been taken to move the former president away from such engagement. However, the team remains concerned about the influence the former president’s actions have on the academic authority of current administrators presently and in the future.

In summary, the team observed that CASU made good strides in hiring an experienced president and retaining and developing a stable executive team. However, there are continuing organizational issues to be addressed. The team observed reporting problems, namely in the legal and human resource functions. The team identified at least one senior administrator who had obligations to both the current and former presidents. Further, it found that the former president had control over the university’s legal issues and a strong influence over human resource operations. Finally, the team fears that, even given the announcement of a “second” retirement by the former president, her continued role as an owner/shareholder gives rise to the possibility of further undue involvement in budgetary, legal, personnel, academic, and other matters in the future that will negatively affect the stability and effectiveness of the administration. Therefore, the team recommends that CalSouthern demonstrate tangible signs that the transition from the previous administration to the current senior leadership team has been completed, and the current

administration focuses solely on and has full authority over the day to day operations of the institution (CFR 3.8).

Staff Administration

Both the institution and the team addressed three areas related to staff administration: turnover, career advancement, and communications. Given the high voluntary and involuntary turnover in the years before the March 2020 visit, the team was concerned when reading in the special visit report that the number of employees had decreased by 15% from May to November 2020 with no reasons given (appendix D, page 1). From a September 22, 2020 email from the former president (and later generally acknowledged in several interviews) the team learned that these numbers were the result of a three-stage RIF in March, April, and May 2020, seven resignations after March, and other demotions, transfers, or temporary leaves. The former president also wrote that she had determined that a severe RIF and salary adjustments were needed if the university was to remain solvent during the pandemic and economic downturn. In her interview, the former president acknowledged that managing the RIFs were part of her legal charge. The special visit report stated that the board has a standing agenda item to review the organizational chart, the resumes of new hires, and reasons why an employee has departed or is being released, but the team did not receive any evidence to either support or refute that statement with regard to the RIFs (special visit report, page 19) (CFRs 1.4, 1.7).

Since March 2020, several strategies were implemented “to ensure clear communication throughout the institution and to address the concern regarding unqualified individuals being promoted.” Human resources issues monthly communications to update all staff on changes in positions, open positions, and opportunities for advancement and professional development and human resources standard operating procedures are available to all staff in the administrative site

and Paylocity portal (special visit report, pages 11-12) (CFRs 3.1, 3.2). The team commends CASU for embracing the self-study process and demonstrating progress in improved communications.

Transparency and Climate

Related to internal transparency and climate, surveys were deployed to all managers, staff, and faculty by IRAD in May and November of 2020 (special visit report, pages 11-12, appendix D, Items 2d and 5e) The campus climate questions appeared to the team to be appropriate. The second campus climate survey elicited 90 responses from university employees, which is about an 18% decrease from the first which had 110 responses. This was due to the fewer number of employees, as discussed above. The team determined through interviews that confidentiality was assured and only IRAD and the team had access to the SurveyMonkey account and survey results.

The team agrees that the results are illustrative of growth and CASU's conclusions that, compared with the first survey, the second survey indicates that respondents were more positive on the subject of updating and keeping employees informed on internal processes by senior leadership with several of the communication strategies named above receiving high ratings. The areas of job satisfaction, employee relations, senior leadership, and shared governance all reflected a positive percentage increase, with the senior leadership area realizing the highest positive score increase of 11%. The team commends CASU for these gains in both institutional climate and culture as measured by the semiannual surveys and feedback provided by key constituents.

Looking at individual survey items, the team noted the largest positive increase in the job satisfaction area was the managers' average response to Question 2.3 ("Most of the time it is safe

to say what one thinks”) which went from 2.71 of 5 in May (the lowest rating for any group) to 3.86 in November, indicative to the team of a more open culture at CASU. The team’s analysis of the number of respondents in employee groups revealed that, while the percentage of manager and staff respondents of the total number increased from May to November (managers: 11% to 24% and staff: 26% to 51%), the percentage of faculty respondents dropped significantly (faculty responses: 52% to 24%). The university may wish to explore the reasons for lower faculty participation. Also, with response rates of only 45% (first survey) and 47% (second survey), the university may wish to employ additional strategies to garner greater feedback from all of its employees.

University Governance

The university considered staff concerns about governance as it moved forward from the March 2020 visit, stating, “In the past, employees may have felt or perceived that university leadership acted without integrity or without including employees in the decision-making process during the reorganization. Today, decisions are made by University leadership to ensure the most effective structure to support our learners” (special visit report, page 11) (CFR 3.2).

The President’s Executive Council and the Budget Development and Resource Planning Council are named as the decision-making bodies for new policies, procedures, and university initiatives (special visit report, page 9) (CFR 1.7). The chief academic officer is considered the voice of faculty on PEC. The BDRPC is composed of the members of the President’s Executive Council, the senior director of administrative services, and a full time faculty member (special visit report, page 10) (CFR 4.1). (See Issue III.B on the Faculty Senate below for discussion of faculty voice on the BDRPC.)

Both bodies are new ones, with President's Executive Council starting in spring 2020, after the current president gave the President's Cabinet a new name, charge, and purpose, and BDRPC this past January 2021. The PEC has a broader scope with BDRPC informing it. According to provided documents, the PEC provides a forum for discussing institutional strategy and issues, engaging in problem-solving, promoting interdepartmental cooperation, and ensuring timely and accountable progress towards CalSouthern's articulated goals. The work of the BDRPC is to conduct a high-level recommendation process that provides a voice in matters that affect the quality, improvement, and outcomes for the university. Members of both groups expressed that they now had access to more institutional data, such as financial actuals, program completions, and weekly and monthly enrollments. Department budgets were recently placed online for administrators to review and manage, a noteworthy advance praised by academic deans and program chairs in their interview.

These bodies have started to help with resource planning, seeking the reasons for resource needs and pursuing equitability. In their interviews, the members gave examples of collective decisions about recommendations on referral fee expenditures and additional personnel which were sent in turn to the finance department, president, and the board for approval. The BDRPC is new enough that it has not gone through a budget cycle, but it is involved in changes in the ongoing budget. It will be involved from beginning to adoption of the next budget.

Despite its strong recommendation for the complete transition from the previous administration to the current administration expressed above, the team believes considerable progress has been made by CASU in addressing the administration issue. The current president has set a new positive tone within the university culture, which is borne out in the climate study

results. Human resources has applied itself to initiating improved communications and personnel policies and practices. The BDRPC shows promise of engaging in a budgetary recommendation process in the future marked by a more collaborative spirit and the inclusion of a faculty voice. The team commends CASU for embracing the self-study process and demonstrating progress in shared governance, improved communication, and university-wide collaboration.

B. Progress on Efforts to Address Sharply Declining Graduation Rates

In May 2020, CalSouthern hired a new institutional research and assessment director. The IRAD director focused on ensuring data are disseminated and incorporated in planning and decision-making (CFR 4.2). In reviewing graduation data, it was determined by the IRAD director that previous data were under-reported. The graduation rate submitted to WSCUC previously utilized an internal definition. The institutional 6-year graduation rate in 2020 for the 2014 entering cohort was 69% based on IPEDS data.

CalSouthern has also focused efforts on retention. Institutional retention rates have been trending upward since 2016, and have increased from 74% in 2018 to 86% in 2020 (CFR 1.2). The Retention Committee identified an increase in co-curricular activities and a new model for learner service support (LSS) as contributing factors to the increased retention rates (CFR 4.3). For example, there has been an increase in participation in the CalSouthern Student Advisory Council (C-SAC), and C-SAC representatives have been included on some university committees, such as the Assessment Committee, and increased participation in webinars (CFR 4.6). Additionally, the LSS department has implemented a self-serve help desk and ticketing system for more efficient access to advising services and learner support (CFR 4.3, 4.7).

The Academic Affairs Committee, IRAD director, and Curriculum Team also described how the new learning management system (LMS) Canvas will provide technology to support

student retention. An assessment software has been acquired that will seamlessly integrate with Canvas for efficient data collection and analysis for assessing learning outcomes at the course, program, and institutional levels (CFR 2.4). Additionally, early warning systems that can be set based on parameters that align with university policies are expected to improve student success.

C. Progress on Clarification of Expectations for Faculty Scholarship

The team attempted to both ascertain the institution's expectations for faculty scholarship and explore its assertions in the special visit report about the opportunities for and extent, use, and tracking of scholarly activities. With regard to expectations, senators and faculty revealed through interviews that the institution has always valued scholarship, but is doing a better job of gathering data about it. Recently, to provide a baseline of scholarly activity, a Faculty Scholarly Research Mentor Survey (appendix H) was developed with Faculty Senate leadership and deployed in October 2020 to all faculty to provide an opportunity to share their activities, insights, and feedback on scholarly research and peer collaboration. The results indicated that 66% of the faculty performed some type of scholarly research in 2019 and 2020 versus an activity rate of 44% for previous years. Moreover, the number of types increased from two (2) during 2017 to nine (9) during 2020, demonstrating an increase in the willingness of faculty to assume responsibilities across a wider array of activity types. Finally, over 78% of the faculty noted that they are interested in collaborating with peers on scholarly research activities (special visit report, pages 14-15) (CFR 4.4).

CASU reported that recently enacted changes to policies supporting scholarship activities were the impetus to the commendable increases. The most notable policy, enacted after the survey, was the Faculty Scholarly Research Institutional Position which was developed by a sub-committee of the WSCUC Steering Committee and the Faculty Senate in January 2021,

approved by the Faculty Senate on February 1, 2021, and distributed recently before the visit to all faculty (appendix I). This Position, which clearly outlines the expectation and the support structure for faculty scholarly inquiry, seems robust and appropriate for a teaching institution.

It was stated in the special visit report that deans and department chairs provide opportunities for faculty to engage in scholarly research and track these activities on an annual basis during performance reviews (page 15) and that “performance evaluations for 2021 include the review and discussion of scholarly research and professional development” (Item 11) (CFRs 3.2, 3.3). With the exception of brief excerpts from the performance reviews of three faculty members and a copied page from one school of nursing faculty evaluation, there was no documentation of the tracking of activities, their use in performance reviews, and provision of opportunities provided. However the deans and department chairs explained in interviews that scholarship will be added to performance reviews for both full time and part time faculty in upcoming annual reviews in 2021. They further reported that some tracking is conducted via periodic surveys and that, for full time faculty, there is a process to report scholarly activities through the Paylocity system. They explained that they share programmatic accretion research opportunities with faculty, that support for methodology by an assistant dean is available, and that stipends may be provided by the university for scholarship upon application if criteria are met.

In conclusion, the processes described in the report for tracking scholarship, including such data in performance reviews, and providing scholarly opportunities appear to be in initial stages at this time. The team commends CASU on the carefully developed policy on faculty scholarly research which has improved faculty understanding of the expectations and increased productivity in scholarship.

D. Progress on Closing the Loop on Use of Assessment of Student Learning

The special visit report provided information on the assessment schedule and demonstrated changes implemented by the new IRAD to include the final roll out of all three phases of the assessment plan (phase three was implemented in September 2020), as well as an annual program assessment cycle. This cycle ensures all program learning outcomes (PLOs) will be assessed in a five year rotating schedule. Within the annual cycle, quarterly tasks have been assigned to keep faculty and programs on track.

PLOs have been developed and/or revised with input from program faculty, deans, and chairs (CFR 2.3, 2.4, and 2.5). Additionally, PLOs to be assessed each year are determined by program faculty and administration (CFR 2.4) and are aligned with assessment of Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILOs) and Academic Program Review (APR) (CFR 2.7). The IRAD meets bi-monthly with deans and chairs to review results of assessment of learning to develop action plans. This well thought out alignment will allow program faculty and administration to make adjustments to the curriculum based on the analysis of results, closing the loop. The team commends CASU for embracing the self-study process and demonstrating progress in curriculum development.

To facilitate closing the loop CalSouthern will be implementing a new assessment software, the Assessment, Evaluation, Feedback, & Intervention System (AEFIS), which will integrate well with their new LMS Canvas. Faculty have been provided monthly training sessions for the new LMS and AEFIS. Faculty are confident in their ability to use the new software as well as follow the processes available to improve assessment of student learning. Multiple faculty are eager to utilize the early warning system provided by Canvas which will allow for early interventions and improve student success.

To facilitate student satisfaction and success, CalSouthern has also provided co-curricular activities to their students on a weekly, monthly, and quarterly basis. Utilizing feedback from students attending these activities, CalSouthern has been able to enhance programs offered to its students (CFR 2.5).

E. Progress on Building Board Independence and Expertise

CalSouthern has made discernable progress with expanding its board members' numbers, diversity, and skill sets. The number of board members has grown from six to seven members, with four remaining from the original board in March 2020. Two new members were voted in at the April 2021 meeting and are moving through the on-boarding process. According to the special visit report, a total of nine board members will ensure a quorum and adequate committee membership.

Based on the descriptions and resumes provided by the members during the special visit, the members have a wide range of professional experiences and the expertise necessary to provide appropriate oversight. The board has created four standing committees with a clear set of roles and responsibilities.

The board has become a member of the Association Governing Boards (AGB). Members expressed a commitment to pursuing AGB-related board training and seeking other board development services, including participating in WSCUC sponsored board development activities. However, the members had not participated in any activities designed to improve their collective capacity to advance the institution at the time of the visit.

During the visit, the team met in a session with seven directors. The board chair provided a general set of updates, and the board members provided some additional insights about the progress that was being made across the institution. The team specifically probed for more

information regarding the board's understanding, relationship, and oversight of the former president, Dr. Finestone-Hecht (whose actions are discussed above in section II.A). Based on documentation and conversations with key personnel, it appeared that the university's former president had a relationship with the institution/board to manage some outstanding matters. According to the WSCUC governing board policy, the institution must be free of undue influence from external parties like the former president/shareholder/owner.

Though the team commends the institution for making progress on board expansion and increased independence, the team recommends that the board further demonstrate an investment in board self-assessment and professional development; continue to expand member expertise and diversity; and improve oversight of the institution, including evaluating the president/CEO (CFR 3.9).

F. Improving Communication and Transparency with WSCUC

The special visit report provided an update on the progress CalSouthern accomplished since the March 2020 accreditation visit. It was clear to the team that CalSouthern conducted a thoughtful, informative, and efficient internal review process. The team recognized and affirmed the hard work put forth in preparing for the special visit. Prior to and during the visit, all requested documents were provided in a timely manner. Additionally, all requested meetings were accommodated. During the visit, all invited participants attended the meetings and open sessions for staff and faculty were well attended. Compared to the March 2020 visit, faculty, staff, administrators, and board members overall appeared more comfortable and willing to openly share the institution's accomplishments as well as areas in need of additional improvement.

From a transparency standpoint, the most significant team finding involved the transition from the former administration to the new administration, a topic which was not addressed at all in the special visit report. The leadership transition appeared protracted and complicated to the team compared to best practices involving a university presidential leadership transition. Over the last year or so, the new administration, led by President Glenn Roquemore, appears to have experienced a challenging and cumbersome relationship with the immediate past president that was not either understood or adequately managed by the board of directors. As referenced in section II.A above, there were obvious signs that the former president was involved in the university's operations, which caused confusion and delayed the transition of authority to the new administration.

In an attempt to understand the unique relationship among the university's owners (including the former president), board of directors, and the current president, the team chair met with Dr. Donald Hecht, founder and board member, Dr. Ray Villanueva, board chair, and Dr. Gwen Finestone-Hecht, former president and owner/shareholder (as described in sections I.B and II.E above). They all expressed a commitment to ultimately empowering the current president and his administration.

The discussion with these individuals was focused on the nature of the arrangement between the institution and the former president because the team received conflicting information about an agreement between several past members of the board and the former president. Most significantly, leading up to and during the visit, all parties agreed either that they had not seen a written agreement or that no written agreement existed. Surprisingly, a week after the visit, the team chair received a written copy of a contract between the board chair and the

former president from the ALO dated December 6, 2019 that included information and dates that conflicted with everything the team was told and learned during the visit.

As a result, the team had significant concerns regarding the former president's relationship with the institution and the institution's willingness to be truthful and forthright about the role of the past president with WSCUC.

SECTION III – ADDITIONAL TOPICS

The following are topics that were included in the institutional self-study and special visit report and were addressed by the team through interviews and document review.

A. Redesign the Educational Model to Ensure Faculty Initiated Regular and Substantive Interaction with Students

At the time of the accreditation visit in March 2020, CalSouthern was in the initial stages of transitioning to a new student information system, Ellucian Colleague, and had recently entered into a contract with Canvas as the new learning management system. In December 2020, CalSouthern completed a comprehensive curriculum revision initiative as all courses were transitioned from their legacy LMS to Canvas. The Curriculum Team, in collaboration with the Academic Affairs Committee, deans, chairs, and faculty, revised all programs to include enhancements in activities and instructional materials, focusing on building the student to faculty relationship (CFR 2.5). The Canvas LMS provides a significant upgrade in multimedia technology that will provide opportunities for robust student to faculty and student to student engagement (CFR 2.5, 4.4). Enthusiasm for the potential capabilities and opportunities Canvas will provide for an enhanced learning experience was evident among the faculty, staff, and administration. When Canvas is implemented, and faculty and students transition to the new LMS, it will be important to establish and document clear expectations for faculty to student

interaction, and for student to student interactions, that leverage the potential opportunities provided within Canvas and associated applications incorporated within the LMS.

In preparation for the transition to Canvas, CalSouthern piloted six courses with an initial total enrollment of six students. Due to course changes and withdrawals, three students completed the pilot courses delivered in the Canvas LMS. The small pilot was intentional due to the incomplete integration of the nascent Ellucian Colleague SIS with Canvas. Without the SIS to LMS integration, registering and transmitting information between the two systems required manual data entries. CalSouthern has been intentional and focused through the development phase of preparing for a successful transition to the new SIS and LMS. However, this has resulted in a delay in the rollout of the SIS, resulting in a slower transition to Canvas than was anticipated. The delay caused by the Intelligent Learning Platform (ILP) synchronizing user and course information allowed CalSouthern to reexamine some processes that will ultimately streamline administrative tasks, thus enhancing the learner experience. Issues such as data synching between software, mapping the new LMS, and necessary manual entry created a slower, more gradual rollout. At the time of the visit, Colleague, the student information system, was implemented. Canvas and the (ILP) were scheduled for implementation for all courses starting June 1, 2021 and beyond.

Due to the small sample size of the pilot and the fact that Canvas had not been implemented at the time of the visit, the team recommends that California Southern fully implement the Canvas LMS and develop consistent expectations for the faculty/student experience (CFR 2.4, 2.5).

B. Strengthen the Faculty Senate by Continuing to Develop a More Engaged Role in University Decision Making

Relying on the special visit report and interviews with the Faculty Senate and various committees, the team found that the institution made progress in strengthening the Faculty Senate and in expanding its functions on internal and university committees since March 2020. It was reported that the Senate Bylaws had been revised and approved and all Senate committees were staffed and will continue to meet and be held accountable according to the established schedule in the Bylaws. There was an increase in the number of senators, which “allows for a larger representation of Senate members active in university committees.” The report further stated that “new officers are committed to supporting the institution's participatory governance model of faculty voice in shared participation and decision making” (pages 10, 24-26, Item 5e) (CFRs 2.4, 3.10).

Upon team questioning, the senators defined “participatory governance” as “having open dialogue” to either generate issues and possible solutions from its committees through the Senate to university leaders or responding to issues generated by those university leaders. They stated that they felt free to bring up their own views and recommend the best avenues for change.

The team learned that there are four university-level committees on which one or more senators serve: Academic Affairs (1); Assessment (3); Retention (2); and BDRPC (1). However the senators were not selected within the Senate to represent it on these committees; instead it appeared that they volunteered or were asked by university administrators to serve. The team suggests that the administration allow the Senate to use an internal formal process to select its representatives to these committees (and others in the future) and also that the Senate develop internal communication protocols for their representatives to both elicit and voice faculty

perspectives on issues and report back on the content and outcomes of committee meetings to the Senate.

Aside from the expected topics on which the Faculty Senate engages with university leaders, there are several examples of its involvement beyond purely academic issues. The Senate helped to inform the institution's response to non-disclosure agreements being implemented last summer, covid-19 issues, pay for faculty with additional or challenged students, and the definition of years of service.

C. Issue: Implement a Functional, Valid, and Reliable Data Collection, Analysis and Reporting System that Supports a Culture of Evidence and Improvement

CalSouthern has made improvements to its institutional research capabilities as outlined in the special visit report. This improvement was corroborated by interviews with the Assessment Committee, IRAD team, staff, and faculty. Included in the improvements are the ability to capture, analyze and report data to and from a variety of constituents (CFR 4.6).

Integration with the new SIS ensures validity of institutional effectiveness data and reporting as required by accreditors. Integration of the LMS and AEFIS will seamlessly aid in gathering, assessing, and reporting out results from the assessment of student learning outcomes. With this improvement CalSouthern will be able to base decisions regarding changes to curriculum and effectiveness of pedagogy on data (CFR 4.4).

Faculty and staff are enthusiastic about the new systems in addition to the resources they contain which will greatly improve and streamline the learning and assessment processes. Faculty are extremely excited with a feature that will allow tracking of student progress along with an early warning system to alert faculty and staff to student issues before they become insurmountable.

The IRAD team has been able to pilot some of the reports the new system is capable of generating and have seen a marked improvement over the current system, LiveText (CFR 4.1, 4.2). The IRAD team is confident in their ability to improve all functions of the IRAD reporting system.

The June 2021 implementation of these three new systems gives CalSouthern the potential to make institutional decisions that will improve processes and enhance student success. The team recommends that CASU continue to develop data collection and analysis to be used for institutional decision making and improvement (CFR 4.2).

SECTION IV – FINDINGS, COMMENDATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE TEAM REVIEW

California Southern University addressed the six issues identified by the Commission and three additional issues that were contained in the March 2020 team report. The team, through review of the special visit report, document examination, and multiple interviews, concluded that the university has made progress in each of the areas in question.

Organizationally, CASU has made good strides by hiring an experienced president who has set a new positive tone within the university culture, retaining and developing a stable executive team, and initiating improved communications and personnel policies and practices. There is promise of more collaborative decision making given a stronger Faculty Senate with representation on several university committees. CalSouthern has made discernable progress with expanding its board members' numbers, diversity, and skill sets.

Academically, CASU has made excellent progress in a number of areas and has built the foundation for further improvements in the future. It addressed sharply declining graduation rates

through improved data collection and attention to retention. Its assessment system and alignment of PLOs with ILOs and Academic Program Review allow program faculty and administration to make adjustments to the curriculum based on the analysis of results, thus closing the loop. CASU has improved its institutional research capabilities to give it the ability to capture, analyze, and report data to and from a variety of constituents. In the future, CalSouthern will be implementing a new assessment, evaluation, feedback, and intervention system which will integrate well with their new LMS Canvas and provide a better learning experience for students. Finally the university has a carefully developed policy on faculty scholarly research which improved faculty understanding of the expectations and demonstrated increased productivity in scholarship and there are plans for tracking and incorporating scholarship data in performance reviews.

However, there are lingering and serious organizational issues to be addressed. The team found administrative reporting problems and evidence that the former president had control over the university's legal issues and undue involvement in budgetary, personnel, academic, and other matters that negatively affected the stability and effectiveness of the administration. These findings are contrary to a WSCUC prohibition against undue influence on institutions from external parties and the board's obligation, under the Standards, to oversee the institution. Finally, despite experiencing a generally informative site review, the team had significant concerns regarding the institution's lack of communication with WSCUC in a timely and transparent manner about the continuing role of the former president.

Commendations

1. Gains in both institutional climate and culture as measured by semiannual surveys and feedback provided by key constituents.

2. The carefully developed policy on faculty scholarly research which has improved faculty understanding of the expectations and increased productivity in scholarship.
3. Progress in board expansion and increased independence.
4. Embracing the self-study process and demonstrating progress in shared governance, curriculum development, improved communication, and university-wide collaboration.

Recommendations

1. Demonstrate tangible signs that the transition from the previous administration to the current senior leadership team has been completed, and the current administration focuses solely on and has full authority over the day to day operations of the institution. (CFR 3.8)
2. Fully implement the new Canvas Learning Management System and develop consistent expectations for the faculty/student experience. (CFR 2.5)
3. Continue to develop data collection and analysis to be used for institutional decision making and improvement. (CFR 4.2)
4. Demonstrate investment in board self-assessment and professional development; continue to expand member expertise and diversity; and improve oversight of the institution, including evaluating the president/CEO. (CFR 3.9)