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Mary Ellen Petrisko

March 7, 2014

Dr. Randal Wisbey
President
La Sierra University
4500 Riverwalk Parkway
Riverside, CA 92505-8247

Dear President Wisbey:

At its meeting February 20, 2014, the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) considered the report of the Special Visit team that conducted an on-site review of La Sierra University (LSU) October 1–3, 2013. The Commission also reviewed the Special Visit report submitted by the University prior to the visit and the institution's December 18, 2013 response to the visiting team report. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the visit with you and your colleagues Steve Pawluk, Provost, and Cindy Parkhurst, former ALO. Your observations were very helpful in informing the Commission's deliberations.

The Commission called for a Special Visit to La Sierra University, to be conducted in spring 2012, in its July 5, 2011 Commission Action Letter. This followed an April, 2011, Special Visit focused on whether LSU was addressing the challenge of teaching evolutionary biology and creationism in the context of generally accepted principles of higher education related to institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and the appropriate roles of the faculty, administration, and governing board. The Commission issued a formal Notice of Concern in calling for the Special Visit.

The scheduled spring 2012 Special Visit was held October 1-3, 2013, following a requested postponement by the University and later extension by WSCUC. The purpose of the fall 2013, Special Visit related to:

1. Governance issues raised by the Commission in its last action letter, including:
 - a. Changes to the bylaws and other operational documents necessary to create an independent governing board;
 - b. Steps taken by La Sierra University to clarify the understanding of the appropriate roles of the governing board, faculty, and administration to ensure adherence to the appropriate scope of authority in keeping with WSCUC Standards;
 - c. Steps taken by the University to ensure its autonomy as an educational institution separate from the church;

2. Appropriate oversight of curriculum matters, specifically: the ongoing work of the faculty to address the curricular issues that gave rise to the controversy over the teaching of evolutionary biology and creationism.

The team report documents the steps taken by La Sierra University to address the concerns which led to the Special Visit. The Commission endorsed the findings, commendations, and recommendations of the Special Visit team, as identified below.

Institutional Autonomy and Governance. The Special Visit team focused much of its review on recent changes to the by-laws of LSU and the governance structure of the university. The team report found evidence that the LSU Board of Trustees took seriously the concerns of the Commission regarding an independent governing board. In addition to engaging an outside board consultant, the university engaged in a thorough review and revision of its bylaws by the Board of Trustees. Specifically, the role and relationship of the constituent membership and denominational ex officio members of the Board of Trustees has been clarified in the revised bylaws of the university, adopted by the constituent membership on May 23, 2013. The Board of Trustees of La Sierra University was commended for its significant efforts to develop, approve, and implement the necessary changes in the university bylaws to clarify the scope and responsibilities appropriate to the board, president, administration, and faculty.

Oversight of Curricular Matters. The team report cited how the curricular issues that arose from conflicts around the teaching of evolutionary biology and church doctrine were addressed through the formation of a cross-disciplinary faculty task force. The special visit report, confirmed by the team during its visit, provided evidence of broad faculty involvement and the use of appropriate faculty governance structures and processes in keeping with WSCUC expectations around academic freedom and autonomous and effective academic decision-making. The university was commended for appropriate faculty engagement in addressing issues at the interface of faith and science and seeking an appropriate balance between the faith-based commitments of LSU and the requirements, standards, and expectations of responsible academic inquiry.

The Commission asks that the following matters noted by the team be given close attention prior to the next WSCUC interaction:

Shared Governance. As noted in the team report, the adoption of new bylaws for La Sierra University is relatively recent. The university should take steps to increase clarity regarding lines of authority and interactions among the constituency, board of trustees, administration and faculty in the shared governance model that emerges through the implementation of and transition under its new bylaws, and ensure that this effort continues.

Board Conflict of Interest. The team report commended the Board of Trustees for retaining the services of a governing board consultant and for its serious efforts to review

and enhance its functioning and activities. Toward that end, a Board Policy Manual was developed and adopted along with a Conflict of Interest policy statement. The team recommended that the LSU board update its Conflict of Interest statement forms to reflect forms of conflict inherent in CFRs 1.6 and 3.9 beyond financial ones.

The Commission acted to:

1. Receive the Special Visit Report.
2. Remove the Notice of Concern.
3. Continue with the scheduled Interim Report in November, 2014, to address the issues noted in the July 2011 Commission action letter, and continue with the Offsite Review scheduled for fall 2017 and accreditation visit scheduled for spring 2018.

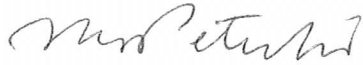
In accordance with Commission policy, a copy of this letter will be sent to the chair of the La Sierra University governing board in one week. The Commission expects that the team report and this action letter will be widely disseminated throughout the institution to promote further engagement and improvement, and to support the institution's response to the specific issues identified in them. The team report and this action letter will also be posted on the WSCUC website. If the university wishes to provide a response to the commission action noted on the Commission website, a link to the university's response will be posted.

As the university works on the issues cited above, it should be mindful of the expectations that it will need to meet at the time of its next comprehensive review, which will take place under the revised Standards of Accreditation and institutional review process in the *2013 Handbook of Accreditation*. Those expectations build on past practice and will include, for example, student success, quality improvement processes such as assessment and program review, planning, and financial sustainability. However, the *2013 Handbook* also includes new foci: the meaning, quality, and integrity of degrees; student performance in core competencies at the time of graduation; and more visionary institutional planning for the “new ecology” of learning. The university will need to familiarize itself with the *2013 Handbook* and to address both old and new expectations.

Finally, the Commission wishes to express its appreciation for the extensive work that La Sierra University undertook in preparing for and supporting this accreditation review. WSCUC is committed to an accreditation process that adds value to institutions while assuring public accountability, and we are grateful for your continued support of our process.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about this letter or the action of the Commission.

Sincerely,



Mary Ellen Petrisko
President and Executive Director

MEP/gc

Cc: Harold Hewitt, WSCUC Chair
To be named, ALO
Ricardo Graham, Board Chair
Members of the Special Visit team
Brenda Barham Hill, WSCUC Associate