

**Special Visit Final Report  
Sofia University  
Submitted by site team  
May 6, 2019**

**WSCUC Special Visit  
Sofia University, April 1-4, 2019**

**Special Visit Site Team**

The Special Visit team is comprised of the following members:

Dr. Katrina S. Rogers, Site Team Chair, President, Fielding Graduate University

Dr. Diane Cordero De Noriega, Team Assistant Chair, Professor Emerita and Former Provost, California State University, Monterey Bay

Mr. Douglas Geier, Team Member, Director of eLearning and Instructional Design, Golden Gate University

Dr. Jeffery Keith, Team Member, Chair, Board of Trustees, Alliant International University (*in absentia*)

Dr. Mark Goor, Vice President, WSCUC, served as the staff liaison for Sofia University

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.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### SECTION I. Introduction

- Context..... 3
- Special Visit Team ..... 6

### SECTION II. Response of the Institution to concerns raised by the Commission

- A. Balance between academic excellent and fiscal needs..... 7
- B. Development of a comprehensive strategic plan..... 8
- C. Evidence-Based, multiple-stakeholders input into strategic plan..... 12

### SECTION III. FINDINGS, COMMENDATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS..... 15

## **Section 1: INTRODUCTION:**

### **Report Context**

In 2017, the WSCUC Commission issued a letter to Sofia University that made three major recommendations:

- A. Sofia must achieve a better balance between academic excellence and operating and fiscal needs and ensure that management considerations do not overshadow the academic mission of the institution. The academic mission and vision should 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)
- B. It is essential that the Sofia University administration team develop an awareness of best practices of higher education and apply those practices to the development of a comprehensive strategic plan, including specific academic priorities that inform enrollment, operational and fiscal plans. The implementation program for the resulting plan should include metrics, milestones, timetables and clear accountabilities clearly tied to the academic mission of Sofia University, its goals, and its objectives. Such a plan should use the data, evidence, and analysis that are essential to creating an evidence-based culture of continuous improvement and long-term strategic thinking. Most critically, an academic strategic plan will help further define Sofia's distinctive mission as it continues to develop and grow. (CFRs 2.10, 3.1, 3.8, 4.1, 4.2,4.3, 4.6)
- C. The University's development of an evidence-based academically-academically-focused strategic plan must be developed with input from multiple stakeholders including the institution's faculty, staff and students. Such a plan will contribute to furthering effective communications, necessary to build trust and to increase campus morale, and to clear and

transparent exchanges from the leadership of the institution as well as among programs, departments, faculty, and staff.

(CFRs 4.4, 4.5, 4.6)

The Commission also indicated that a special visit would be scheduled in the spring of 2019 to assess progress of each of these recommendations. On January 22, 2019, Sofia University submitted a self-study to WSCUC in preparation for this special visit. In the selfstudy, institutional leaders emphasized the theme of change since the last WSCUC visit two years previously.

Notably, senior administrative personnel turnover has been significant. Sofia University has had three different Presidents between January and May of 2018. A former Provost as well as the Chief Operating Officer left Sofia University during the same period. The Provost hired in April 2018 by a former President has now resigned, replaced by an experienced interim provost. A national search for a permanent provost is now underway. Despite this churn in recent institutional leadership, there is now new strong senior leadership in place.

In May 2018 Barry T. Ryan became President of Sofia University. Prior to coming to Sofia, Dr. Ryan had a distinguished career as an executive in higher education. Recent positions include Provost at International Technical University, President and CEO of West Coast University and Interim Chancellor of Argosy University. He serves as a WSCUC Commissioner. President Ryan has focused on bringing Sofia University into compliance with the federal Department of Education (DoE) and the California Bureau of Postsecondary Education (BPPE). Eleven findings from DoE in 2017 were successfully closed out in July 2018. Letters from BPPE were received October 12, 2018 approving the application to operate under new ownership and to add the Master of Business Administration in Chinese (previously approved by WSCUC).

Both are coterminous with Sofia's term of accreditation granted by WSCUC.

In addition, leaders noted that, with the stabilization of senior leadership, additional administrators have been hired at the Director level to strengthen critical infrastructure, including a Director of Financial Aid, a new Senior Registrar, a new IT Manager, a new Vice President of Marketing & Enrollment Management, and a new Vice President of Global Strategy and Operations.

Regarding financial matters, Sofia University continues to be in a weak financial position, with a deficit of \$1.4M for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2018. In May 2018, Beitou Holdings (Canada) LTD purchased a 46% ownership stake in the corporation that owns Sofia University. Beitou enjoys a close business partnership with Beifang Education Group, a forprofit company in Beijing with a commitment to internationalizing higher education. Beifang has a number of educational entities; Sofia University is the first American institution with which Beifang is now associated through its partnership with Beitou. On April 1, 2019, Sofia received a \$5,000,000 line of credit from Beitou. Sofia leadership intends to continue this strategy, such that Beitou will ultimately have a 67% ownership stake, by submitting a change of control to WSCUC for the June 2019 meeting. Should WSCUC approve, Sofia University and Beitou will proceed with additional approvals necessary from the Department of Education, Student and Education Visitor Program (SEVIS).

Other advancements since the WSCUC Commission letter of 2017 include the creation of committees, which are tasked with attending to academic matters; the re-affirmation of shared governance through strengthening the relationship between university administration and the Faculty Senate; and the creation of a new strategic plan. Finally, on March 20, 2019, WSCUC approved a substantive change for Sofia University's Costa Mesa location to become a branch

campus. There were a number of recommendations related to this substantive that is addressed under section 2, #A.

### **Special Visit Site Team**

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Prior to the in-person visit, team members reviewed Sofia University's self-study and shared their initial observations related to the WSCUC three recommendations. They also completed the team worksheet to serve as a guide to the visit. Team members noted the importance of engaging in inquiry around several areas, including the stability of leadership, the concreteness of progress to date that has improved the student experience, the alignment of the strategic plan with operational advancements and budgets, and changes that are leading to enhanced financial stability. The team was thus prepared and convened on site for the special visit from April 1-4, 2019.

## **Section 2: Responses of the Institution to the concerns raised by the Commission**

### **A. Sofia must achieve a better balance between academic excellence and operating and fiscal needs. (CFRs 1.5, 2.10, 2.13, 3.7)**

Since the last visit, Sofia University has been focused on aligning the balance between the academic and fiscal needs of the institution. The process of the balance started with reconstituting the Board of Directors with members who have higher education experience. Three new directors were added to the board (Allen Huang, Martin Dresner, Allan Cahoon) with varying levels of experience in the Academy. Dr. Huang is a former professor, department chair, Provost and University President. Dr. Dresner has been a full-time faculty member at the University of Maryland since 1998 and is a former department chair. Dr. Cahoon has been an administrator and professor at several institutions over a multi-decade career dedicated to higher education.

The Board of Directors, with the guidance of Dr. Ryan, has re-established a robust board committee structure. All the committees required under the WSCUC standards have been active and working through various requirements to oversee the institution. For example, in January of 2019 the board reviewed and approved the strategic plan for the university. The focus of the plan included academic excellence and financial sustainability as two of its main focus areas. The balance between creating a financially sustainable university with a focus on academic excellence and enrollment growth will only enhance with the increase of ownership by Beifang Education Group. The board has reviewed and approved a budget which considers the academic needs of institution balanced with responsible enrollment growth, financial support from Beifang and the path to a multi-year financially sustainable institution.

Sofia has operated in a deficit situation for the past three years. The report indicates that this situation will not change in the near future. However, Beitou Holdings (Canada), Ltd. has committed to a five million dollar line of credit. Beitou is currently the largest shareholder of Sofia University. In addition, a proposal for change of control making Beitou the majority shareholder is in progress. The plan is to have the proposal to WSCUC for approval at the June meeting of the Commission. Approval for the addition of the Costa Mesa arrived just before the accreditation team arrived. While the substantive change proposal was approved, there were a number of recommendations to Sofia for future proposals.

#### **B. Development of a Comprehensive Strategic Plan (CFR's 2.10, 3.1, 3.8, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.6)**

The report of the 2017 Special Visit Site Team, followed by the Commission's 2017 action letter, recommended the development of a comprehensive strategic plan grounded in an awareness of best practices of higher education. Such a plan should incorporate specific academic priorities that inform enrollment, operational and fiscal plans.

Since the last visit, Sofia University has completed a strategic plan, approved by the Board of Directors in January, 2019. The strategic planning process, led by President Ryan, included a committee of 12 members of the Sofia community, including faculty and staff from the Palo Alto and Costa Mesa campuses. At the forefront of the process, the committee studied the process of best practices in strategic planning, collected and analyzed data, surveyed key stakeholders including students, faculty and staff, conducted a gap analysis, and engaged in environmental scanning of employment projections for psychology, business and computer science. Additional qualitative information was sought from faculty and staff on their "best day at Sofia" and the committee wrote "what if" scenarios describing future aspirations they have for

Sofia. A copy of the plan was provided as an attachment to the institutional report and reviewed by the visiting team ahead of the visit. The plan was also the topic of many conversations between the visiting team and Sofia faculty, staff and students during the site visit.

The plan, grounded in accreditation requirements, reflects an awareness of best practices in higher education. It identifies areas for improvement and advancement, with staff assigned to various roles. The alignment of the plan with Maslow's hierarchy of needs reflects the philosophical position of the institution, resonates with the Sofia community, and provides structure from which to prioritize the plan's initiatives. During the site visit, the Strategic Planning Team commented that, while it was difficult to set aside longer-term goals and aspirations, the plan helped them to prioritize efforts and focus their energies into the more immediate needs of the institution.

The plan proposes a five-year roadmap in key strategic areas: academic excellence, academic infrastructure and technology, enrollment management, financial health and student services/one university: two campuses. While the plan outlines strategic directions in all of these areas for the next five years, the plan as developed thus far is largely aspirational. An implementation plan based on the five-year roadmap is populated in the plan for the next 12-18 months, with plans to fully review, update and develop a detailed implementation plan for subsequent years closer to the time they are to be operationalized.

The team found inconsistency and lack of clarity with portions of the written implementation plan developed to date. Timelines are sometimes vague, and measurable outcomes with identified evidence in support of those outcomes are often missing or incomplete. The presence of an evidence-based set of milestones and metrics are necessary to support and assess a successful implementation and realization of strategic goals.

However, despite the noted omissions and inconsistencies with the plan in its current form, it is evident to the visiting team that a great deal of reflection, discussion and collaboration went into its development. But perhaps most importantly, the plan is serving as a guide to move the institution forward. Interviews with the Strategic Planning Committee, program chairs, leadership and others indicate an awareness and ownership of the plan's initiatives. Members spoke of the clarity and focus the plan provides in executing their day-to-day activities, something that seems to have been missing from Sofia before the development of the plan. One example that was relayed was how program chairs are monitoring and better projecting course loads in an effort to ensure they are meeting the needs of students, while also keeping teaching costs within target range (Goal 1.1.1 of Strategic Plan). Similar discussions were had with regards to plans for improving upon curriculum, courses, enrollment management, and student services.

The team was also very impressed with how the strategic plan has served as a tool for helping to build a more collaborative culture at Sofia. Members of the Strategic Planning Team expressed that the process of developing the plan helped to break down silos which have enabled them to better understand each other's challenges and to work more collaboratively to develop solutions. This is an important cultural shift at Sofia, one that has resulted in improved morale and has instilled a renewed sense of hope and vitality for many at the institution. Another positive sign is the Strategic Planning Committee's desire to be retained as a permanent standing committee at Sofia. The discussion with the committee during the site visit confirms their enthusiastic commitment to the strategic planning process and ongoing monitoring of their efforts. This demonstrates to the team that a culture of continuous improvement is taking root at Sofia.

### Enrollment Planning

As specified in the second recommendation, the development of a comprehensive strategic plan should include specific academic priorities that inform enrollment, operational, and fiscal plans. The strategic plan indicates that 500 students are needed for Sofia to be financially sustainable, and 1000 to grow. But it is not made clear to what extent the strategic plan informs these enrollment numbers, or if these are simply the target enrollments needed to ensure financial stability and growth.

In a meeting with the enrollment team, we found that an enrollment plan is in place that informs fiscal and operational planning. Significant strides have also been made in developing an enrollment funnel and providing information to program chairs about incoming students. The team has also been working on a recruiting strategy and community outreach. They are currently performing all of their own market research, consulting sources of information such as the census, Department of Education, and employment rates. While some of the interactions between the enrollment team and staff and faculty could be better coordinated and facilitated, the visiting team was impressed with the speed and competency with which they continue to build this capacity, as well as their high level of collaboration across the functions of the university.

### Culture of Evidence and Continuous Improvement

Review of the strategic planning committee minutes and discussions with the committee at the site visit indicate an awareness of the need for an evidence-based approach to planning. Sofia employs a part-time IR director with experience in higher education who generates reports and analysis, largely on an ad-hoc basis. For example, the IR director contributed to the strategic planning process in administering surveys of students, alumni and internship employers. Much of the rest of his work focuses on compliance reporting to government and other agencies (e.g.,

IPEDS and BPPE). He also provides data on enrollment trends and retention data, however, much of this is not on a regular schedule.

In order to foster the development of an evidence-based culture at Sofia, there is an increasing need to build on their capacity for institutional research. This will be even more critical as Sofia prepares to grow enrollment and execute and evaluate the success of the strategic plan. Data analysis would be useful in enrollment planning, as well as in a process of academic outcomes assessment and program review. Regular reporting and analysis of key data such as enrollment numbers and student success metrics will help the institution in decision making and planning.

An additional indication of an evidence-based culture taking root at Sofia is the founding of the Curriculum and Assessment Committee in April 2018. Part of the committee's charge is to review assessment plans and program reviews and resulting action plans. While their efforts are just getting underway, they have been elevated to inclusion in the strategic plan.

**C. Sofia University must demonstrate that an evidence based, academically focused strategic plan is developed with input from multiple stakeholders including faculty, staff and students. (CFRs 4.4, 4.5, 4.6).**

The strategic planning process as described in Section B was as important as the plan itself. It brought the campus together in a serious planning environment involving multiple stakeholders. For example, the students' participation was enacted through a town hall meeting where students had the opportunity to react, give feedback and ask questions. Students and Community from both campuses had the opportunity to be engaged in the process via Zoom. There was no other direct student participation in the planning process. The recommendation for the special visit asked Sofia to produce an evidence based, academically focused strategic plan.

The plan is organized organically based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This philosophical connection makes sense for Sofia University. However, it could present a challenge with respect to measuring specific learning outcomes.

Standards 2 and 4 both address student learning outcomes as well as programmatic learning outcomes. In addition the CFR's include the expectation that those outcomes will be assessed and the resulting data used to inform an environment of continuous improvement. The plan addresses academic excellence. However, academic excellence seems to be largely defined by faculty workload and class size. Staff are reviewing full time and part time faculty loads and reducing the number of part time faculty. These efforts have been important to the institution to become more financially stable. They are also looking at salary comparisons with comparable institutions. Classes are regularly evaluated and Student Academic Progress policy is now in place. Members of the committee provided a good example of an outcome of the strategic planning process. It was apparent that opportunities for professional development and training were lacking. Sofia has already taken steps to provide training for faculty and staff. Efforts to track progress are in the beginning stages to date. They are clear that they are still in "survival mode." The cabinet meets regularly with the strategic planning committee to discuss and assess KPI's. The next quarterly report will be a review of what has been accomplished thus far.

With respect to assessment of learning, as stated above the outcomes and the data to be collected is sometimes vague and all assessment of learning processes are in beginning stages. The team found outcomes in the catalogue, some program outcomes and student learning outcomes for specific emphases in the majors. However, we were informed that the catalogue is out of date. Some faculty have attended WSCUC sponsored training in learning assessment. One

program has developed their outcomes from that experience and those outcomes are available on Canvas, their learning management system. The computer science program has a six-point evaluation plan that includes student surveys, faculty surveys, grades, evaluation of student capstone projects, interviews with students and class visits. Other programs have dissertations rather than capstones.

While there is a calendar of program review as part of the strategic plan, it has not yet been implemented. There is no consistent campus-wide process established for program review. Department chairs are creating unique systems at the program level. There are some best practices coming out of their efforts and changes have been implemented as a result. Still, the process of program review is lacking in consistency. In addition, the Institutional Research function is not supporting efforts to assess student learning and success. There are regular assessments of student satisfaction, and other routine data collection for reporting purposes. The visiting team urges Sofia University to create a full time IR function to support faculty in their efforts to develop and implement a program review process that encompasses assessment of students learning and program effectiveness across the campus; for example, student support services. Sofia has made great strides in their planning efforts towards creating an environment of data-based decision making. The team heard from all the interviewees that they understand that they are in the beginning stages and they still have a lot of work to do. The team appreciates this recognition and encourages Sofia to continue moving in this direction.

### **Section 3: Conclusion**

The special visit site team found that the institution has made progress on all three of the WSCUC recommendations made as a result of the previous site visit in 2017.

**Commendations.** The team commends Sofia University for the following 5 accomplishments and practices:

- the leadership provided by the CEO in expeditiously resolving compliance issues with the Department of Education and Bureau for Private Post-secondary Education (BPPE);
- strong institutional commitment to the essential mission and vision as expressed through the strategic plan;
- The Strategic Planning Committee's inclusive and comprehensive process and their commitment to continuing their work as a standing committee;
- Cultivating a renewed environment of trust, collaboration and openness to support institutional success; and
- Recruiting new board members with knowledge of higher education and creating structures that align with best board practices.

**Recommendations.** The team has identified the following 3 recommendations to focus Sofia University's ongoing and future efforts:

- Continue to develop the strategic plan to include explicit academic planning with milestones and outcomes. As next steps, cultivate data sources in order to identify specific measurable outcomes that support the KPIs and demonstrate results to the Sofia community (CFRs 4.1, 4.4, 4.6);

- Provide evidence of academic excellence through assessment of student learning outcomes and program review, making the process consistent across the institution. This includes codifying the process of program review (CFRs 2.3, 2.4, 2.6, 2.7); and
- Build and expand the role and capacity of institutional research in data informed decision making. The institution needs to create an environment where data is gathered and routinely analyzed for continuous improvement (CFRs 3.1, 3.7, 4.2).