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Ralph A. Wolff

March 3, 2010

Sung-Mo (Steve) Kang
Chancellor
University of California, Merced
5200 North Lake Road
Merced, CA 95344

Dear Chancellor Kang,

At its meeting February 17-19, 2010, the Commission considered the report of the Capacity and Preparatory Review (CPR) team that conducted the visit to the University of California, Merced (UCM), September 29 - October 1, 2009. The Commission had access to the university's Letter of Intent, submitted in July 2008; the Capacity and Preparatory Review report for Initial Accreditation, submitted in July 2009; and the report of the CPR visiting team. The Commission would like to thank you, Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost Keith Alley, and Assistant Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Nancy Tanaka for participating in the conversation with the Commission regarding the review.

The campus was granted candidacy in 2007 and applied for Initial Accreditation in 2008; this most recent review represents the university's next step toward Initial Accreditation. In addition to demonstrating the ways in which the university meets each Standard and Criteria for Review, the university's CPR report highlighted three goals: 1) becoming a student-centered research university; 2) ensuring value added in general education; and 3) engaging in interdisciplinary and strategic planning.

In part, these goals coincide with the three Commission recommendations that came out of the Educational Effectiveness Review for Candidacy: 1) develop and institutionalize a plan that integrates UC Merced's vision and goals with its resources; 2) enact UCM's mission as a student-centered research university serving students of the state and the Central Valley; and 3) ensure that the University of California Office of the President (UCOP) is aware of the challenging regulatory environment in which UCM must function and that UCOP provides the necessary resources and assistance.

The CPR team found the university's report thorough, accurate, and candid. With regard to the Commission's earlier recommendations, the team found clear progress. In its planning, UCM has responded with agility to recent budget limitations, to changed enrollment targets, and to the challenges of its interdisciplinary design. The university has embraced its identity as a student-centered research university with a special mission to serve the students and communities of the Central Valley. The campus remains in close communication

with UCOP, the president has repeatedly expressed his support, and institutional leadership and UCOP appear to be working well together.

During its three days on campus, the team found much to commend. It noted skillful leadership and a strong *esprit du corps* that extends from administration and staff through faculty to students. The team saw evidence of faculty ownership of assessment, a focus on student learning, a commitment to teaching effectiveness, and a promising new program review process. Enrollment is increasing, and the campus has a new vitality. The fact that the Faculty Accreditation Organizers in each graduate and undergraduate program are slated to become Faculty *Assessment* Organizers speaks well for the sustainability of assessment efforts beyond the WASC review. In the team's words, UCM has created "an environment for success." Your remarks to the panel about the library self-study, the rise in application rates, the planning for a new classroom building currently underway, and the president's continued support for the campus were also very encouraging.

The team made a series of recommendations that the Commission endorses and supports. These recommendations, which sound familiar themes, include the following: 1) UCOP and campus leadership should develop a financial plan that will realistically align financial resources with enrollment, the educational program, and research objectives; 2) the campus should implement and evaluate the Academic Program Review Plan; and 3) a system for use of assessment and other data at administrative unit and institutional levels should be established.

The Commission urges the university to follow these recommendations and believes the university can also benefit from the many valuable observations and suggestions contained in the team's CPR report. At the same time, the Commission would like to highlight the following issues, which overlap with but are not identical to the team recommendations.

Assessment. UC Merced has made remarkable progress in developing student learning outcomes for courses; program-level learning outcomes; and institution-level "Guiding Principles" that are to be addressed in the development of any program and include scientific literacy, decision making, communication, self and society, ethics and responsibility, leadership and teamwork, aesthetic understanding and creativity, and development of personal potential.

The challenge now will be to 1) refine learning outcomes throughout the university so they are assessable and so there are linkages from outcomes at the course and program level to the institution level; 2) develop methods of *direct* assessment to determine how well students are achieving these outcomes and to guide efforts to improve learning; 3) develop and implement multi-year assessment plans for program learning outcomes, with the leadership of the Faculty Accreditation Organizers; 4) strengthen collaboration between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs regarding the development and assessment of co-curricular programs; 5) optimize access to and use of data to inform campus-wide planning and improvement; and 6) produce findings about student learning and development by the time of the Educational Effectiveness Review (EER) visit. (CFRs 1.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.10, 2.11, 4.6, 4.7)

Program review. Like the team, the Commission was pleased to learn of the strong academic program review procedures that were provisionally approved during the CPR visit. The next

steps for the campus include 1) developing a multi-year schedule for upcoming program reviews; 2) implementing the new procedures, as planned, with the Applied Mathematics program; 3) having the results of at least one completed program review available by the time of the EER visit; and 4) extending systematic program review from Academic Affairs and Student Affairs to other areas of the campus. As the team report phrases it, "viewing *all* units as delivering educational outcomes is encouraged." (CFRs 2.7, 4.4, 4.6, 4.7)

Student success. A majority of students at UCM are first generation college goers and students from lower socio-economic background with modest SAT scores. While UC Merced students persist and achieve beyond what these factors might predict, they do lag behind other UCs. It is commendable that the campus has responded vigorously to impediments to success with mandatory advising workshops, an undergraduate writing course, and a variety of other support programs. However, as the report says, the effectiveness of these efforts "can only be sustained through continued focus and resource allocation."

It will be important for the campus to continue to address obstacles to student success. In particular, the university may want to focus on 1) improving student satisfaction; 2) maintaining and increasing the high proportion of students who participate in faculty research, even as enrollment grows; 3) intentionally developing the opportunities in undergraduate programs to integrate classroom learning with real-world applications; 4) ensuring that the campus commitment to student success is embraced across the entire campus; 5) developing the ability to disaggregate and analyze student data by demographic characteristics; 6) making systematic use of the data provided by the Office of Institutional Planning and Analysis and linking it to programmatic outcomes; and 7) ensuring that financial, strategic and academic planning all have student success as a priority. (CFRs 2.10, 2.11, 2.12, 2.13, 4.4, 4.6)

Financial, strategic, and academic planning. It will be essential for campus leadership to continue to work with the Office of the President to develop a multi-year financial plan that ensures solvency, permits programs to grow, supports the construction of essential facilities, and balances the educational needs of students with those of the research mission.

According to the team report, the campus faces an operating shortfall in 2009-10, and shortfalls are projected well into the future. While the Office of the President is committed to supporting the campus and ensuring its financial stability, a clear financial plan needs to be developed by the Office of the President and campus leadership as soon as possible.

Financial, but also strategic and academic planning, is challenged by the emerging pattern of growth at UC Merced. Originally, the university's curriculum and research mission were to be focused on engineering, natural sciences, and mathematics. These are, however, notoriously expensive programs to introduce, staff, and maintain. At the same time, student demand for majors in the social sciences and humanities has risen, bringing a welcome increase in enrollment while shifting the campus's growth toward lower-cost academic programs.

The team found the number of faculty at this time sufficient to support programs for the current number of students. It warned, however, that the key issue for the campus would be garnering sufficient tenure-track faculty lines to keep up with enrollment growth, and allocating those lines

in a manner that balances the needs of the educational programs with the institution's research agenda.

The requirements of new majors as well as assessment, program review, student success initiatives and institutional research may mean rethinking the priorities and timelines for construction and faculty hiring as well as other staffing. As the team report notes, a shift in the campus's academic strategy "will test its ability to develop and maintain the linkages among all its various planning efforts." By the time of the EER visit, the team will look for both more developed planning efforts and more fully articulated linkages among them. (CFRs 3.1, 3.2, 3.5, 3.8, 4.2, 4.3)

The Standards of Accreditation place special emphasis on student learning and on the obligation of institutions to assess student learning and identify ways to improve that learning. The Commission, along with the visiting team, anticipates progress in all four areas discussed above, but especially in this one. Beyond that, the Commission would note that the particular focus of the EER is not on process but on *findings* or results that are available to answer the question: "How well, how *effectively*, is UCM achieving its educational and other goals?" Thus the team will want to see evidence that learning goals are being attained at an appropriate level or standard of proficiency. Other targets and indicators – for example, related to program review, student success, planning, and systematic use of data to support these efforts – should also be identified and evidence provided to show the extent to which they are being achieved.

The Commission found that UC Merced has made notable progress toward meeting WASC's Core Commitments, Standards, and Criteria for Review. Thus the Commission acted to:

1. Accept the Capacity and Preparatory Review report and continue the Candidacy of University of California, Merced.

2. Proceed with the scheduled EER visit for Initial Accreditation in spring 2011. The Institutional Report is due 12 weeks prior to the scheduled visit.

3. Request that the institution incorporate its response to the issues raised in this action letter and to the major recommendations of the CPR team report into its Educational Effectiveness Review report. You may include this analysis in an appendix to your Educational Effectiveness report or incorporate it into the report.

In accordance with Commission policy, copies of this letter will be sent to President Mark Yudof and the chair of the UC Board of Regents. 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.

Finally, the Commission wishes to express its appreciation for the extensive work that the university undertook in preparing for and supporting this accreditation review. WASC 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,

Ralph A. Wolff
President and Executive Director

RW/bw

Cc: Sherwood Lingenfelter, Commission Chair
Nancy Tanaka, ALO
Russell Gould, Board Chair
Mark Yudof, President of the University of California
Members of the CPR team
Barbara Wright