June 30, 2010

Jolene Koester
President
California State University, Northridge
18111 Nordhoff Street
Northridge, CA 91330

Dear President Koester:

At its meeting on June 16-18, 2010, the Commission considered the report of the Capacity and Preparatory Review (CPR) team that conducted the visit to California State University, Northridge (CSUN) on February 3-5, 2010. The Commission also reviewed the Capacity and Preparatory report submitted by the university prior to the visit. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the visit with you and your colleagues: Harry Hekkenbrand, Provost/VPAA; Elizabeth Say, Dean of the College of Humanities; Michael Neubauer, Director of Liberal Studies; and Cynthia Rawitch, ALO. Your observations were very helpful.

CSUN’s Institutional Proposal outlined three themes for the Capacity and Preparatory Review: student success through engagement and learning; faculty and staff support for university success; and learning as an institution.

The Commission commended the vision, transparency, and openness of the executive leadership; the short-and long-range planning embedded in the university culture; the shared knowledge and consultative decision making on campus; the strong campus commitment to students and their success; the competent and energetic institutional research team; improvements in information technology and student advising; and strong work in the assessment of learning outcomes.

The Commission likewise endorsed the recommendations of the CPR team and wished to emphasize the following areas for continued attention and development:

**Student Support.** Certain areas of student support will need to be protected during this period of state budget pressures. As noted in the team report, “budget pressures will compress the schedule at the very moment that timely graduation is becoming more important.” Transfer students also need advising and a quality student experience comparable to that of the first-year students. CSUN is encouraged to continue “aggressively using available resources and processes to facilitate access to courses such that students can get the courses they need to progress,” and to assess the transfer student experience. (CFRs 2.11-2.14)
Graduation and Retention Rates. While the team noted in the first theme a shift in emphasis from retention and graduation rates to student learning, the University’s commitment to increasing retention and graduation rates is also evident. Despite this emphasis, CSUN’s six-year graduation rates remain below CSU norms and its one-year retention rate has dropped significantly. While work has been done on the former, the team did not detect “much concern or awareness” of the latter by the faculty and lower-level administrators. It is expected that by the time of the Educational Effectiveness Review (EER) visit, CSUN will have up-to-date data (aggregated and disaggregated) regarding graduation/retention rates; will have made progress in improving the six-year graduation rate; and will have identified the reasons for the drop in retention rates and developed and implemented compensating strategies to reverse its direction. (CFRs 2.10, 4.5)

Alignment of Institutional and Financial Planning. Although CSUN has demonstrated that both short- and long-range planning are embedded in its culture, there are two areas of alignment between institutional and financial planning that need attention: information technology systems and advancement. The campus is encouraged to “continue its evaluation of the appropriate organizational balance between centralized and decentralized information system services” – a decision that will have both budgetary and student success implications – and to further develop the advancement function, including fundraising, alumni relations, portfolio and planned giving, branding and communication. (CFRs 4.2, 4.3)

As the University moves forward to the Educational Effectiveness Review, it will be important to review the research questions identified in the original Proposal and develop an effective design for the deeper level of inquiry expected for the EER around student and organizational learning, as well as the other issues identified in the Proposal. There are many resources available within the University to support the implementation of the Proposal research questions such as the University’s own institutional research team and many faculty with strong research design expertise expertise.

The Commission acted to:

1. Receive the Capacity and Preparatory Review report and continue the accreditation of California State University, Northridge.

2. Proceed with the scheduled Educational Effectiveness Review in fall 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 Chancellor Charles Reed and the chair of the CSU Board of Trustees 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.

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/dh

cc: Sherwood Lingenfelter, Commission Chair
    Cynthia Rawitch, ALO
    Herbert L. Carter, Board Chair
    Charles Reed, Chancellor
    Members of the CPR team
    Diane Harvey, Associate Director, WASC
August 9, 2010

Ralph A. Wolff
President and Executive Director
Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities
Western Association of Schools and Colleges
985 Atlantic Avenue, Suite 100
Alameda, CA 91330

Dear Ralph:

My colleagues and I appreciated the Commission’s recent positive comments concerning the reaccreditation of California State University, Northridge. We found the visit very productive and beneficial, and overall we were pleased by the team’s findings and report, as well as with the general tenor of your letter of June 30, 2010.

However, while we chose not to challenge or contest any specific items in the site team’s final report, on behalf of the University I would like to respond for the record to comments in your letter related to Graduation and Retention Rates. We addressed this issue in our response to the first draft of the report when we had the opportunity, but our comments were not included or cited in the final document.

At the top of the second page of the discussion, the report suggests that the campus does not understand the reasons underlying the recent significant decline in the one-year continuation of its first time freshmen, has not developed appropriate strategies to address that decline, and does not have current aggregated and disaggregated data on the graduation and retention rates of its students.

We disagree. The campus has been systematically tracking its continuation and graduation rates for many years now, with explicit comparisons with other CSU campuses regularly assembled since at least 2006. In keeping with new WASC procedures, longitudinal figures disaggregated by gender and race/ethnicity have been added to our retention data sets and these accompanied the campus’ CPR report.

The recent drop in the one-year continuation rate of our first time freshmen has been carefully tracked on campus and the underlying reasons for it are well understood, as discussed in the addendum documents. Because the decline is rooted in our incoming students’ need for remediation at entry, we have redoubled efforts already underway to develop effective means of preparing our incoming freshmen for college-level work. These recent efforts “to help underprepared students catch up with their classmates” are noted approvingly in the report of the CPR site visit team (p. 12). And, as you may have seen in The Education Trust’s January 2010 issue where they identify the “Top Gap Closers in Public Four-Year Colleges and Universities,”
Ralph A. Wolff  
Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities  
August 9, 2010  
Page 2

Cal State Northridge is cited for cutting its graduation rate gap from 16.9 percent to 9.3 percent between 2002 and 2007. I have attached a two-page “Overview of Recent Efforts to Track Retention at Cal State Northridge” as well as a PDF file containing the four figures mentioned in the text.

We look forward to continuing discussion of these matters during the EER activities planned for the 14 months.

Sincerely,

Jolene Koester  
President

cc: Chancellor Charles B. Reed, The California State University  
Provost and Vice President Harry Hellenbrand  
Associate Vice President for Undergraduate Studies Cynthia Rawitch  
President Marvalene Hughes, Dillard University, and WASC Site Team Chair
September 18, 2010

Jolene Koester
President
California State University, Northridge
18111 Nordhoff Street
Northridge, CA 91330-8230

Dear President Koester,

WASC has received and appreciates your letter of September 9, 2010 that expresses concern about the visiting team’s conclusions regarding retention and graduation rates at California State University, Northridge. Both Executive Vice President Teri Cannon and I have reviewed the materials that you sent and contrasted them to the relevant comments in the team report. I understand the points that you are making and will be sure that the EER team revisits the matter and its findings at the time of the next visit.

I am sorry that such a concern arose from the CPR visit. The visit was very positive and successful, and it is unfortunate that this campus concern was not responded to earlier. I would like to assure you that I will keep a close watch over any such concerns that might arise from the EER visit, as well as making sure that this issue is revisited by the team.

Thank you for the gracious way that you have notified us of your concern. I look forward to preparing the future EER team for its visit and to my return visit to your campus as well.

Sincerely,

Diane Harvey, Ph.D.
Vice President
Western Association of Schools and Colleges
An Overview of Recent Efforts to Track Retention at Cal State Northridge

The Office of Institutional Research (IR) at Cal State Northridge routinely compiles and updates data sets relating to various aspects of undergraduate retention. Attention focuses on both one-year continuation rates and graduation rates, with data compiled separately for first time freshmen and transfer students. Since at least 2006, reports utilizing these retention data have included extensive comparisons with other CSU campuses.

One of the appendices to the campus’s CPR report (Appendix G), which is cited approvingly on page 6 of the site visit report, provides an overview of these reports:

More recent efforts to foster student persistence-to-degree have built on these early initiatives. In Fall 2006, the Office of Institutional Research (IR) used the data compiled for the CSU’s biennial accountability review, in which all campuses participate, to compare CSUN’s continuation and graduation rates to those prevailing at the system level and at other similar campuses. The analysis revealed that CSUN’s transfer students are retained at high levels and have relatively high graduation rates. The University’s First Time Freshmen lagged other CSU campuses, however, in their one-year continuation rates and, to a lesser degree, in their graduation rates. The data examined also revealed that the disproportionately high number of freshmen needing remediation at entry in mathematics and English hindered their initial retention at CSUN. These findings contributed to an ongoing multi-year effort to improve the delivery of remedial coursework and to the development of programs that allow incoming freshmen to begin to address their remedial needs in the summer prior to formal matriculation (pages 1-2, Appendix G; italics added).

The requirement that CPR reports include a comprehensive analysis of student success did not come into force until relatively late in the Northridge CPR process. Thus, in keeping with advice from WASC staff, information on the reports addressing the new requirement was included in an appendix to the campus’s main CPR report. Thus, Appendix G, which site visit team members received in hard copy as well as electronically, provided an overview of and links to three reports included on the flash drive sent to all team members in mid-November 2009.

The first updates the 2006 accountability report with additional data provided by the CSU Chancellor’s Office in mid-2008. Since these most recent accountability data do not extend beyond the Fall 2006 entry cohorts, the second report, which is brief, puts the more recent continuation and graduation rate data for Cal State Northridge into longitudinal perspective. Finally, the third report represents the first phase of a two-part investigation into the continuation and graduation rates of subgroups differing by gender and racial and ethnic background.

The larger investigation, which is ongoing, relies on newly available data on subgroup persistence compiled by the CSU Chancellor’s Office for all campuses. The first phase of the investigation compared the CSUN rates to those for the system as a whole, while the second phase involves comparison of the CSUN data with those for other similar CSU campuses. The report on it should be available by the end of November and will be posted on the IR Special Reports webpage.

By and large, this last investigation confirms what the earlier ones had already revealed. In comparison to other CSU campuses, CSUN’s transfer students are retained in disproportionately large numbers and graduate in a timely manner. The persistence of our First Time Freshmen, in contrast, lags that of freshmen on other campuses, largely because they are disproportionately

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1 Presentation by Teri Cannon at the March 19-20, 2009, San Francisco meeting of the CSU IR Directors.
likely to need remediation at entry. Insofar as minority and underserved freshmen are less likely to persist than their white counterparts, it is because they are less likely to be proficient in mathematics, in particular, at entry (Appendix G, page 3-4; italics added).

And, as promised above, the full report of the findings emerging from the analyses of subgroup persistence was posted on the IR Web site at the time of the team visit and was available in hard copy in the team room. The final report contains 100 pages of tables with campus-by-campus figures for multiple indicators of retention. In addition, a series of charts summarize multi-year continuation and graduation figures for CSUN, the CSU as a whole, and two comparison groupings: other large CSU semester campuses and other CSU campuses in the L.A. Basin.

The second report referenced in Appendix G contains a concise explanation of the recent drop in one-year continuation rates on its first page:

> Taken together, the five figures reviewed below suggest that the recent downturn in the one-year continuation rate of CSUN’s first time freshmen (from 77% to 71%) is a consequence of several factors. One key factor is the 55% increase in the size of the freshman class. This increase in cohort size is important because of the relative stability of faculty size during the 2004-08 period. As a result, at least some of the entering freshmen inevitably failed to get the attention they needed to thrive. The challenges posed by increasing cohort size were compounded by the increase in the percentage of freshmen needing remediation in mathematics at entry, which resulted in larger numbers of students unable to become proficient within one year of entry. This, in turn, is what led to steady reduction in the one-year continuation rate ("Retention of Undergraduates Entering Cal State Northridge During the 1999-2008 Period").

The factors affecting the recent drop in the one-year continuation rate are summarized in Figures 1 and 2. In addition, Figure 3 shows the close link within the CSU between one-year continuation rates and proficiency in mathematics at entry. These factors have been both noted and discussed on campus. Since they also underlie CSUN’s historically-low freshman continuation rate, the recent downturn has led to a redoubling of recent energetic efforts “to help underprepared students catch up with their classmates,” efforts that the report of the site visit team mentions approvingly on page 12. Further, all discussions of these efforts rest on the tacit assumption that improvement in the campus’s one-year continuation rate is a key priority.

Finally, it is worth noting that analyses undertaken this Spring, subsequent to the CPR site visit, suggest that the one-year continuation rate of CSUN’s first time freshmen cohorts is not as closely related to their eventual six-year graduation rate as one might assume (see Figure 4, especially the retention rates for the 1995-97 entry cohorts). Such a rather unusual outcome is probably a consequence of the interplay of three factors: the campus’s open admissions policy, the CSU’s strict rules about completing remediation within one year of entry, and the persistence of students who are successfully remediated within one year, which, CSU research indicates, is equivalent to that of freshmen arriving fully proficient at entry. Put somewhat differently, the disproportionately high remediation needs of CSUN’s entering freshmen depress their one-year continuation rate, but affect their six-year graduation rate far less. In short, the campus’s low one-year continuation rate may not be the barrier to higher graduation rates that the site visit report assumes it to be.
Figure 1. The Number of First Time Freshmen Enrolling at Cal State Northridge by Fall Entry Term

Figure 2. Percentage of First Time Freshmen Needing Remediation in Mathematics at Entry by Fall Entry Term
Figure 3. Campus-Specific One-Year Continuation Rates for All Freshmen by Proficiency in Mathematics at Entry (Fall 2005-Fall 2007 Cohort Averages)

Figure 4. Retention Rates for First Time Freshmen Entering CSUN During the 1994-2008 Period by Fall Entry Term