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March 6, 2015

Dr. Donald Straney
Chancellor
University of Hawaii at Hilo
200 West Kawili Street
Hilo, HI 96720-4091

Dear Chancellor Straney:

At its meeting February 18-20, 2015, the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) considered the report of the review team that conducted the Accreditation Visit (AV) to the University of Hawaii at Hilo (Hilo) September 10-12, 2014. Commission members reviewed the institutional report prepared by Hilo prior to the Offsite Review (OSR), and any supplemental materials requested by the team following the OSR. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the review with you and Seri Luangphinith, Chair of Humanities and Accreditation Liaison Officer. Your comments were helpful in informing the Commission's deliberations.

The Commission expresses appreciation to Hilo for its willingness to be part of a group of seven institutions to serve as the second group of pilot institutions to test a new institutional review process in advance of the 2013 approval of the new *Handbook of Accreditation.* In this pilot, institutions were asked at an early stage to focus on several anticipated new components that had not been required by WSCUC under the 2008 Standards of Accreditation. Because no samples were available prior to the pilot, Hilo was forging new ground in addressing such areas as the meaning, quality, and rigor of the degree; the achievement of core competencies; and the changing environment of higher education. The Commission concurs with the team conclusion regarding Hilo's "level of candor, transparency, self-awareness, and commitment to continuous learning," which "demonstrated a high level of quality and rigor invested in the accreditation process." The Commission is further impressed with the large number of new initiatives instituted at Hilo not just to meet the new requirements, but also to help strengthen the college in several areas that have been problematic in the past. With so many initiatives at an early stage of development, and given Hilo's position as a pilot institution for the new WSCUC institutional review process, the Commission recommends that the team report be studied carefully in order for Hilo to keep the momentum going in each area.

The Commission endorses the findings, commendations, and recommendations of the EER team.

The Commission wishes to highlight the following areas for special recognition.

Sense of Place. The title of the concluding integrative essay of Hilo's institutional report, "Our Sense of Place," conveys the importance Hilo feels about passing the culture of The Big Island to the current generation while at the same time focusing on the creation of new meanings for the future. Even the mission statement uses island language to convey the importance of "our university 'ohana/family" and the institution's "kuleana/responsibility . . . to improve the quality of life of the people of Hawai'i, the Pacific Region and the world." The institution in the concluding essay uses rain as a proverb, "often a cleansing and healing resource of the Big Island, that when given too much or too little can have devastating effects on the environment," as a way to symbolize its challenges. The Commission commends the university for making the "sense of place" such a core element of how it identifies itself as an institution.

Integrity, Quality, and Rigor of the Degree. As a pilot institution for the new institutional review process, Hilo was one of the first institutions to implement WSCUC's requirement that institutions define the meaning of degrees through their integrity, quality, and rigor. As part of this work, the Commission commends Hilo for using its unique mission rooted in Hawaiian traditions to define domains of learning (applied learning, community engagement, and universal skills); for developing required applied learning experiences including community based projects, service learning, research internships, practica, creative activities and capstone projects; and for the increased and effective attention on assessment throughout the campus.

Core Competencies. The university was allowed to choose one of the five required core competencies to assess and focused on written communication. The Commission commends Hilo for the "thorough and comprehensive" approach taken with evidence of improvement and adjustments made based on the results of assessment. As the team found, "Th[is] willingness indicates a major cultural shift in recognizing the value of learning outcomes assessment and provides evidence that the initial efforts to assess the [remaining] core competencies . . . are proving to be fruitful to the assessment initiative." The Commission also supports the team's recommendation that the assessment of core competencies now be extended beyond general education into each discipline.

Committed Administration, Faculty, and Staff. The university has been through many challenges, including issues that grow out of the isolated location of The Big Island, the economic challenges that have reduced state funding, the lag in economic recovery experienced on The Big Island compared to other islands, and even the potential of disruption from advancing lava flow. The Commission is pleased that the team found that Hilo has "strong, well-respected leadership as well as committed staff and faculty—key elements in ensuring longer-term educational effectiveness and financial sustainability." While staff has suffered from salary and budget reductions as well as reductions in their numbers, meaning everyone is doing more, staff remains committed to the university's mission. As the team concluded, "UH-Hilo is a campus of resiliency in action."

The Commission endorses the findings and recommendations of the team and wishes to emphasize the following areas for continuing attention and development:

Applied Learning. One of the most unique elements of Hilo's program is an applied learning requirement for every student coordinated by the Office of Applied Learning Experience (ALEX) that "links theory to practice, connects to the distinctive natural and cultural environment of Hawai'i and promotes skilled participation in a global society." The Commission endorses the team's recommendations that this remarkable program be strengthened in several ways: 1) by the adoption of clear definitions and guidelines for applied learning activities, courses, and internships; and 2) by the development of criteria and processes to assess the effectiveness of applied learning activities and contribution to student learning. (CFRs 2.3, 2.6, 4.7)

Student Success. The team report is filled with many alarming statistics about the high percentage of students being on academic warning or probation, low retention and six-year graduation rates, and troubling transfer student success rates disaggregated by gender and geographical background. Because these issues have been the focus of many WSCUC interactions over the years, the Commission was surprised to learn from the team that "the University appears to have only recently begun to think deeply about the nature and processes of student success and the specific structure and programs that the University might implement to improve student performance, retention, and graduation." Evidence was provided in the report of many positive initiatives including FREGAS (Freshman Guaranteed Academic Schedules), the University's "15 to Finish" campaign, the "Freshman Village Project, the creation of an Office of Academic Advising and an Office of University Disability Services, new employees focused on student success, and "intrusive" advising. However, what is missing is a definition of student success and "a clear, holistic and operationalized description of what student success means at UH-Hilo." The Commission encourages the institution to follow through on its intention to hire a new Assistant Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management who can lead the effort to develop a comprehensive enrollment plan which includes recruitment, persistence, and graduation as the institution attempts to define and improve student success efforts. All of these plans will need to be backed up by data analysis from the possible creation of a campus data warehouse supported by a robust institutional research office which has recently experienced a lack of consistency due to turn over of personnel and inadequate staffing. Because these efforts are so crucial, not only for the institution to achieve its mission but for financial sustainability, the Commission urges that the team's recommendations regarding student success become one of the highest priorities for Hilo. (CFRs 1.2, 2.10, 2.13)

Financial Stabilization. The Commission urges continued attention to stabilization of the university's finances. In recent years, expenditures have exceeded revenue and have been covered by reserves. However, Hilo cannot remain sustainable by relying on reserves. The plans for the future include conservative revenue projections, increased freshman enrollment and retention, additional nonresidential students, distance learning, and decreased faculty turnover. As highlighted in the prior paragraph about student

success, much will depend on enrollment management in order for the university to have financial sustainability. (CFR 3.5)

Program Review. The university recently revised program review guidelines that represent good practice in higher education, however implementation has been problematic. The Commission recommends that the university adhere to the published program review schedule so that departments can receive results on a timely basis in support of program improvement. (CFR 2.7)

Distance Learning. As part of the review, the institution completed the required Distance Education review form. Based on team analysis of the information provided by the university, the Commission endorses the recommendation of the team that "the development and oversight of the distance-learning program, specifically the online courses and degrees, requires a clearly articulated strategy and adequate resources to support faculty and learning. The team recommends that immediate attention be given to all aspects of the online, distance education program." (CFRs 2.1, 2.3, 3.6)

Given the above, the Commission acted to:

1. Receive the self-study report and reaffirm the accreditation of University of Hawaii at Hilo for a period of seven years.

2. Schedule the next comprehensive review with the Offsite Review in spring 2021 and the Accreditation Visit tentatively scheduled for fall 2021.

3. Schedule a Mid-Cycle Review in spring 2019.

4. Request an Interim Report in spring 2017 on the following issues cited in the team report and this letter above: 1) The status of the enrollment management efforts, specifically new student enrollment goals and retention targets identified in the institutional report; 2) Demonstration that the educational effectiveness and assessment efforts are ongoing and have advanced across all programs offered by Hilo and through the co-curricular programs of the campus. It is important that this effort also include the integration of the core competencies throughout the major programs offered at the undergraduate level; 3) An update on the financial strength of the institution particularly as it relates to enrollment management success and negotiations with the University of Hawaii system and state legislature; 4) The status of the institutional research office, development of a data warehouse, and use of data to inform decision-making; and 5) Demonstration of a commitment to fully support the distance education programs, including the need to provide learning outcomes assessment and faculty development and support to advance the online education objective.

In taking this action to reaffirm accreditation, the Commission confirms that the University of Hawaii at Hilo has satisfactorily addressed the Core Commitments to Student Learning and Success; Quality and Improvement; and Institutional Integrity,

Sustainability, and Accountability. The University of Hawaii at Hilo has successfully completed the multi-stage review conducted as a pilot in advance of approval by the Commission of the 2013 *Handbook of Accreditation.* Because the revised Standards had not been approved when Hilo began its self-study, the 2008 Standards of Accreditation were used and referenced in the team report and this letter. Between this action and the time of the next review, the institution is encouraged to ensure and maintain its compliance with WSCUC standards as delineated in the 2013 *Handbook of Accreditation* and to uphold its commitment to continuous quality improvement.

In accordance with Commission policy, a copy of this letter will be sent to the chair of the University of Hawaii system board and to President David Lassner 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 this letter. The team report and the Commission's action letter will also be posted on the WSCUC website. If the institution wishes to respond to the Commission action on its own website, WSCUC will post a link to that response.

Finally, the Commission wishes to express its appreciation for the extensive work that Hilo undertook in preparing for and supporting this accreditation review. WSCUC is committed to an accreditation process that adds value to institutions while contributing to public accountability, and we thank you for your continued participation in this process. Please contact me if you have any questions about this letter or the action of the Commission.

Sincerely,

Mary Ellen Petrisko
President

MEP/ro

cc: William Ladusaw, Commission Chair
Seri Luangphinith, ALO
Randolph Moore, Chair, University of Hawaii Board of Regents
David Lassner, President, University of Hawaii System
Members of the WSCUC Accreditation Visit Team
Richard Osborn, WSCUC Vice President, Staff Liaison