



**ACCREDITING COMMISSION for COMMUNITY and JUNIOR COLLEGES**  
*Western Association of Schools and Colleges*

Barbara A. Beno, President  
Steven M. Kinsella, Chair

February 5, 2016

Dr. Melinda Nish  
Superintendent/President  
Southwestern College  
900 Otay Lakes Road  
Chula Vista, CA 91910

Dear President Nish:

The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges, at its meeting on January 6-8, 2016, reviewed the Institutional Self Evaluation Report (ISER) submitted by Southwestern College, supplemental information and evidence provided by the college president, and the External Evaluation Report prepared by the evaluation team that visited on September 28 to October 1, 2015. College leadership, including the governing board and the college president, certified the ISER which was submitted in application for reaffirmation of accreditation. The purpose of the Commission's review was to determine whether the college continues to meet Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards and Commission policies (hereafter called standards).

The Commission also considered the written response to the evaluation team report that President Nish submitted prior to the Commission meeting. The Commission listened to testimony that President Nish and business and finance consultant to the college, Jim Austin, provided in closed session. The Commission found their testimony helpful for its deliberations.

After considering all of the written and oral material noted above, the Commission acted to **issue Warning** and to require a Follow-Up Report in eighteen months.<sup>1</sup> The Commission also acted to require an evaluation team to visit the college to evaluate the institution's work to meet standards. Warning indicates the Commission has determined that an institution does not meet one or more standards and reaffirmation is not warranted. Southwestern College is required to submit its Follow-Up Report by **March 15, 2017**. The report should demonstrate that the college has resolved all deficiencies and meets accreditation standards.

The Commission finds Southwestern College out of compliance with Standards I.A.1, II.A.6.c, IV.A (Recommendation One); II.A.1 (Recommendation 2 and Recommendation 3); II.A.7 (Recommendation 4); III.A.1.c (Recommendation 6); III.A.1.b (Recommendation 7); III.D.1.c, III.D.1.d, III.D.2, III.D.2.a, III.D.2.c, III.D.2.e, III.D.3.a, III.D.3.c, III.D.3.g, III.D.3.h, III.D.4, IV.B.1.c, Commission Policy on Institutional Compliance with Title IV (Recommendation 13); IV.B.1.c, IV.B.2.d (Recommendation 14); and IV.B.1.d, IV.B.2.c (Recommendation 15).

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In addition to the findings which led to the issuance of Warning, the Commission also replaced Team Recommendation Five with Commission Recommendation One, finding the college did not meet Standards II.A.1.c, II.A.2.e, and II.A.2.f.

### **Need to Resolve Deficiencies**

Accreditation Standards represent practices that lead to academic quality and institutional effectiveness and sustainability. Deficiencies in institutional policies, practices, procedures, and outcomes which lead to non-compliance with any standard will impact institutional quality and ultimately, the educational environment and experience of students. The evaluation team has provided recommendations that give guidance for how the institution may come into compliance with standards.

Please note that the Commission found the college has demonstrated that it meets Eligibility Requirements 2, 16, 17, 18, 19, and 20, which were cited as deficient in team recommendations and in the body of the Evaluation Team Report. These are no longer included with the citation of standards for which there are deficiencies.

### **Recommendation One**

In order to meet the Standards [and comply with Eligibility Requirements], the team recommends that the college ensure there is only one mission statement and when the mission statement is published, the wording of the mission statement is presented consistently in all College documents, signage, posters, displays and publications, electronic and print, and that such wording matches exactly the wording approved by the Board of Trustees. (I.A.1, II.A.6.c; IVA)

### **Recommendation Two**

In order to meet the Standard, the team recommends the College evaluate regular and effective student contact for distance education courses to determine compliance with the College Distance Education Handbook, stated learning outcomes, and whether achievement is comparable with students enrolled in face-to-face programs. (II.A.1)

### **Recommendation Three**

In order to meet the Standard, the team recommends that the College implement and evaluate 508 accessibility compliance. (II.A.1)

### **Recommendation Four**

In order to meet the Standard, the team recommends that the College evaluate and regularly review web-based applications and sites (beyond LMS), whether faculty or publisher provided, to validate student privacy and identity (at the individual level, not the course level). (II.A.7)

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**Recommendation Six**

In order to meet the Standard, the team recommends that the College ensures that faculty and others directly responsible for student progress toward achieving stated student learning outcomes have, as a component of their evaluation, how they use the results of the assessment of learning outcomes to improve teaching and learning. (III.A.1.c)

**Recommendation Seven**

In order to meet the Standard, the team recommends that the College evaluate all personnel systematically and at stated intervals. The Team further recommends the creation of a mechanism to ensure compliance with stated evaluation guidelines. (III.A.1.b)

**Recommendation Thirteen**

In order to meet the Standards [and Eligibility Requirements], the team recommends that the College create a budget that meets the short- and long-term liabilities, contingency plans, unforeseen occurrences and future obligations of the College while meeting the appropriate reserves set by board policy. In addition, the College shall implement, assess, and evaluate internal controls sufficient to mitigate risk and maintain the fiscal integrity and stability of the College. (III.D.1.c, III.D.1.d, III.D.2 ; III.D. 2.a ; III.D.2.c ; III.D.2.e, III.D.3.a, III.D.3.c, III.D.3.g, III.D.3.h, III.D.4, IV.B.1.c; Commission Policy on Institutional Compliance with Title IV.)

**Recommendation Fourteen**

In order to meet the Standards, the team recommends that the Board and the CEO ensure the fiscal integrity of the College by establishing a balanced budget that includes a plan for effective enrollment management. (IV.B.1.c, IV.B.2.d)

**Recommendation Fifteen**

In order to meet the Standards, the team recommends that the Board develop and adopt all Board policies required by law, and that it fully implement the plan to review and update all Board policies on a regular cycle. The team further recommends that the Board avoid assigning itself authority over College operations. (IV.B.1.d, IV.B.2.c)

**Commission Recommendation 1:**

In order to meet Standards, the Commission recommends that the college demonstrate widespread and consistent participation within the academic programs, which includes the Higher Education Centers, in course and program student learning outcomes assessment that results in program and institutional improvement. (II.A.1.c, II.A.2.e, and II.A.2.f)

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The External Evaluation Report provides details of the team's findings with regard to the college's work to meet the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies, as well as deficiencies in college practices noted by the team. I advise you to read the report carefully to understand the team's findings and recommendations.

### **Improving Institutional Effectiveness**

The Commission found that the college had demonstrated it meets the standards as to deficiencies noted in the External Evaluation Report for team Recommendations Eight through Twelve. The Commission acted to require Southwestern College to take Team Recommendations eight through twelve as recommendations to increase institutional effectiveness (improvement recommendations).

These recommendations do not identify current areas of deficiency in institutional practice, but highlight areas of practice for which college attention is needed. Consistent with its policy to foster continuous improvement through the peer accreditation process, the Commission expects that institutions will consider the advice for improvement offered during the peer evaluation process, and report on actions taken in response to the team's recommendations, if any. The failure of an institution to act on these recommendations will not itself constitute a deficiency in meeting standards or requirements of the Commission. However, in the Commission's experience, failure to take note of areas of practice pointed out in improvement recommendations may lead to future conditions which limit the college's ability to meet standards. As such, we highly recommend the team's improvement recommendations for your attention.

The improvement recommendations are:

#### **Recommendation Eight**

In order to meet the Standards, the team recommends that the College evaluate the current model for total cost of ownership of physical, fiscal, and human resources, in order to provide a sustainable, safe, secure, and healthful learning and working environment. (IB; III.B.1, III.B.2.a, III.D.1.c)

#### **Recommendation Nine**

The team recommends that the collection, storage, and transportation of monetary resources be reviewed and shortcomings identified and ameliorated. (III.B.1.b)

#### **Recommendation Ten**

In order to meet the Standard, the institution should ensure that its mission and goals are integrated with its financial and institutional planning by ensuring realistic resource availability. (III.D.1; III.D.1.a ; III.D.1.b)

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### **Recommendation Eleven**

In order to meet the Standard, the institution needs to ensure that internal and external controls have a high degree of credibility and accuracy and reflect the appropriate use of financial resources. As part of credibility, financial information must be provided in a timely manner to the institutional community. As part of assessment and improvement, the institution should respond to the evaluation and effectiveness of internal controls and financial resources.

(III.D.4; ER 18, ACCJC 2013 Special Report)

### **Recommendation Twelve**

To meet these Standards, as reported in the 2013 Special Report, the institution will review and make modifications to its memorandum of understanding between the institution and the foundation in conjunction with hiring appropriate staff to facilitate foundation activities. In addition, the institution shall ensure that the financial resources of auxiliary services, grants and fund raising efforts are used with integrity, shall maintain internal controls and will be evaluated for effectiveness. (2013 Special Report; III.D.2 ; III.D.2.d ; III.D.2.e)

### **Additional Information:**

Under U.S. Department of Education enforcement regulations, the Commission is required to take immediate action to terminate the accreditation of an institution which is out of compliance with any standards, or, alternatively, may provide an institution with additional notice and a deadline for coming into compliance that is no later than two years from when the institution was first informed of the non-compliance. With this letter, Southwestern College is being provided with notice of the standards for which it is out of compliance, and is being provided time to meet the standards.

The guidance and recommendations contained in the External Evaluation Report represent the best advice of the peer evaluation team at the time of the visit but may not describe all that is necessary for the college to come into compliance (or to improve). Whether or not it agrees or disagrees with any part of the Report, Southwestern College is expected to use the Report to improve educational programs and services. In addition, the college has the responsibility to accept the Commission's action and to uphold the integrity of the accreditation process by accurately portraying it and helping institutional constituencies to understand the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies pertinent to this Commission action.

As was noted previously in this letter, the conclusions from the Commission's review differed from those of the team in several areas. A **final** copy of the External Evaluation Team Report is attached. Commission changes to the Report are noted on a separate page for inclusion with the Report. The College may now duplicate and post copies of the Report, with this added page.

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The Commission requires that you give the ISER, the External Evaluation Team Report, and this letter appropriate dissemination to those who were signatories of the ISER, and to make these documents available to all campus constituencies and the public by placing copies on the college website.

The Commission requires that you give the External Evaluation Team Report, and this letter appropriate dissemination to those who were signatories of the ISER, and to make to make these documents available to all campus constituencies and the public by placing copies on the college website.

Please note that in response to public interest in accreditation, the Commission requires institutions to post accreditation information on a page no more than one click from the institution's home page.

On behalf of the Commission, I wish to express appreciation for the work that Southwestern College undertook to prepare for institutional self-evaluation, and to support the work of the external evaluation team. The Commission encourages the college's continued work to ensure educational quality and to support student success. Accreditation and peer review are most effective when the college and the ACCJC work together to encourage continuous quality improvement in higher education. Thank you for sharing the values and the work of accreditation.

If you should have any questions concerning this letter or the Commission action, please don't hesitate to contact me or one of the ACCJCs Vice Presidents. We'd be glad to help you.

Sincerely,



Barbara A. Beno, Ph.D.  
President

BAB/tl

Attachment

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<sup>1</sup> Institutions preparing and submitting Midterm Reports, Follow-Up Reports, and Special Reports to the Commission should review *Guidelines for the Preparation of Reports to the Commission* found on the ACCJC website at: (<http://www.accjc.org/college-reports-accjc>).