REPORT OF THE WSCUC TEAM
SPECIAL VISIT

To Marymount California University
Rancho Palos Verdes, CA

February 6-7, 2018

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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.

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SECTION I – OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

A. Description of Institution, Accreditation History, as relevant, and Visit

Marymount California University (hereafter MCU) is an independent Catholic university whose main campus is located in Rancho Palos Verdes, California. Founded as a two-year institution called Marymount College and embracing a mission associated with the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary (RSHM), MCU transferred its accreditation from ACCJC to the Senior College and University Commission in 2010, when it received approval to begin offering Bachelor of Arts degree programs. The institution changed its name to Marymount California University in 2013, the same year that WSCUC approved it to begin offering master’s degrees and approved the opening of a stand-alone location in Lake County, California called the Lakeside Campus. Today, MCU offers seven bachelor’s degrees and three master’s degrees, serving just under 1,000 students. Two additional bachelor’s degree programs are scheduled to begin in Fall 2018.

MCU underwent an offsite visit in May 2015 with a subsequent regular accreditation visit in September 2015. In June 2015, MCU President Michael Brophy resigned and accepted the presidency of Benedictine University in Lisle, Illinois; the provost and the chief financial officer were named as interim co-presidents. On March 2, 2016, WSCUC granted a six-year reaffirmation of accreditation and scheduled a special visit for Spring 2018 to follow up on nine recommendations made in the Commission Action Letter. On April 1, 2016, Dr. Lucas Lamadrid took office as the new president of MCU. In 2017, MCU took action to close its Lakeside Campus and began its teach-out plan in a manner consistent with WSCUC policy.

The February 2018 site visit was unusual. The report prepared by MCU in preparation for the special visit was thorough, clear, and demonstrated significant progress against the recommendations from the September 2015 onsite visit. However, the visiting team arrived to a campus in the midst of
considerable turmoil. The MCU Board had placed the president on administrative leave sometime in January 2018 and engaged a third party law firm to conduct an investigation. The President was asked not to come to campus while the investigation was underway. Aside from the provost and CFO, the campus was not informed of this action, nor of the President’s status, for nearly a month. No interim or acting president was appointed. No one at WSCUC or the visiting team was informed that the president was on leave; indeed, the WSCUC staff liaison and visiting team chair were notified in confidence by the provost/ALO a week before the special visit, and the rest of the visiting team only learned of the situation as the visit began.

In the midst of our visit, a sitting Board member was appointed as the new president of MCU. We had an opportunity to meet him, and to discuss the entire process and status of the campus with the Executive Committee of the MCU Board. To a person, the Board was thoughtful, concerned, and candid.

The Board had clearly been faced with a difficult situation, and they navigated with discretion as best they could. Their intentions and their commitment to MCU are not in doubt. However, decisions that led to and through the turmoil raised some conflicts with WASC standards and created great disruption on campus. Thus, this report will address both MCU’s progress relative to our previous recommendations, and identify and discuss new areas of concern.

B. Description of Team’s Review Process

The February 2018 special visit was conducted by four of the five members of the September 2015 visiting team. The team reviewed the report and attachments and made only minimal requests for additional information prior to the site visit. During the visit, the team met with MCU’s Board and its senior and mid-level leadership; the team also held open forums with students, faculty, and staff. The team also reviewed the messages sent to the confidential email account, which numbered roughly a dozen; several of these were quite lengthy, and they expressed concerns which the team followed up on.
during the visit. These concerns will be discussed in Sections II and III, below. The team did not visit any locations other than the main campus.

C. Institution’s Special Report: Quality and Rigor of the Report and Supporting Evidence

As indicated above, the institution’s report was very thorough, with appropriate supporting evidence provided. MCU provided a detailed list of specific actions taken by the university to follow up on the nine recommendations in the 2016 Commission Action Letter; these are described in Section II, below. Based on the information provided, it appears that faculty were involved appropriately in the changes to curriculum and assessment made between 2016 and 2018. The institution’s assessment system is very detailed, and its analysis of assessment data seems to have led to appropriate changes in curriculum and pedagogy.

MCU also devoted a great deal of time and energy to program and financial review, with the result that the institution took a number of steps (detailed below) to address its flat overall student enrollment, including closing offsite locations, closing and consolidating academic programs, downsizing its staff and outsourcing certain functions, liquidating assets in order to reduce institutional debt, and ending academic and student recruitment partnerships that were proving unproductive for MCU in the long run. Based on the information provided, these decisions appear to have been made by the appropriate leadership bodies at the university after considering relevant evidence. The effectiveness of these conclusions and actions are reflected in MCU’s most recent financial statements, which seem to depict an institution in a stable financial position, prepared to live within its current means based on its current level of enrollment.
SECTION II – EVALUATION OF ISSUES UNDER THE STANDARDS

Recommendation 1: Lay the groundwork for a new president’s success by addressing outstanding issues, most importantly the financial deficit; create appropriate flexibility in the 2020 plan so that new leadership can own and refine Marymount 2020 (CFR 3.4, 3.6, 3.7, 4.7).

Since the visiting team report of September, 2015, a new president arrived and has left MCU. The team’s first 2015 recommendation was designed to “lay the groundwork for a new president’s success,” and while that new president’s tenure was short-lived, the groundwork should still serve the institution and its new leadership well.

The campus has made significant progress in laying that groundwork. The team was impressed by the clarity and speed with which fundamental changes have been made to respond to a changing environment and to pressing budget concerns. These include a refocusing of resources to the main campus, closing academically and financially suspect arrangements with international partners, and reallocating resources to support students and faculty represent welcome progress. We also recognize that balancing the budget meant significant and sometimes painful reductions in staffing, and that closing programs is never a straightforward or conflict-free process.

However, we also note significant concerns in the midst of these changes. The reorganization of positions and roles has led to some reporting lines that are at best unusual, and in some cases represent a direct conflict of interest or challenge to federal regulations. The registrar, for example, is reporting to the CFO rather than the usual practice of reporting through the academic side of the house as an essential function of the academic program. Enrollment and admissions currently report to the CFO; this may be seen as a potential conflict of interest. Of greater concern is financial aid reporting to the CFO, which is opposed to NACAC guidelines, and has been the source of federal sanctions for other institutions.
In addition, the University must resolve its identity and vision for the future. The Marymount 2020 Plan, which called for significant growth and expansion, was clearly identified with the last long-serving president. The president who served 2016-2018 instituted a number of significant changes, but many faculty and staff reported that they perceived these changes as “top-down,” without widespread support on campus. For example, he announced an initiative to move all courses to hybrid modality by Fall 2018; by the second day of the team’s visit, we were already hearing that this decision was being reversed. These and other recent changes have led to a strong feeling on campus that the University is changing, but without clarity about its near or long-term shape or purpose. The new president must move quickly to engage the campus in a visioning process built from participatory governance that develops a clear plan for the institution’s educational vision and is aligned with its mission.

**Recommendation 2: Fully evaluate the Marymount 2020 plan to adjust program and enrollment targets appropriate to the context of the broader environment of higher education, an environment which anticipates declining numbers of high school graduates, a saturated degree completion market, and growth of Pell-eligible and first generation students (CFR 1.4, 4.2, 4.7).**

The Marymount 2020 plan projected an enrollment of 1,700 by 2020 and ratcheted up resources prior to realizing the actual enrollment. The WASC team was pleased to see a more realistic and conservative assessment of enrollment projections for the three years 2016-2019. However, the institution has not completed or developed a new comprehensive plan, and current enrollment projections do not appear grounded in solid market analysis and assessment. MCU has staffed Admissions with five recruiters, four of whom are former students and alumni of the university.

However, turnover at leadership of marketing, recruitment, and admissions must be addressed, and MCU needs to consider hiring professional staff, who understand and are experienced and well-versed in higher education marketing, recruitment, and admissions. The institution needs to undertake
a comprehensive assessment, address the “institutional identity” issue, and determine a clear course for enrollment for the next three years based on market research. The institution should be commended for considering hiring an outside consultant; these arrangements were being finalized during the special visit. In order for this investment to succeed, the institution must consider engaging the firm with the broader university community through focus groups in order to address lingering questions of identity resulting from moving from a 2 year college to 4 year college granting both bachelor’s and master’s degrees. MCU should mandate comprehensive market research, and it should prepare a strategic plan that will address the enrollment issues.

Recommendation 3: Individually evaluate the variety of initiatives taken to expand enrollment and make decisions to eliminate, redistribute or invest as appropriate (CFR 4.6, 4.7).

The university has moved swiftly and efficiently to evaluate the enrollment expansion initiatives that were underway during the 2015 team visit and that were part of the Marymount 2020 plan. Since that time, MCU has moved to phase out two locations -- its Lakeside Campus and its Olguin Campus facilities -- and has completed the sale of the Klaus facility in downtown San Pedro. Programs and students associated with the Lakeside and Olguin facilities are being taught out. The institution also sold its Palos Verdes Apartments and consolidated its housing in one off-campus location (MCU is not permitted to house students on its main campus).

On the academic side, the university has discontinued its Master of Science degrees in Leadership and Community Psychology and is teaching them out. MCU has discontinued two emphases in its Liberal Arts degree -- those in Music and Performing Arts -- and it is in the process of restructuring its BA in Film and Media Production. The university has also discontinued its high school dual enrollment program with San Pedro High School and ended its international partnership with the University of Nicosia, both of which were analyzed and found to be financially unsustainable. Finally,
MCU eliminated its developmental math course, based on a study of both internal and external data regarding the efficacy of such coursework and its effect on student retention and completion.

During this same time, MCU invested resources in starting new academic programs, including a BA in Criminal Justice and both a BA and BS in Biology. These new undergraduate majors are proving popular and sustainable. The institution is also investing additional resources in its Business program, hiring new Business faculty, and planning to launch BS degrees in both Management and Accounting in Fall 2018. MCU is also committed to maintaining and growing its existing MBA program.

While the institution appears to have involved its Board and its administrative leadership appropriately in the decisions to close or downsize programs and offsite locations, the visiting team also heard concerns voiced by a sizable number of full-time faculty regarding their limited involvement in the decision-making process. While MCU has downsized in response to a very challenging financial situation, some of these decisions appear to have been made and announced in a manner that has negatively affected faculty and staff morale. The institution should monitor employee morale carefully over the next few years, and it will need to consider taking steps to rebuild the damaged trust in the university’s leadership.

However, based on the financial statements provided by MCU, the net effect of the recently curricular changes, together with the downsizing of staff and restructuring of support services and departments, has been to move MCU’s financial position from a budget deficit in FY2016 to net revenue in FY2017 (even without including revenue from the sale of property), with a positive net revenue outcome projected for FY2018 as well.

**Recommendation 4: Evaluate the long-term viability of the Lakeside Campus. Develop appropriate plans to make it financially viable or create an exit strategy (CFR 4.7).**
After careful analysis of this situation, MCU has successfully terminated the lease at Lakeside Campus and has developed an appropriate teach-out plan, which was shared with and approved by WSCUC. The teach-out plan involves providing students in northern California with online courses to complete their programs or facilitating their transfer to other institutions. MCU has moved recently purchased classroom furniture and equipment from the Lakeside Campus to its main campus and has used it to upgrade and update classrooms there.

Recommendation 5: Develop a strategic approach to creating a three-year budget plan that realistically reflects enrollment scenarios for a tuition-driven institution (CFR 4.2, 4.6, 4.7).

The institution has balanced its budget and developed a conservative budget plan for 2018-2021. However, 2018-2021 budget plan does not have strong underlying assumptions. For example, the FY2018 budget projects revenue from private gifts and grants totaling $1 million; this figure increases to $1.4 million by FY2020, but the team was not presented with a development plan that would lead to 40% growth in contributions over two years. Likewise, revenue from auxiliary enterprises is projected to grow from $5.2 million in FY2018 to $5.9 million by FY2021, without a clear explanation of the sources of that revenue growth. MCU projects decreases in revenue from tuition and fees in FY2019 and FY2020, followed by a modest increase in FY2021. The enrollment assumptions behind these projections were not made clear to the visiting team. The institution’s comprehensive marketing, recruitment, and admissions plan, once ready, should be used in conjunction with realistic plans and projections regarding fundraising and auxiliary revenues as a road map for framing future budgets.

Recommendation 6: Develop a comprehensive three-year undergraduate and graduate admissions and marketing plan aligned with the institution’s strategic plan and with its academic programs (CFR 4.7).
The institution has identified new strategies for student recruitment, and at the time of the special visit, it was pursuing a contract with a marketing and branding firm based on a request for proposal (RFP) issued in fall 2017. However, MCU has experienced significant leadership turnover in admissions since 2015, and the current director of admissions has been in place for only a short time. As of the date of the special visit, MCU has not yet developed a comprehensive marketing, recruitment, and admissions plan, which is an area of concern. While some upgrades to the university website and its marketing materials have been made, the visiting team was not presented with evidence of a concrete plan based on enrollment trends, projections, and the overall strategic direction of the university. MCU needs to address its flat enrollment over the past few years and plan accordingly.

**Recommendation 7: Reorient the assessment process to streamline the collection of data, refining and implementing recommendations in order to close the assessment loop and sustain a culture of evidence-based decision-making (CFR 4.2, 4.4).**

MCU is to be commended for streamlining its assessment process by reducing the amount of data collected, placing the data collection and analyses with the faculty, and focusing on critical data that faculty analyze to improve teaching and learning. MCU is furthering its process of streamlining their institutional student learning outcomes (ISLOs) and program learning outcomes (PLOs), as evidenced by the Psychology Department Assessment Package document shared during the sit visit. As this document indicates, a detailed assessment of the Psychology major’s 11 program learning outcomes in Spring 2017 resulted in a number of program improvements, as well as in the reduction of PLOs from 11 to 6 for the academic year 2018-2019.

The university has announced that it will change its curriculum from 3 semester-hour courses to 4 semester-hour courses over the next year. In light of this change and the recent change in core competencies, MCU has a plan to review and revise curriculum for 4 semester-hour courses -- and hence
its ISLOS and PLOs -- during the 2017-2018 academic year. New and revised rubrics for ISLOs will be developed during the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 academic years, as evidenced in both the Psychology Department Assessment Package document and the MCU Assessment Calendar 2016-2022 provided to the visiting team (CFR 2.4).

Evidence for CFR 2.3 was demonstrated in the Psychology Department Assessment Package document and the Behavioral Sciences Divisional Minutes of 8/22/2017, which indicated that faculty discussed areas in which data-informed improvements could be made in a number of courses. Assessment of capstone courses provided evidence that graduates achieve stated levels of attainment (CFR 2.6).

Given the change from 3 semester-hour courses to 4 semester-hour courses, MCU should further streamline its assessment process. For example, instead of focusing on all of the PLOs each year for each program and department, a smaller number might be assessed each year, so that all PLOs in each program are assessed over a 2 to 4-year period. Whatever approach MCU undertakes to streamline the assessment process, the institution should provide clear evidence that it is closing the assessment loop and creating a culture of evidence-based decision-making that is sustainable for the faculty.

Recommendation 8: Complete the faculty-led review of terms of employment to align with institutional vision and strategic plan (CFR 2.8, 2.9, 3.2).

Since the 2015 site visit, MCU’s Board of Trustees has approved the reduction of the full-time faculty load from 27 semester hours to 24; it has also removed the previous long-standing requirement that faculty advise students as part of their regular workload. These changes allow faculty to focus more fully on teaching (MCU describes itself as primarily a teaching institution). The advising function has been moved to a professional advising staff.
MCU has hired additional full-time faculty for a total of 36 in fall 2017, compared with 30 in fall 2016; its goal is to have 40 or more full-time faculty by 2020. MCU’s Board of Trustees recently expanded its salary ranges for incoming Assistant and Associate Professor ranks with the goal of increasing hiring at these ranks in order to build its faculty for the future. The faculty senate has recently approved changes to processes and templates for its faculty professional development plans and portfolios.

The institution acknowledges that it has additional work to do in formalizing criteria for teaching quality, revising its course evaluation instrument, and connecting contract renewal and salary increases to a clearly defined set of faculty performance criteria. MCU has set goals of increasing the percentage of faculty with terminal degrees or appropriate professional qualifications, increasing the percentage of courses taught by full-time faculty, improving faculty members’ technological skills and capacity related to online and hybrid courses, and increasing full-time faculty representation in the first-year curriculum in an effort to improve student retention. Its plans for achieving these goals were not developed in detail at the time of the special visit.

**Recommendation 9: Develop a strategy for international recruitment that aligns more closely with MCU’s mission and vision and budget realities (CFR 4.7).**

During the 2017-18 academic year, 19% of MCU’s total student population is international. MCU is in the process of ending its relationship with its on-campus partnership for recruiting international students through King’s Colleges LLC; the contract will not be renewed when it expires in August 2019. MCU is also terminating its relations with the University of Nicosia, Cyprus and aligning international recruitment more closely with the university’s mission and vision. However, the University does not have a clear plan for how it intends to replace these students with either international or domestic students, aside from a stated initiative to recruit international student athletes through the
Athletic Department. The visiting team was not presented with a tactical or strategic plan on how university is planning to address its international recruitment once the contracts are terminated with King’s Colleges and the University of Nicosia. The institution needs to consider and plan to replace the international students via a proactive recruitment plan.

SECTION III – OTHER TOPICS, AS APPROPRIATE

As mentioned in the introductory section, the visiting team arrived to a campus in turmoil and transition, as the president had been placed on administrative leave a few weeks prior to the visit. The decisions and campus climate issues surrounding that situation merit specific notes in this report, as there are further areas which need future review based on the WSCUC Standards.

Specifically, a section of Standard 1 refers to Institutional Integrity and Transparency. We believe MCU was in violation of Standard 1.7, which includes “timely and fair responses to complaints,” and Standard 1.8, which refers to “Honest, open communication with WSCUC including notification of material matters; implementation of WSCUC policies.”

In July of 2017 the MCU Board of Trustees received a letter of concern from a group defining themselves as “concerned faculty and staff members.” The letter (which was shared with the visiting team via the confidential email account) raised a series of serious allegations, including alleging a climate of sexual and personal harassment and intimidation, along with concerns about campus mission and culture in the midst of budget reductions. Within two days of the letter’s distribution, the president sent a response to MCU faculty and staff about the “anonymous email attacking the management of the University.” Within a month of receiving the anonymous letter, the chair of MCU’s Board of Trustees sent a letter to campus expressing the Board’s support for the president and his leadership team.

Later in the academic year, a formal complaint was filed against the president. The Board acted swiftly, placing the president on administrative leave. The Board contacted the CFO and provost and
asked them to continue to manage the campus. At that time, they did not appoint an acting president or notify the campus or any of MCU’s accrediting or fiduciary agencies that action had been taken, and the campus remained without an acting president for approximately a month.

Just as the visiting team arrived, the MCU Board announced the appointment of a new president, a parent of a university alumna and a long-serving member of the Board with significant executive experience in the petroleum industry. The visiting team had the opportunity to meet the new president, and his commitment to MCU and to helping the campus through the current crisis is evident. The campus appeared to respond to his appointment with relief.

The Visiting Team asked the MCU Board Executive Committee about their response to the initial letter of concern received in July. The Executive Committee stated that since the letter was anonymous and did not include a formal complaint, they did not investigate further at that time. The Chairman of the Board emailed the anonymous source asking for an in-person discussion but received no response. The Executive Committee also noted that the campus was making significant strides in managing its budget challenges, and they felt many of the concerns raised were the result of necessary program closings and layoffs, some of which were unpopular. In several cases in referring to the letter and subsequent media coverage, Board members or administrators said, “We know who did this.”

Several faculty and staff told the visiting team that the MCU Board and president’s response to the anonymous letter made the campus climate worse, as the president felt emboldened in his actions. Faculty and staff, in numerous settings, described a “climate of fear.”

The visiting team believes that the MCU Board acted in good faith, with the best interests of the university at the front of their decision making. However, failure to pursue the very serious allegations of a hostile climate in July, followed by a letter fully endorsing the president, put the institution at great risk.
The Board’s swift action after a formal complaint was filed is to be commended, and the Board clearly worked with care and intensity to resolve the situation and appoint a new, qualified and steadying leader for MCU. The Board was understandably concerned about confidentiality. However, the Board’s failure to notify the campus, WSCUC, and presumably other fiduciary entities, or to put an acting leader in charge, also put the institution at risk and added to the campus turmoil. It is possible to communicate basic information and ensure continuity without violating the rights of anyone involved in a complaint; indeed, it is the norm to do so when high profile personnel are involved.

Within the past year, the visiting team also believes MCU was in violation of a portion of **Standard 3: Developing and Applying Resources and Organization Structures to Ensure Quality and Sustainability.** Specifically, the team believes MCU was in violation of **Standard 3.6**, which states that “Leadership operates with integrity, high performance, responsibility, and accountability”; **Standard 3.7**, which refers to *Clear, consistent decision-making processes*; and **Standard 3.8**, which requires “Full-time CEO and full-time CFO; sufficient, qualified administrators.” The Visiting Team also has concerns about compliance with **Standard 3.10**, “Effective academic leadership by faculty.”

It is the visiting team’s hope that MCU is now in compliance with Standard 3.6 and Standard 3.8. There are ongoing concerns about Standard 3.7 and 3.10 concerning decision-making processes. A number of faculty report that over the past few years, the governance structure at MCU has moved from “shared governance to participatory governance to top-down governance.” A significant number of faculty state that they felt disenfranchised under the recently departed president, and that their concerns were not adequately considered in matters of program closure, program expansion, and curricular changes such as the move from 3 semester-hour to 4 semester-hour courses and the mandate to offer all courses in the hybrid modality (which was apparently reversed immediately upon departure of the previous president).
Further, the decision to place the Registrar, Enrollment Management, and Financial Aid all under the CFO raises questions about the centrality of academic programming to institutional decision-making.

Finally, the Visiting Team is concerned about Standard 3.5, which refers to “information and technology resources sufficient and aligned with objectives.” Both faculty and students report difficulty getting timely responses to service requests; some students report that they have not had wifi access in the residence halls for several months, which interferes with their ability to complete homework in a timely manner. The institution made a reasonable decision to outsource its IT services and support as part of its cost-saving measures; however, it appears to have been slow to respond to student and faculty complaints regarding technological issues related to teaching and learning.

SECTION IV – COMMENDATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE TEAM REVIEW

Commendations

The team commends Marymount California University for:

1. Addressing the institution’s financial deficit and moving MCU to a stronger financial position.

2. Evaluating the enrollment initiatives in the Marymount 2020 plan and making a series of difficult decisions to end unproductive partnerships and close under-performing programs and locations, including the Lakeside Campus.

3. Developing a three-year budget plan based on more realistic and conservative enrollment projections for a tuition-driven institution.

4. Streamlining its assessment processes by reducing the amount of data collected and focusing on critical data that faculty can analyze to improve teaching and learning.

5. Developing a plan to increase the size of the full-time faculty and reduce faculty load.
6. Revising its strategy for international recruitment to align with MCU’s mission and with changing market conditions for international students.

Recommendations

The team recommends that Marymount California University should:

1. Define, refine and implement a clear model of participatory governance that includes the Board, faculty, administration, and staff. (CFRs 3.7 and 3.10)

2. Take steps to identify and address issues of faculty and staff morale, including a baseline climate survey to be administered soon, and a second survey administered prior to next accreditation visit. (CFRs 1.7 and 4.5)

3. Create a new institutional strategic plan that is developed through participatory governance, responds to external trends, and creates a clear identity for MCU. (CFR 4.6)

4. Within the strategic plan, develop a comprehensive three-year undergraduate and graduate admissions and marketing plan aligned with the institution’s strategic plan. (CFRs 3.4 and 4.7)

5. Engage higher education professional organizations and leaders for consultation and begin to better align MCU with state and federal and guidelines and employ higher education best practices. (CFR 1.7)

6. Closely evaluate reductions in infrastructure, particularly IT, to ensure basic faculty development and student needs are met. (CFRs 3.4 and 3.5)

7. Develop an effective communications model that includes internal communication and crisis management. (CFRs 3.6, 3.7, and 4.3)