July 10, 2012

Jonathan Veitch
President
Occidental College
1600 Campus Road
Los Angeles, CA 90041-3314

Dear President Veitch:

At its meeting June 13-15, 2012 the Commission considered the report of the Educational Effectiveness Review (EER) team that conducted the visit to Occidental College February 8-10, 2012. The Commission also had access to the Educational Effectiveness Review report and exhibits submitted by the college prior to the visit and the documents relating to the Capacity and Preparatory Review (CPR) visit conducted in spring 2010. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the review with you and your colleagues: Jorge Gonzalez, vice president for academic affairs and accreditation liaison officer and Brian Harlan, assistant director of assessment. Your comments were helpful in informing the Commission’s deliberations.

Occidental’s institutional proposal, initially based on a comprehensive standard-by-standard approach for both visits, was revised after the Capacity Review to allow for a thematic approach to the Educational Effectiveness Review. The revised proposal outlined three areas of inquiry and improvement for this Educational Effectiveness Review: core curriculum, undergraduate research, and program review. All three of these themes were addressed thoroughly in both the institutional report and the visit, and one of them, the core curriculum, was addressed also as an example of the program review process.

At the time of the visit, the faculty members in both the core curriculum and undergraduate research areas were discussing responses to questions that arose from recent program reviews or curricular planning processes, and the college was in the midst of conducting its first meta-review of the systematic program review process, which Occidental has employed since 2001. The team found the core curriculum, Occidental’s general education program, to show “clear evidence of meeting WASC standards [for assessment]” and the undergraduate research program to be “a visionary, well-designed program that promises to make a very strong undergraduate research program even stronger.” The program review process was found to include clear guidelines for reviewing programs using assessment results, serving as “a mechanism to link resource allocation to the resulting evidence.”

In addition, the Commission’s action letter of July 8, 2010 highlighted three major issues for special attention during the interval between the CPR and EER visits:
assessment, governance and leadership, and planning and resources. The administrative and academic leadership of Occidental has stabilized and a central role for academic leadership has emerged. As the team noted, “[S]ignificant progress [has] been made since the … CPR visit in terms of broad-based campus involvement in institutional planning and stabilizing the college’s finances.” Assessment work has led to faculty-adopted, institution-wide student learning outcomes that are expected to be formally adopted as part of the planning process, and the team concluded that “a thoughtful system of assessment has been established.”

Occidental College is to be commended for putting in place a new, highly energized leadership team, supported by an engaged board of trustees; for the faculty’s deep dedication to academic excellence; and for the campus community’s unity around the mission of “access and excellence.” As noted by the team, “Occidental College has established all of the necessary components to continue its educational effectiveness progress into the future.”

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

**Planning and aligning resources.** In assessing the degree of alignment between the strategic plan and all other planning efforts, the team found that “institutional leaders are well aware of the need to allocate resources based on the priorities to be established in the new plan” and that the entire campus has been engaged in the strategic planning process. Though not yet finalized at the time of the visit, the planning process appeared “to align academic, personnel, fiscal, physical and technology [efforts].” The Commission appreciated your update in the panel discussion on Occidental’s progress toward finalizing and implementing the strategic plan it and affirms the efforts of the leadership and campus in this endeavor. At the same time, the team notes, “given the institution’s intention to maintain or even strengthen the diversity of its student body, [its] finite limitation of financial aid discounting presents a significant dilemma.” The Commission notes that the institution is addressing this challenge as it finalizes its strategic plan: monitoring the complex relationship among enrollment, financial aid expenditures, and tuition discount rates; enhancing its data-driven fundraising capacity; and preparing the institution for possible future financial conditions “that could, once again, adversely affect endowment values.” The role of assessment in strategic planning is addressed in a separate paragraph of this letter. The Commission encourages Occidental College to continue with its work in finalizing its strategic plan and aligning its resources with its educational purposes and objectives. (CFRs 3.5, 4.1-4.3)

**Refining and expanding student learning outcomes and assessment.** The team found that “a thoughtful system of assessment has been established [at Occidental], with the need remaining to identify Institutional Learning Objectives related to the forthcoming institutional strategic plan.” Deployment of assessment across the programs was found to be variable. While some faculty members are not supportive of, or engaged with, assessment-related work and faculty members vary widely in their understanding and use of assessment of student learning, the team found that “widespread ownership of the assessment process across administrative leadership and the faculty as a whole was evident.” Assessment would be strengthened if it was extended to all programs in the college and if student learning was assessed directly, based on samples of
student work. In addition, regular feedback needs to be provided on the quality of assessment plans and the college’s use of results. The Commission urges the Occidental faculty to exercise leadership in this critically important area of quality assurance and improvement, and to participate in faculty development that will increase faculty understanding, confidence, and expertise in developing student learning outcomes, assessing learning in ways that are useful and appropriate for the college, and in using the findings from this work to document and improve student learning. (CFRs 2.3, 2.4, 2.6, 3.4, 4.6, 4.7)

**Enhancing the quality and usefulness of program review.** As noted by the team, “Occidental College has made considerable progress in its effort to develop its current comprehensive system of program review.” Program review was one of the themes studied for this reaccreditation review and as part of that inquiry the college undertook a meta-review of its program review process to evaluate its effectiveness. The review concluded that the process needed improvement in three areas: the integration of results of direct assessment of learning into the reviews; the utilization of reviews for improvement; and the building of assessment expertise of the faculty, also noted above. Based on the analysis of the team report, the Commission concurs with these findings and expects that Occidental will strengthen these elements of its program review process. The Commission commends the progress that Occidental has made in evaluating and refining its system of program review and encourages the college to ensure consistent implementation of the process across programs and to link the program review process to the allocation of resources in the strategic plan. (CFRs 2.7, 4.4)

Given the above, the Commission acted to:

1. Receive the Educational Effectiveness Review report.
2. Reaffirm the accreditation of Occidental College.
3. Schedule the next comprehensive review with the off-site review in spring 2021 and the visit tentatively set for fall 2021.
4. Request an Interim Report in fall 2014 on the issues cited in the EER report: (1) implementing the strategic plan, (2) expanding and refining student learning outcomes and assessment, and (3) enhancing the quality and usefulness of program review. Progress should be demonstrated, as defined above.

In taking this action to reaffirm accreditation, the Commission confirms that Occidental College has satisfactorily addressed the Core Commitments to Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness, and has successfully completed the three-stage review conducted under the Standards of Accreditation. Between this action and the time of the next review, the institution is expected to continue its progress, particularly with respect to educational effectiveness and student learning.

In accordance with Commission policy, a copy of this letter will be sent to the chair of Occidental College’s governing board in one week.
In keeping with WASC policy adopted in November 2011, this letter and the underlying team report also will be posted on the WASC website in approximately one week. If you wish to post a response to the letter and/or team report on your own website, WASC will also post a link to that response on its website. Any link that you wish to provide should be forwarded to the attention of Teri Cannon so that it may be included on the WASC website. As noted in the Commission policy, team reports and action letters are foundational for institutional accountability and improvement. Institutions are expected to disseminate these documents throughout the institution for the purposes of promoting ongoing engagement and improvement and encouraging internal communications about specific issues identified in team reports and action letters.

Finally, the Commission wishes to express its appreciation for the extensive work that the college 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

RW/dh

cc: Linda Johnsrud, Commission Chair
    Jorge Gonzalez, ALO
    John Farmer, Board Chair
    Members of the EER team
    Diane Harvey, Vice President and WASC liaison