REPORT OF THE WSCUC TEAM
SPECIAL VISIT

To Design Institute of San Diego

April 15-17, 2020

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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 the Institution and Visit

Design Institute of San Diego (DISD), a family owned for-profit institution founded in 1977, is a single purpose institution with a reported student enrollment of 78 FTE and total institution unduplicated headcount of 159 (2018). DISD’s CEO, the daughter of the founders, was appointed to the position in 2015, having served as COO since 2005. The executive leadership team includes the CEO, CFO (part-time, volunteer), the Director of Operations, and the Interior Design Program Director. Thirteen staff members and two academic/full time faculty administrators comprise the administrative staff. The faculty include one other full time member who also serves in a leadership role, along with a cadre of 24 part-time faculty with content, discipline specific, and related professional expertise.

The Bachelor of Fine Arts in Interior Design, which at the time of the original visit was the only degree program at DISD, has been accredited by the Council for Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA, formerly the Foundation for Interior Design Education Research) since 1991 and was re-accredited by CIDA in August 2017.

Design Institute of San Diego is approved to operate as a private postsecondary educational institution in the State of California by the Bureau for Private Postsecondary Education (BPPE) through February 28, 2024. Approval means compliance with state standards as set forth in the California Private Postsecondary Education Act of 2009.

The institution was granted eligibility by the WSCUC Commission in September 2016, hosted a Seeking Accreditation Visit 1 (SAV 1) in September 2017, and was subsequently granted initial
accreditation by the WSCUC Commission on February 16, 2018. The Commission allowed the date of Initial Accreditation to be applied retroactively to September 14, 2017. The Commission identified five recommendations and scheduled a Special Visit to be held at DISD in spring 2020 to review the progress made by the institution regarding those recommendations.

In April 2018, the DISD CEO filed a Corporate Restructuring Questionnaire following the gift to her by DISD founders Arthur and Gloria Rosenstein of the remainder of the DISD stock. The filing was made to determine whether or not the ownership change brought about by the gift of DISD stock would constitute a substantive change due to the Code of Federal Regulations (34 CFT Section 600.31), provision (e), which describes circumstances for excluded transactions in the case of a transfer from a family member. On April 11, 2018, the CEO received notification from WSCUC that the proposed corporate restructuring did not constitute a substantive change. With subsequent approval also by the BPPE, a change of ownership was initiated with the US Department of Education. The institution’s program participation agreement was updated on September 20, 2018.

On January 16, 2020, DISD submitted a proposal for a Master of Interior Design (MID) to the WSCUC Substantive Change Committee for review. The proposal and attachments were reviewed by a three-member Substantive Change Panel. A substantive change conference call took place with panel members and six institutional representatives on March 16, 2020. On March 18, 2020 DISD received interim approval for the MID program from the Substantive Change Committee, with site visit waived. The proposal is currently in the hands of readers from the Structural Change Committee who will make a recommendation to the Commission.
B. Description of Team’s Review Process

Preparations for the Special Visit to DISD were abruptly altered by the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the California governor’s stay at home order that went into effect on March 19, 2020. DISD responded quickly and thoroughly to the changed circumstances, and arrangements for a virtual visit were put together by the DISD CEO, WSCUC staff members, and the chair of the Special Visit team. The entire Special Visit was moved online and subsequently took place from April 15-17, 2020.

In planning for the Special Visit, a letter was sent on December 17, 2019 to all team members informing them of their assignments and of the timing for the team conference call. The Special Visit team for DISD, made up entirely of team members who had served on the SAV 1 in 2017, had ample previous experience with the institution, its facilities, faculty, staff and administration, board members, and depth of documentation provided. DISD provided the institution’s report and appendices to all members of the Special Visit team prior to the established deadline of February 6, 2020. In preparation for the team conference call, each team member provided their input on assigned sections of the team worksheet provided by WSCUC. All individual contributions were collated by the assistant chair and sent back out to the team members in time for the team conference call on Tuesday, March 17th, 2020. As a result of the team conference call, additional data requests were made of DISD prior to the Special Visit. Again, DISD provided the requested documentation promptly and it was made available to all team members in the WSCUC Box website.
The schedule for the Special Visit was developed through collaboration among the ALO, WSCUC staff, and the chair and assistant chair of the team. The shift to a virtual format for the Special Visit occasioned a re-working of the schedule. An updated schedule was created by the ALO and accepted by the team with minor modifications.

A final preparatory team-only conference call on April 6th, 2020 discussed the virtual visit schedule, reviewed and finalized assignments for questions during each session, and examined best practices in virtual visits. The discussion of best practices was informed by newly created WSCUC materials for conducting virtual visits.

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

As in the previous SAV 1, the team found DISD’s report to be well organized, clearly written and substantiated with relevant documentation. It was clear that DISD had reflected deeply and engaged substantially with the recommendations of the WSCUC Commission, and that it had made changes accordingly. The team found the report to be an accurate reflection of the condition of the institution, to the extent such condition could be evaluated through document examination and interviews and without benefit of an onsite visit. Institutional involvement in preparation of the report and appendices as well as for the review included a broad and representative list of faculty, staff and administrators (DISD Special Visit Report, p.4); all those interviewed communicated substantial familiarity and knowledge of the report and progress made by the institution since the last visit. Both full and part-time faculty on the Future Academic Offerings Task Force (FAOT) confirmed their role in conducting the background research and recommending the Master of Interior Design program for offering at DISD. The
institutional report dealt rigorously and at length with each of the Commission’s recommendations, using a highly reflective, evidence-based approach. Action steps taken have substantially addressed the majority of issues, as reflected in Section II of this report.

SECTION II – TEAM’S EVALUATION OF ISSUES UNDER THE STANDARDS

1. Continue to develop capacity and invest in talent for the collection, analysis, and use of data to support key operational metrics, student success, and evidence-based decision-making across all areas of the institution. This includes the further development of capacity for institutional research and student learning outcomes assessment. (CFRs 4.1 and 4.2)

DISD employs a deliberate set of quality-assurance processes in both academic and non-academic areas that promotes collaboration between faculty and staff. Since the SAV 1 in September 2017, much has been done to develop capacity, invest in talent, build on successful programs, and formalize processes for the collection, analysis and use of data to support evidence-based decision-making. The Institutional Research and Effectiveness Handbook provides a comprehensive look into how and when data are collected, analyzed, and reported, and aligns with the strategic plan goals set by the institution. As institutional effectiveness leaders at DISD, the Library Director & Assessment Coordinator and Faculty Institutional Research Committee (FIRC) chair joined both the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) and the California Association for Institutional Research (CAIR), and completed a seven-week online course, “Foundations of Data Management”, along with other workshops and conferences. In May 2018, a part-time Assistant Librarian was hired to provide assistance with the Student Success Center and allow the Library Director & Assessment Coordinator more time to devote to institutional review and effectiveness responsibilities. DISD has put in place two committees directly engaged in assessment and institutional research.
The Campus Effectiveness Committee (CEC), consisting of faculty and administrators, collects and analyses data on retention, graduation and placement rates and provides regularly scheduled reports to faculty and administrators. The team reviewed CEC’s annual Campus Effectiveness Plan (CEP) and concluded that it was a well-constructed document. The emphasis throughout the current CEP is primarily on Institutional Research (IR) and indirect assessment methods such as surveys. The team agreed that the document needed additional emphasis on direct assessment of student learning outcomes at the program level, and a section on how IR and assessment data could be brought together and utilized in planning, budgeting and decision making.

The Faculty Institutional Research Committee (FIRC) conducts one or two in-depth educational research projects per year. The FIRC is comprised of faculty who do not have administrative roles, which allows them to conduct research into topics such as grade analysis with full independence from the administration. The FIRC Co-Curricular Report 2019 states that “The DISD Faculty Institutional Research Committee has been tasked with the creation of a formal system of co-curricular assessment that will be implemented at the school and course level in order to more effectively track activities and their impact on student engagement in their program of study” (pages 12-13). The team found that report to include a descriptive literature review of student co-curricular assessment in the context of art and design institutions nationwide, as well as a review of current DISD co-curricular activities and recommendations for the design of co-curricular assessment going forward at DISD, but little analytical content. The team noted an exceptionally broad array of co-curricular offerings already in place at DISD, particularly given the size of the institution. Further use of the standardized event post-evaluation forms and ongoing enhancement of the assessments put in place for the Community
Service Program will offer value to the student experience as well as added benefit to local communities. The team encourages DISD to follow the FIRC recommendations and to continue to develop this aspect of institutional assessment.

The faculty and staff at DISD continue to be committed to strengthening their data literacy skills with multiple opportunities for external continuing education and internal training sessions noted. The learning assessment platform, Via by Watermark, was implemented in fall 2018 providing an e-portfolio tool for assessing mid-way portfolios. DISD noted that close to 90 percent of current faculty had attended training for Via by fall 2019, and 60 percent of the courses had at least one assignment implemented for assessment. Via training and assistance is offered to students and faculty through the Student Success Center. The first review of portfolios using this platform is scheduled to take place in fall 2020; at the time of the Special Visit no results were yet available.

DISD’s progress in the use of data research, collection, and analysis in demonstrating evidence-based decision-making is most prevalently illustrated in the development of a new Master of Interior Design (MID) program. The extensive research which includes a Graduate Degree Program Comparison of Schools, MID Program Assessment Plan, MID Assessment Matrix, and MID Program Review Schedule provides a comprehensive understanding of how data were used to design a new program for DISD, and how faculty assessment of student learning will be conducted in the future once the program is operational. DISD plans to have the Faculty Leadership Committee (FLC) take primary responsibility for evaluating the academic effectiveness of the program, with the Campus Effectiveness Committee (CEC) taking primary
responsibility for evaluating other measures of student success and program effectiveness. The hiring of a consultant with expertise in institutional research supports DISD’s commitment to the investment in talent for the collection, analysis and use of data to support key operational metrics, student success and evidence-based decision-making across all areas of the institution. The consultant made a number of recommendations including that DISD develop a data dictionary, data directory, and data repository to further articulate and democratize data governance. DISD’s completion of the data dictionary and its work on other data projects provided the team with evidence that the institution is motivated and aspires to produce a democratic model of data governance that empowers faculty, along with administrative and executive leadership, to contribute, access, and effectively use institutional data in every step of the decision-making process. The team recommends that DISD continue to formalize data governance (the availability, usability, integrity and security of systems and the policies that control data usage) and continue to implement quality control measures to ensure accurate and consistent data reporting for use in decision-making. (CFR 4.1, 4.2)

DISD has in place a model of assessing its institutional learning outcomes (ILOs) including communication, critical thinking and quantitative reasoning, information literacy, creativity, and global context (DISD Assessment of ILOs 2018). Clear and appropriate rubrics have been developed for assessment of the ILOs and results were included in evidence (DISD Assessment of ILOs 2018). In interviews, faculty members substantiated the calibration process followed to ensure the accuracy of information obtained through use of the ILO rubrics. The institution’s ILOs also overlap withWSCUC core competencies.
DISD has been accredited by the Council for Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA) since 1991 (CIDA website) and is subject to the student learning expectations encompassed in each of the sixteen CIDA professional criteria. In the most recent (2017) review by CIDA, the institution was found in compliance with all professional criteria. Notably, CIDA reviews take place only every six years. As outlined in the IRE Handbook, (pages 5-6) DISD conducts a review of its program-level learning outcomes only in preparation for CIDA reviews, every six years. While agreeing that planning for assessment in the graduate-level MID program has been thorough, team members were concerned that having a model where one or more undergraduate cohorts could matriculate and graduate prior to the faculty having systematically assessed their learning relative to PLOs means that DISD faculty members are missing opportunities to utilize current program-level assessment findings to improve undergraduate student learning at the level of the PLOs. While aware of the substantial progress in developing IR capacity DISD has made and the manner in which those data were used in planning the MID, team members were nevertheless concerned that DISD is missing opportunities to put its rapidly developing IR data and the results of faculty assessment of student learning together to obtain a “big picture” overview of ongoing evidence. This “big picture” would bring together meaningful, ongoing and current program-level assessment data and IR data for use in critical planning efforts, decision-making, and budgeting. The team therefore recommends that DISD take steps to develop and implement a formal plan and methods of assessing PLOs more frequently than required by the Council for Interior Design Accreditation, integrating assessment and IR data, and closing the loop with assessment data in decision-making, planning and budgeting. (CFR 2.3, 2.4, 3.4, 4.1, 4.3)
A note about WSCUC, assessment, and educational effectiveness to enable DISD to continue on its educational effectiveness trajectory: WSCUC calls on institutions to systematically gather, interpret, and act on data related to student learning. Documenting that students acquire knowledge and skills validates institutional quality, provides accountability, and sets the conditions for the improvement of student learning. As a newly WSCUC accredited institution, DISD has put in place a solid basic infrastructure for assessing educational effectiveness. The institution is well positioned to continue its progress to become highly developed in this area. A resource that may be helpful to DISD is the WSCUC “Rubric for Assessing Educational Effectiveness” (https://wascsenior.box.com/shared/static/t8wq06hia0p86gewj3f8.docx) that describes the key elements of educational effectiveness and benchmarks to help an institution reflect on its progress. In addition, as a newly accredited institution, DISD could benefit from participating in the WSCUC annual conference scheduled for April 28-30, 2021 in San Diego and attending WSCUC educational programs that are offered on topics such as assessment, analytics, student success and the like. The WSCUC community of institutions is a good resource for tips, advice and exchanges of information. DISD has much to offer other institutions and in turn could learn from them as well. The team encourages DISD to actively engage with WSCUC resources and institutions.

2. Further develop and implement a comprehensive, scalable institutional technology strategy (CFRs 1.7, 3.5, and 3.7)

Since the Seeking Accreditation Visit I in September 2017, DISD has undertaken several initiatives to strengthen its technology infrastructure and security risks. The institution engaged an outside company that specializes in technology to assess its existing infrastructure and make
recommendations. DISD then implemented several of the company’s recommendation including:

a. migrating all staff, faculty and student emails to a Microsoft Office 365 web app;
b. installing new servers;
c. implementing uniform WIFI and secure connectivity throughout the campus;
d. providing VPN remote access; and
e. upgrading classroom computers, monitors and projection screens (student-initiated request).

The team acknowledges the work and effort DISD has put forth to make improvements in this area. However, the team observed that DISD could benefit from a more strategic focus in addressing its technology issues.

In reviewing DISD’s current list of technology projects, the team noted that two projects identified as “Moderate Priority” could better be classified as “High Priority” because of the risk of system failure and the impact on the operations of the institution. These two projects are DISD’s Student Information System (SIS), Transcript, and the Campus Management System.

DISD’s approach to addressing technology improvements appears to be focused on the user facing functionality with less emphasis on the institutional risks. While on the surface this may be seen as commendable, it fails to address that a poorly timed SIS disruption could leave the institution incapable of fulfilling key regulatory requirements, such as completing IPEDS reporting, providing supporting schedules for annual audits or reporting to accreditation or licensing bodies. No document provided for this Special Visit outlined a contingency plan for
such a failure. Team members strongly encourage DISD to more clearly investigate the risks of technology failures to its institutional obligations, document a fully tested contingency plan, and project a heightened sense of urgency in its operational and strategic planning documents.

Similar to the approach taken to formation of the marketing and enrollment plan, the team recommends that DISD expand its current technology plan and organizational capacity to implement interoperable and streamlined technology systems to support future growth and scaling of operations and to minimize risk. (CFR 1.7, 3.5, 3.7)

3. **Continue to develop a comprehensive human resources strategy, including an appropriate faculty and staffing plan, to ensure risk mitigation, succession planning, and sustainable organizational structure.** (CFRs 3.7 and 3.8)

The institution has established clear roles, responsibilities, and lines of authority and places a priority on sustaining institutional capacity and educational effectiveness. This is evidenced starting with the CEO who, with board of directors’ support, hired a consultant to assess the current organizational structure in July 2018. An extensive review of the existing leadership team, with recommendations on organizational, personnel and/or structural changes, resulted in DISD making changes to leadership. At the DISD board of directors meeting in October 2018, the consultant recommended hiring a senior executive director-level manager with deep leadership skills and experience to oversee admissions and other functions. As a result of the recommendation, DISD hired a Director of Operations (DOO). DISD’s Executive Leadership Team (ELT) was expanded to include the CEO, CFO, DOO and Program Director. The new Director of Operation’s responsibilities also include implementing student tracking and projection reports, contributing to the budget process, and contributing to the robust staffing plan that considers enrollment growth and the MID program. In addition to changes in the leadership team, a student success team (SST) was organized to be a more focused group of administrators
to support student success. The DISD Staffing Plan (Plan) serves as a guide to the institution in
identifying and prioritizing staffing needs over the coming years with the addition of the new
MID program. The team recognizes that DISD continues to develop a comprehensive human
resources strategy, including an appropriate faculty and staffing plan, to ensure risk mitigation,
succession planning and sustainable organizational structure.

4. In the context of the Marketing and Enrollment Plan, undertake a comprehensive market
analysis and scenario planning for each identified new program opportunity to determine its
viability and probability for success. (CFRs 2.2b, 3.4, 3.7, and 4.7)

Since the SAV 1, DISD identified one new program opportunity, the MID, which received
interim approval from the Substantative Change Committee and will be reviewed by the
Commission at its June meeting.

In preparation for this Special Visit, the team had the opportunity to review several documents
related to the introduction of this new program, including the Master of Interior Design Program
Overview; the Initial Marketing Plan; the Graduate Degree Program Comparison Schools; and a
Southern California Market Survey. The work to research this program offering was conducted
by the Future Academic Offerings Taskforce (FAOT). Based on the team’s observations, DISD
performed a comprehensive analysis and identified key parameters that influenced decision-
making. For example, the review of the market identified no other regional (Southern
California) institutions offering a MID, although there were many MIDs offered around the
country. This helped refine the enrollment strategy to a more localized approach rather than
expand to a national audience. In addition, DISD included many constituents (students, alumni,
employers and industry experts) to determine if there were adequate interest, need and incentive
to pursue a higher degree level in Interior Design. Both informal surveys and formal industry
reports indicate that:
a. Students returning to college would have much preferred enrolling in a MID program rather than a second bachelor’s program.

b. Employers were more likely to give hiring preference to candidates with a master’s degree and would offer a raise or promotion to a current employee who obtained a master’s degree.

c. According to ASID’s Interior Design Salaries and Benefits General Report, salaries increase with degree levels at a rate of approximately 11 percent, from associates to bachelors and from bachelors to masters.

d. MID expands opportunities to pursue an alternative career path in education.

DISD clearly demonstrated its thorough review of the marketability of a MID program. The institution’s approach to scenario planning was less robust. There were no budgets or scenario planning documents provided to the team, however in discussions with the CFO and the COO, they indicated that they were planning a very slow growth trajectory, did not anticipate more than a 5 percent enrollment cannibalization of the BFA, and were allocating a relatively small initial investment of $50,000 for technology and marketing. In the future, it would be beneficial to provide more formal evidence of viability budgeting and scenario considerations.

Upon meeting with the FAOT during the Special Visit, the team discovered that this taskforce was not a permanent committee, but rather a subset of the Faculty Leadership Committee (FLC) that had been assembled for the sole purpose of vetting the MID program. Team members were pleased to see the creation of this taskforce and believe that the institution would benefit from FAOT’s continued and more formal contributions.

5. Review the potential changes to organizational structure, policy, and culture that could result from dramatic enrollment growth or the addition of graduate programs. (CFRs 1.7, 2.2b, 4.6, and 4.7)
DISD leadership, with the support of the board, responded with an immediate sense of urgency to address the organizational structure and capacity recommendation. The independent board members lauded the executive leadership team’s use of and openness to the consultancy to manage organizational capacity in a strategic way. The plan included the engagement of a consultant to analyze the leadership capacity and to recommend changes that would situate the institution for immediate needs and future growth. Specifically, following a comprehensive review process that included capacity, sustainability, and succession planning, the assessment led to the position of Director of Operations as a member of the executive leadership team to address and manage key pressing operational matters. This position reports to the CEO, with primary responsibility for the management of admissions and the Student Success Team, which has led to a successful launch of key metrics tracking for evidence informed decisions. Additionally, the DOO has been a major contributor to a data-driven staffing plan designed to ensure the institution is properly staffed for new initiatives and growth such as the MID program, as well as planning for succession.

The MID program exemplifies how the organizational structure and processes informed the decision to offer a new degree level. DISD capitalized on its processes and structures to determine the need for the program through survey results, a strategic planning retreat, and the diligent efforts of the Future Academic Offerings Taskforce to fully understand the graduate culture shift, human capital, and research impacts related to the program.

DISD leadership and managers have proceeded with other hires, applying a careful approach. The deliberative focus serves to ensure the right hires based on honoring a review process that
includes assessing for the basic skill set required, meeting with leadership members, and ensuring mission alignment. In addition, the hiring of part time faculty has incorporated peer review into the decision-making. At present, interviews are continuing in order to meet staffing needs; and the hiring of an executive assistant for the CEO is imminent. The team noted that upon review of the IT consulting report, although there appears to be a need for a senior level individual with higher education information technology as a core competency to inform and execute on the technology plans, that role does not appear in the staffing plan, potentially having an impact on execution of the IT plan.

In sum, the team found that DISD gave immediate and serious attention to the need for organizational capacity, sustainability, and succession planning as it prepares for growth. The team concurs that the early focus on organizational structure and capacity enabled a proactive plan and a relatively seamless pivot to virtual teaching and learning environment in the face of COVID-19 referenced elsewhere in this report.

SECTION III – OTHER TOPICS, AS APPROPRIATE
N/A

SECTION IV – FINDINGS, COMMENDATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE TEAM REVIEW

Findings
The team concluded that DISD satisfactorily addressed the issues for this Special Visit though some areas need further attention and development. Evidence was provided to show accomplishments in institutional research, use of data in decision-making, technology, organizational structure, and planning for a new degree program.

Commendations
The Special Visit team commends DISD for:

1. Taking to heart the recommendations of the Commission in improving organizational structure and process.
2. Preserving and developing its deep and pervasive culture of critique, one that operates at all levels of the institution. The culture of critique, coming from a place of humility, guides the institution in positive ways towards developing quality educational solutions.
3. Carefully and deliberatively developing its institutional research capacity, as evidenced by its understanding of and ability to use IR data for ongoing institutional decisions, and professional development of staff and faculty in data literacy.
4. Rapidly and creatively responding to the COVID-19 pandemic with a student-centered approach by faculty, staff and administration.

Recommendations

The Special Visit team recommends that DISD:

1. Continue to formalize data governance and implement quality control measures to ensure accurate and consistent data reporting for use in decision making. (CFRs 1.7, 3.5, 3.7)
2. Develop and implement a formal plan and methods of assessing Program Learning Outcomes more frequently than required by the Council for Interior Design Accreditation, integrating assessment and IR data, and closing the loop with assessment data in decision-making, planning and budgeting. (CFRs 2.3, 2.4, 3.4, 4.1, 4.3)
3. Expand its current technology plan and organizational capacity to implement interoperable and streamlined technology systems to support future growth and scaling of operations and to minimize risk. (CFRs 1.7, 3.5, 3.7)