July 3, 2012

Robert Riordan
President
High Tech High Graduate School of Education
2855 Farragut Road
San Diego, CA, 92106

Dear President Riordan:

At its meeting June 13-15, 2012 the Commission considered the report of the Special Visit team that conducted an on-site review of High Tech High Graduate School of Education (GSE) March 5-7, 2012. The Commission also reviewed the GSE report and supporting documents submitted prior to the visit, the WASC legal analysis of the High Tech High (HTH) corporate and governance structure, and the institution’s April 16, 2012 response to the visiting team report. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the visit with you and your colleagues: Larry Rosenstock, academic dean; and Allison Ohle, administrative dean and accreditation liaison officer. Your observations were very helpful in informing the Commission’s deliberations.

The High Tech High Graduate School of Education was granted eligibility in 2007. It then hosted a Capacity and Preparatory Review (CPR) visit for candidacy in March 2009 and an Educational Effectiveness Review (EER) visit for candidacy in February 2011. In its June 2011 action letter following the EER, the Commission determined that the GSE did not yet meet several of the Standards of Accreditation and Criteria for Review at the minimum level required for candidacy. The Commission acted to receive the EER report and defer action on candidacy for one year, and asked that the GSE address four areas in preparation for the spring 2012 Special Visit: leadership and governance; organizational structure and decision-making processes; educational effectiveness, including program review; and graduate culture. The team found progress in all areas cited in the letter and the EER team report, with further development needed in some of those areas as described below.

The Commission endorsed the findings, commendations, and recommendations of the Special Visit team; in particular it commended the GSE for its responsiveness to the EER team report, its commitment to the assessment of student learning outcomes, and its emerging understanding of how the characteristics of a graduate culture can be developed within the context of High Tech High.

The Commission highlights the following areas for attention as the institution moves toward initial accreditation:
Cultivating a graduate culture. The July 2011 Commission action letter highlighted the need for students to engage with the literature in the field of education and for the GSE to support research, scholarship, and creative activity that “moves beyond local practice.” The letter called on the GSE to establish a clear definition of scholarship and to identify which categories of faculty would be expected to engage in scholarship. The Commission acknowledges the GSE’s subsequent efforts to build a graduate culture and provide support for research. However, the Commission continues to have concerns about the development of a graduate culture, including support for research, scholarship and creative activity, and about the limited scope of the content of the graduate program. It appears that the GSE program does not provide diversity of viewpoints or multiplicity of perspectives independent of the pedagogy espoused by High Tech High. Even while recognizing the special focus of the high school and graduate program at HTH, for a graduate degree to have validity it should provide sufficient breadth for students to understand the literature, theories and methods of the field, and to prepare students to understand the broader contours and context of the profession into which the student will be entering. The Commission was pleased to learn from your presentation to the panel that the GSE has instituted a national search for a Chief Academic Officer/Dean of the Faculty, who will provide internal mentorship for research, and that the GSE is contacting consultants to provide training for and administration of the proposed institutional research board, in keeping with the team’s recommendations. The Commission expects that by the time of the next visit, the GSE will have made significant progress in the area of graduate culture by clarifying workloads and expectations about teaching, scholarship and research; identifying the level of support it will provide to faculty; and implementing long-term methods to mentor students in their research. Further, the Commission expects the GSE faculty to consider broadening the content of its program by enriching it with multiple perspectives from the literature and research in the field. (CFRs 2.1, 2.2b, 2.8, 2.9, 3.1-3.4)

Strengthening leadership. The Commission commends the GSE for steps it has taken to meet WASC expectations about leadership and governance, including adopting job descriptions, creating lines of reporting, and establishing a review process for all administrators. As noted by the team, there remains “a need for title alignments with actual functional responsibilities that parallel best practices and recognized nomenclature in higher education...,” in particular clarifying the respective roles of the dean and chief academic officer. The Commission also expects the GSE to consider carefully the kind of experience and background needed for a chief academic offer at this point in the school’s development and acknowledges the initial steps taken to fill this role with a well-qualified person. (CFRs 1.3, 3.1, 3.10)

Developing the governing board. The team found that the GSE governing board is aware of its responsibilities and dedicated to the values and mission of the GSE. However, having four corporate entities with overlapping memberships raises some concerns about whether the GSE has a sufficiently independent governing board under WASC standards and policies. The Commission understands that the GSE is in the process of responding to recommendations from WASC staff that include the installation of an independent GSE board chair and revisions to some bylaw provisions. The recommended revisions concerning appointment and removal of board members will promote greater board independence. Consideration should also be given to revisions relating to nominating committees, board member qualifications and bylaw amendments so as to strengthen the authority of the GSE board and the autonomy of the GSE as a separate accreditable entity. (CFRs 1.3, 1.6, 3.8, 3.9; Policies on Related Entities and Independent Governing Boards)
Clarifying organizational structure. In its July 2011 letter, the Commission highlighted as a continuing concern the fact that most of the GSE administrators, faculty, and staff hold dual roles in the graduate school and the high school. The team found that “there is still the need to clarify the responsibilities of those with dual roles.” It appears from the team report that the president and the two program chairs are the only full-time employees of the graduate school. “The Dean, Administrative Dean, and CAO all continue to have considerable responsibilities – with varying amount of time dedicated outside the GSE – to other HTH units.” The Commission understands that the GSE is small and it acknowledged in its July 2011 letter GSE’s progress “from a start-up to an emergent institution.” Nonetheless, the Commission remains concerned about the extra-institutional, dual focus of most of the GSE’s personnel. The Commission expects the GSE to review the number and time commitment of personnel needed to successfully operate an independent graduate school of education, including time allotted for scholarly and creative activities, and to carry out the imminent work that will be needed to move the institution from meeting all WASC Standards and CFRs at a minimal level to meeting them at a substantial level for initial accreditation. (CFR 3.1)

Enhancing educational effectiveness. As noted in the team report, the GSE “has made significant strides in establishing the infrastructure system and processes to support the educational effectiveness of their graduate programs.” The Commission supports the GSE’s strides in developing an effective program review process for both the academic and non-academic programs; the infrastructure for assessment with measurable learning outcomes at the course, program, and institutional level; tools for direct and indirect measurement of learning; mapping of outcomes to courses; and inclusion of outcomes in course syllabi. The GSE has completed program reviews, collected annual assessment reports, and created timelines for future program reviews. The team observed that “it will be critical for the GSE to implement the Institutional Review Process through a complete cycle and beyond.” The Commission concurs and notes that full implementation of the GSE institutional review system and process with preliminary findings will be expected by the next review. (CFRs 1.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.6, 2.7, 4.4)

Given the above, the Commission acted to:

1. Receive the Special Visit report.

2. Grant candidacy to the High Tech High Graduate School of Education for four years, through June 2016.

3. Schedule the Capacity and Preparatory Review for Initial Accreditation for fall 2013 and the Educational Effectiveness Review for Initial Accreditation for spring 2015. The institutional report will be due 12 weeks before each visit.

In taking this action to grant candidacy, the Commission confirms that the High Tech High Graduate School of Education has satisfactorily addressed the Core Commitments to Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness at the level expected for candidacy, and has successfully completed the review for candidacy 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.
The Commission advises the GSE that while a minimum level of compliance with the Standards and the CFRs is required for candidacy, the required level for initial accreditation is higher. As stated in *How to Become Accredited*:

The Initial Accreditation Review moves beyond a mere compliance review, considering evidence of the institution's capacity for deep engagement with significant issues, including issues related to the institution's educational effectiveness. The institution demonstrates that it meets all of the Standards of Accreditation and the Core Commitments by:

1. Demonstrating that it has reviewed itself in reference to the Standards of Accreditation and the Core Commitments to Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness.

2. Demonstrating that it meets all of the Standards at a substantial level.

3. Demonstrating its commitment to developing and sustaining Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness.

4. Demonstrating that it has successfully addressed the Criteria for Review and Guidelines identified in the action letter as being of concern at the time of the candidacy review.

5. Having collected evidence of student learning and being able to demonstrate how it has used such evidence to support inquiry and improvement in support of educational effectiveness.

Institutions granted the status of Candidate for Accreditation must use the following statement in the *How to Become Accredited* manual if they wish to describe that status publicly.

The High Tech High Graduate School of Education has been recognized as a Candidate for Accreditation by the Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), 985 Atlantic Avenue, #100, Alameda, CA 94501, 510.748.9001. This status is a preliminary affiliation with the Commission awarded for a maximum period of four years. Candidacy is an indication that the institution is progressing toward Accreditation. Candidacy is not Accreditation and does not ensure eventual Accreditation.

Federal law requires that the WASC address and phone number appear in your catalog.

Institutions granted candidacy are required to:

1. Submit an Annual Report in the format required by the Commission. This report will be sent to you electronically within a few weeks.
2. Keep the Commission informed of any significant changes or developments, especially those that require prior approval according to the Commission's Substantive Change Policy. The GSE is approved to offer only the two Master of Education programs (School Leadership and Teacher Leadership) and only at the School’s current location. Please consult the Substantive Change Manual and confer with your WASC liaison about any proposed new degree programs, off-campus sites, online offerings, and/or changes in governance or ownership to determine if these matters require Substantive Change approval.

3. Pay annual dues calculated on the basis of the institution's FTE of student enrollment and prorated from the date of this action. An annual dues statement will be sent under separate cover.

In accordance with Commission policy, a copy of this letter will be sent to the chair of the High Tech High Graduate School of Education 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 School 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
Allison Ohle, ALO
Gary Jacobs, Board Chair
Members of the Special Visit team
Diane Harvey, Vice President and WASC Liaison