July 9, 2012

James L. McKearney, SS
President and Rector
St. Patrick’s Seminary and University
320 Middlefield Road
Menlo Park, CA 94025-3596

Dear President McKearney:

At its meeting June 13-15, 2012, the Commission considered the report of the Capacity and Preparatory Review (CPR) team that conducted the visit to St. Patrick’s Seminary and University (SPSU) February 29-March 2, 2012. The Commission also reviewed the Capacity and Preparatory Review report and exhibits submitted by the university prior to the visit and your response to the CPR team report, dated June 7, 2012. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the visit with you and your colleagues: Fr. Gladstone Stevens, academic dean and vice rector, and Melanie Morey, provost. Your observations were very helpful in informing the Commission’s deliberations.

St. Patrick’s Seminary and University’s institutional proposal took a comprehensive approach to the CPR, under which the institution evaluated its capacity under all four Standards of Accreditation. SPSU’s success in demonstrating that it meets the expectations set forth in the Standards was, according to the team, “uneven.” For example, the team found that SPSU has a clear sense of institutional values and character “that pervade the educational and formational programs of the seminary and direct its policies and decisions” (CFR 1.1); and clean audits “and a system to respond to Management Reports” (CFR 3.5). On the other hand, at the time of the visit, SPSU did not collect and analyze aggregated and disaggregated student data (CFR 2.10), lacked a process for systematic program review (CFR 2.7), and had little in the way of institutional research capabilities (CFR 4.5). Overall, the team was unable to confirm that SPSU has in place “an identifiable system of quality assurance for capacity issues that is aligned with mission and educational purpose.” The Commission was deeply troubled by SPSU’s inadequacies in carefully monitoring retention and graduation rates, systematically assessing student learning, and putting in place mechanisms to assure continuous quality improvement. The Commission expects that by the time of the next visit, SPSU will show concrete evidence of educational effectiveness as reflected in the Standards of Accreditation.

The Commission endorsed the commendations that are found throughout the team’s report. These include: diversifying the student body to be more reflective of the parishioners that churches now serve; developing a strong, deeply embedded culture of student-centeredness; cultivating a rich sense of community and a climate of collegiality; creating a hard working, loyal and dedicated staff
and faculty; and earning the respect and high regard of students, the boards, church officials, dioceses and parishes.

The Commission likewise endorsed the recommendations of the CPR team and wished to emphasize the following areas for urgent attention:

**Refining student learning outcomes.** The team observed on course syllabi “program goals, not student learning outcomes,” with little indication of the knowledge, skills, attitudes or habits of mind that students take with them from the course. At the program and institution level, the team found “laudable goals” such as “cultural competency,” but these were not framed as “expected learning outcomes” so that their achievement could be adequately assessed. The Commission expects SPSU to define the most important outcomes for students to achieve, identify the mechanisms for assessing how well students meet these outcomes, then use that information to continuously improve teaching and learning. (CFRs 2.3, 2.6, 4.6, 4.7)

**Improving assessment, program review and institutional research.** The Standards of Accreditation place special emphasis on the obligation of institutions to assess student learning and identify ways to improve it. The team concurred with the institution’s self-evaluation that SPSU is at an “emerging state of assessment.” Although SPSU’s efforts are “nascent,” the team concluded that the university has “the capacity to make demonstrable progress in areas of assessment.” In terms of program review, SPSU is regularly evaluated by outside religious agencies, including the Association of Theological Schools, but it does not have its own internal program review process. The team could find little that suggested “the institution analyzes its data or has systems in place to use that evidence for planning, program review or continuous quality improvement.” The Commission expects the university to develop and implement appropriate assessment and program review strategies. In addition, the Commission expects St. Patrick’s to build its institutional research capability so that it can gather, analyze and interpret data for use in improving educational effectiveness. (CFRs 2.3, 2.6, 2.7, 4.4, 4.5)

**Understanding student success.** The team was not provided with required retention, time-to-degree and graduation rates, “finding only a record of number of degrees awarded.” The Commission expects SPSU to gather, analyze and publish graduation and retention data. In addition to reviewing aggregated data, SPSU should examine disaggregated data to identify performance gaps among various subpopulations (such as those who learned English as a second language or adults returning to higher education studies) to seek to understand any disparities it finds, and to develop and implement strategies to raise the rates in areas identified. In addition, the Commission expects SPSU to use comparative data from other institutions to contextualize and understand its graduation and retention rates. (CFRs 2.6, 2.10, 4.4)

**Creating a strategic plan.** SPSU will be embarking upon a strategic planning process. Such a plan should speak to campus priorities, future pathways, alignment of long- and short-term goals, and directions for allocation of resources. The Commission urges SPSU to integrate a fiscal plan into the strategic plan so that the institution’s financial goals are identified and the ways in which they will be achieved are clear, “especially in regard to generation of major gifts.” The
Commission expects a strategic plan to be completed by the time of the Educational Effectiveness Review (EER). (CFRs 3.6, 3.7, 4.1-4.3)

**Enhancing board governance.** The governing board is a policy-making body responsible for the quality, integrity and financial sustainability of the institution and for ensuring that the institution's mission is being achieved. SPSU has two boards: a governing board and an advisory/fundraising board. The team found an “active” and engaged governing board that will be facing the imminent retirement of the Archbishop of San Francisco, the chair of the board. At the time of the visit, SPSU was not in conformity with the then-draft Policy on Independent Governing Boards, which has since been adopted. The Commission expects SPSU to review its board operations against this policy and make the necessary adjustments. Independent of any changes that might take place in university leadership or with the Archbishop, the Commission expects SPSU to adhere to this policy. In keeping with good practice, the Commission also expects the board to establish mechanisms for assessing how well it meets its responsibilities, and to use the results of that assessment to enhance board effectiveness. (CFRs 1.6, 3.9 and Policy on Independent Governing Boards)

**Adopting and implementing a credit hour policy.** During the interval between the visit and the Commission meeting, SPSU has implemented a credit hour policy and is undertaking a careful review of all course syllabi with respect to unit value and estimated workload. In addition, SPSU has indicated that all new courses submitted for approval will be verified to assure that credit hours are accurate, and that the program review process will include an examination of credit hours. The EER team will review this work at the time of the visit. (CFRs 1.7 and its Guideline, 1.9, 2.2, and Policy on Credit Hour)

The Commission acted to:

1. Receive the Capacity and Preparatory Review report and continue the accreditation of St. Patrick’s Seminary and University.

2. Reschedule the Educational Effectiveness Review visit from fall 2013 to spring 2014. The Institutional Report is due 12 weeks prior to the scheduled visit.

3. Request that the institution incorporate its response to the issues raised in this action letter and to the major recommendations of the CPR team report into its Educational Effectiveness Review report. You may include this analysis in an appendix to your Educational Effectiveness report or incorporate it into the report.

In extending the timeframe until the Educational Effectiveness Review, the Commission is providing the institution with time to address the serious concerns identified in this letter so that by the time of the next visit, learning outcomes, strategic planning, program review and overall institution-wide assessment activities will have been systematically and meaningfully embedded throughout the institution and SPSU can produce concrete evidence of educational effectiveness.
In accordance with Commission policy, a copy of this letter will be sent to the chair of St. Patrick’s Seminary and University’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 on Friday, July 13. 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 university 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/bgd

cc: Linda Johnsrud, Commission Chair
    Melanie Morey, ALO
    Rev. George Niederauer, Board Chair
    Members of the CPR team
    Barbara Gross Davis, WASC