March 20, 2015

Dr. Eileen Aranda
President
Claremont Lincoln University
250 West First Street
Suite 330
Claremont, California 91711

Dear President Aranda:

At its meeting February 18-20, 2015, the Commission considered the report of the Special Visit team that conducted an on-site review of Claremont Lincoln University (CLU) for Initial Accreditation December 3-5, 2014. Commission members also reviewed the Special Visit report submitted by the institution prior to the visit and its January 2, 2015, response to the visiting team report. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the visit with you and with Dr. Laura Burgis, Executive Vice President, Jay Sample, Senior Vice President and Chief Information Officer, and Linda Robitoy, Chief Financial Officer. Your comments were very helpful in informing the commission’s deliberations.

CLU was granted Candidacy status by the Commission in June 2013, with the understanding that it continues its development toward its own accreditation as a unit of Claremont School of Theology (CST). Subsequent to the Commission’s 2013 action, the institution’s development trajectory changed significantly, necessitating that it sever its relationship with CST and pursue Initial Accreditation on its own. As a result, this visit was scheduled to evaluate the institution’s status with regard to each of the Commission’s Standards of Accreditation in order to determine whether to grant Initial Accreditation. The self-study, then, was comprehensive and addressed each of the 39 Criteria for Review under the four Standards. The team’s findings are addressed below.

The team also inquired into the institution’s response to issues identified for attention by the Commission in its July 2013 letter. These issues were: financial sustainability, Board of Trustees development, educational effectiveness, and data management. The team determined that evidences for CLU’s substantial responses to these issues were embedded in the institution’s analysis of its standing under the 39 CFRs.

Based on the team’s report and the other information sources as identified above, the Commission has determined the following with regard to the institution’s compliance with each of the WSCUC Standards of Accreditation.
Standard 1: Defining Institutional Purposes and Ensuring Educational Objectives.

The Commission has determined that the institution has met this Standard.

The Commission commends the institution’s achievements under this Standard for developing a truly innovative and promising curriculum, framed by three master’s programs, that gives a powerful expression of CLU’s mission. The courses are substantive, thorough, interactive, and valued by the students. The Commission also commends the degree to which CLU’s mission permeates the vision, operations, and conversations of the entire organization.

Standard 2: Achieving Educational Objectives through Core Functions.

The Commission has determined that the institution has met this Standard at a minimal level.

The Commission commends the institution for its highly innovative program design process – the Curriculum Labs. These interactive events appear to create relevant learning experiences for CLU students. The team references CLU’s initiatives in the ‘scholarship of application’ as evidence of effective opportunities to bring students and faculty together in highly relevant research. These efforts show promise.

However the Commission also notes the need for additional work in this area. The Commission concurs with the review team’s concern that the development of the curriculum may not have been designed to align the actual classroom experiences with the expected outcomes. For example, the team report notes that after careful review of many course syllabi with regard to research skills, including the Capstone course, the review could not substantiate “much effort in readings, assignments, or discussion that developed research skills.” The team report goes on to say that there was no evidence in the course assignments that supported the course description that students would be able to define and analyze a critical social problem and that they would conduct data collection and analysis.

The Commission also notes that, in view of the newness of each of the degree programs, it is not able to verify at this time the degree to which its graduates’ culminating assignments represent the achievement of the intended outcomes at the level of rigor appropriate to the graduate degree being awarded. The Commission learned from the institution during its panel interview that no culminating experiences have been completed in any of the programs since two of the three programs were newly developed and the other was recently restructured. Both the team report and the presentation by the representatives during the panel discussion left the Commission with serious questions regarding compliance with CFR 2.2a. In the next review, the Commission will look for alignment between expected course outcomes and assignments as well as examples of graded assignments and culminating experiences.
Standard 3: Developing and Applying Resources and Organizational Structures to Ensure Quality and Sustainability.

The Commission has determined that the institution has met this Standard at a minimal level.

The Commission commends the institution’s work under this Standard for bringing together a qualified and seasoned leadership team. This has, in turn, helped to create supportive and effectively collaborative relationships with full- and part-time faculty and consultants during this high-pressure developmental period. The Commission also notes that faculty in each category are qualified and appreciated by their students as creating effective learning experiences.

The Commission further notes that the institution has undergone a corporate restructuring and expansion of its Board within the last year. Questions were raised in the initial visit with regard to the Board composition and while the Commission is pleased to see that the Board has been restructured and expanded, it is too early to evaluate the effectiveness of this change. (CFR 3.9)

The Commission’s greatest concern is the financial sustainability of the institution. Despite the fact that Claremont Lincoln has had two clean audits and has favorable financial ratios, the institution is overwhelmingly dependent on a single revocable gift for its operations. The institution acknowledges that it needs to increase program revenue in order to become more financially stable. However, its extremely ambitious projected enrollment growth is based on a highly optimistic and speculative marketing analysis. (CFR 3.4)

The Commission will look for evidence to substantiate the expected developments in these critical areas of financial sustainability in the next review.

Standard 4: Creating an Organization Committed to Quality Assurance, Institutional Learning, and Improvement.

The Commission has determined that the institution has met this Standard at a minimal level.

The Commission commends the institution’s work under this Standard for laying the foundation for continuous quality improvement by adopting industry standards and processes for data collection, analysis, and use in making improvements. These processes are, in turn, overseen by qualified institutional research staff. As noted earlier, the Curriculum Labs are structured to engage faculty and external specialists in ongoing review of the purposes and outcomes of the academic programs on both annual and planned comprehensive review cycles.

As reported by the team: “Given its projected rapid growth, multiple degree programs, and especially its multiple admissions entry, CLU has an obvious need for a very robust and effective program of institutional research. (CFR 4.5) Essential here is a reliable, transparent, and analytically rigorous system of tracking student outcomes (retention,
graduation, time-to-degree) by entry cohort, student characteristics, and degree program. The institutional research capacity of CLU is also hampered by a lack of appropriate data and comparable benchmark data from other institutions largely due to the unique nature of its mission and newness of the endeavor (CFR 4.5). CLU had only 13 graduates at the time of the visit therefore systematic stakeholder input from alumni is still a future endeavor. CLU has an exciting mission statement and goals for reaching out to the community and creating future stakeholders. It will be important for CLU to have “shovel-ready” assessment instruments in place to gain the necessary data (CFR 4.4), analyze it through the collective work of the assessment team (CFR 4.5), and respond to a changing higher education environment (CFR 4.7).”

The Commission, as noted above, considers each degree program to be in an early developmental stage. Due to the fact that two of CLU’s programs have been in existence for less than one year, and the third since 2012, its planned program review process, which is to occur every four to seven years, cannot as yet have been carried out. The team report verified that “a process has been designed that includes three steps: 1. Preparation of a self-study 2. Self-study reviewed by external review team 3. Results reviewed again (not specified by whom) with the generation of a Findings and Recommendations Report submitted to the Academic Leadership Team. The process appears to be in place but there is some confusion regarding who manages the process. In one place it notes that the Assessment Team manages the process but in Exhibit 10 it states that the Report is sent to the Academic Leadership Team. Clarity for the management of the program review process would benefit the institution. (CFR 2.7)”

Given the four to seven year schedule for these reviews, there appears to be ample time to have the management of the process clarified prior to implementation.

In a subsequent review, the Commission will expect evidence of faculty having engaged in collective evaluations of students’ culminating academic work from one or more cohorts of graduates under the current curriculum. Based on these reflections on the strengths of the curriculum, the faculty will be expected, as appropriate, to implement curricular refinements leading to even more consistent achievement of the intended outcomes.

In view of the above, the Commission acted to:

1. Receive the Special Visit Report and continue Candidacy for Claremont Lincoln University until fall 2017
2. Schedule a subsequent review at a time to be determined by WSCUC staff to assess the institution’s progress in the areas identified herein as representing minimal compliance.

Institutions in Candidacy are required to:

1. Submit an Annual Report in the format required by the Commission
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 University is approved to offer only the degrees listed in the attached consolidated list of degrees at its current locations. Please consult the Substantive Change Manual and confer with your WSCUC liaison about any proposed new degree programs, off-campus sites, online offerings, and/or changes in governance or ownership, to determine if these matters should be approved in advance by WSCUC.

3. Pay Annual Membership Dues calculated on the institution’s student FTE 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 Claremont Lincoln University’s governing board in one week. The Commission expects that the team report and this action letter will be widely disseminated throughout the institution to promote further engagement and improvement and to support the institution’s response to the specific issues identified in these documents. The team report and the Commission’s action letter will also be posted on the WSCUC website. If the institution wishes to respond to the Commission action on its own website, WSCUC will post a link to that response.

Finally, the Commission wishes to express its appreciation for the extensive work that the University undertook in preparing for and supporting this accreditation review. WSCUC is committed to an accreditation process that adds value to institutions while contributing to public accountability, and we are grateful for your continued support of this process. Please contact me if you have any questions about this letter or the action of the Commission.

Sincerely,

Mary Ellen Petrisco
President

MEP/rw

Cc: William Ladusaw, Commission Chair
    David Lincoln, Board Chair
    Members of the Special Visit team
    Richard Winn