July 7, 2014

Father Gladstone Stevens, S.S.
President and Rector
St. Patrick's Seminary and University
320 Middlefield Road
Menlo Park, CA 94025-3596

Dear President Stevens:

At its meeting June 18-20, 2014, the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) considered the report of the Educational Effectiveness Review (EER) team that conducted the visit to St. Patrick’s Seminary and University (SPSU) March 19-21, 2014. The Commission also reviewed the EER report and exhibits submitted by the university prior to the visit and your response to the EER team report, dated May 19, 2014. The Commission appreciated the opportunity to discuss the visit with you and your colleagues Fr. John Piderit, Vice President for Administration and Vicar for Finance, and Melanie Morey, Provost. Your observations were very helpful in informing the Commission’s deliberations.

For the Capacity and Preparatory Review (CPR) visit held February 28-March 2, 2012, St. Patrick’s Seminary and University took a comprehensive approach and prepared an institutional report in which it evaluated its capacity against all four Standards of Accreditation. For its Educational Effectiveness Review, SPSU organized its institutional report thematically to respond in a systematic way to the concerns raised by the Commission and the team during the Capacity and Preparatory Review visit. As a result of that visit, six areas were identified for attention: 1) refining student learning outcomes; 2) improving assessment, program review and institutional research; 3) understanding student success; 4) creating a strategic plan; 5) enhancing board governance; and 6) adopting and implementing a credit hour policy. The team found that SPSU had made excellent progress in some areas, such as enhancing board governance and implementing a credit hour policy, but that significantly more work was needed in others, such as creating a strategic plan, strengthening assessment and program review, and improving current systems of data collection.

During its time on campus, the team commended SPSU for: the “significant strides” in establishing institution-wide assessment, though much more work is needed to create a robust culture of assessment; efforts to strengthen educational programs by systematically seeking and incorporating feedback from key stakeholders, such as alumni and Bishops; and the public availability on the SPSU website of student success data (average time to master’s degree of two years; 88% of the graduates are ordained as priests). The Commission endorses these commendations and commends SPSU for:

**Board governance.** At the time of the CPR, SPSU had two boards. SPSU subsequently took “dramatic action” and dissolved the board of regents and reconfigured the board of trustees, clarifying their fiduciary role and increasing the numbers of independent members. The team “was impressed with the sweeping changes” of moving from two
boards to one and lauded the “energy and collective commitment to the institutional mission” of the newly revitalized board of trustees.

**Faculty, staff, and administrator commitment.** The team praised SPSU stakeholders for their dedication to the mission of the institution. As the team observed, “Rarely have team members had the privilege to talk with staff, administration and faculty who so universally understood and were committed to the mission of their institution.”

Despite these commendations, the Commission is deeply concerned about the lack of progress of St. Patrick’s Seminary and University in a number of critical areas and its capacity to resolve its problems. The Commission endorses the recommendations in the EER team report and identifies the following areas for attention:

**Implementing the strategic plan.** SPSU’s strategic plan, approved by the Board in December 2013, contained, according to the team, “an undifferentiated compilation of tasks” and “numerous goals and objectives.” The team was unable to discern the critical priorities for the institution or how those priorities would be achieved. The Commission notes that work is already underway in identifying priority goals. The Commission expects SPSU to develop a detailed action plan for implementation that includes refined timelines, required resources, identified lines of responsibility, and clear, specific, observable measures for determining when milestones are achieved. The Commission further expects SPSU to make systematic progress on its identified strategic priorities. (CFRs 3.5, 4.1-4.3)

**Continuing to strengthen assessment and program review.** Though SPSU has made some progress in educational effectiveness, the institution still remains, as the team noted, “behind where it needs to be” — in an “emerging state of assessment and program review.” Course level data on student learning were “not common.” Rubrics “were not well-formed.” And, systems of data collection seemed “inadequate” to support a growing culture of assessment and provide meaningful data on student learning. Further, although the team observed faculty engagement with assessment and program review, the team also reported, “Few faculty felt they had the training (in assessment) to bring the institution up to an appropriate level to demonstrate educational effectiveness.” The Commission expects SPSU to continue its efforts to refine assessment techniques, clarify the practical evidence that would support whether student learning outcomes are achieved, incorporate evidence of student learning consistently into the program review process, and ensure that faculty and department chairs have sufficient training to fully develop a complete and robust assessment plan for the institution. The Commission notes that arrangements are being made for in-service training of faculty in assessment for 2014-15. The Commission also expects SPSU to develop a schedule for the regular review of its academic programs, conduct the reviews involving colleagues from peer institutions, if possible, and incorporate the results into strategic planning, curricular improvement, and the allocation of resources. In particular, SPSU will want to tie the results of assessment and program review to its budgeting process and to align strategic planning, assessment, and allocation of resources in order to accomplish its institutional goals. (CFRs 2.3, 2.6, 2.7, 3.4, 4.4, 4.6)

**Defining and assessing “cultural competence.”** The team observed that SPSU lacks a “comprehensive view” of the meaning of cultural competence. Cultural competence was variously defined as: exposure to Eastern philosophical traditions as well as Western models; understanding the distinctions between Catholic and secular culture; sensitivity towards and awareness of diverse populations. Equally
undefined or unclear to the team was the degree to which “language skills related to cultural competence, especially when there was a marked difference between the cultural and linguistic background of the seminarian and the parishioners.” SPSU could benefit from developing a clear definition of cultural competence, reviewing how the definition is aligned with the institution’s educational programs, and identifying ways cultural competence can be assessed. (CFRs 1.4, 2.2)

**Developing a plan to improve the technological infrastructure.** The team determined that upgrading the information technology infrastructure was “a pressing need.” Administrative software systems to support accounting, HR, and advancement “are essential to improve efficiency of those functions.” Current systems of data collection prevent SPSU from collecting, analyzing, interpreting and using data for institutional research purposes. According to the team, “The ability of SPSU to engage in robust data analysis ...is hampered by its lack of technological infrastructure.” (CFRs 3.7, 4.5)

**Reviewing the organizational structure.** Over the past several years, SPSU has experienced transitions in its senior leadership. As a result, some administrators according to the team “were tasked with heavy administrative and academic duties... and unrealistic dual responsibilities.” A review of job descriptions and assignments for administrators and faculty, in light of priorities in the strategic plan and institutional goals, can help SPSU achieve stability and effectiveness in its organizational structures. SPSU can also benefit from a careful review and consistent application of its HR policies and procedures related to hiring, orientation, training, and performance management. The team learned that organizational changes over the last two years “resulted in some laxity in enforcement of HR policies and procedures.” SPSU’s new staff handbook is a good first step. The institution needs to ensure that policies and procedures in the handbook are being consistently followed. (CFR 3.8, 3.10)

The Commission action is intended to highlight the importance of these issues. Given the above, the Commission acted to:

1. Receive the Educational Effectiveness Review report and reaffirm the accreditation of St. Patrick’s Seminary and University for seven years, through June 2021.


4. Impose a Formal Notice of Concern with regard to the issues identified in this letter, with particular emphasis on assessment, program review, and strategic planning.

5. Request a Special Visit in spring 2016, on the following issues cited in the EER team report:

   a. Strategic planning: An action plan for the strategic plan that identifies the priority order of the goals, targets and milestones, timelines, a consideration of resources needed to support implementation, and lines of responsibility; and current status of SPSU in achieving its strategic goals and aligning strategic priorities, assessment, and resource allocation.
b. Program review: An update on program review including the schedule for reviews, description of the process, and copy of completed program review(s).

c. Assessment: An update on assessment including a description of the strategies and techniques used to assess student learning and the training provided to faculty to carry out these assessments.

d. Cultural competence: The definition of “cultural competence,” how the definition is aligned with the institution’s educational programs and how the competency is being assessed.

e. Organizational structure: Job descriptions of senior leadership, copy of the organizational chart, and plans, if any, for organizational changes or changes in personnel.

f. Technological infrastructure: Plans to improve technology for administrative and institutional functioning.

A Formal Notice of Concern action provides notice to the institution that, while it currently meets WSCUC Standards, it is in danger of being found in noncompliance with one or more Standards if current trends or findings continue. If the issues are not addressed within four years, a sanction could be imposed as described in the 2013 Handbook of Accreditation.

In taking this action to reaffirm accreditation, the Commission confirms that St. Patrick’s Seminary and University has addressed the two Core Commitments to Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness, and has completed the three-stage review conducted under the 2008 Standards of Accreditation.

In accordance with Commission policy, a copy of this letter will be sent to the chair of the 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 them. 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.

Please note that the Criteria for Review (CFR) cited in this letter refer to the 2008 Handbook of Accreditation. The 2008 Handbook continues to be available on the WSCUC website at www.wascsenior.org. The Special Visit in spring 2016 will be conducted under the Standards and CFRs described in the 2013 Handbook of Accreditation.

As the institution works on the issues cited in this letter, it should be mindful of the expectations that it will need to meet at the time of its next comprehensive review, which will take place under the revised Standards of Accreditation and institutional review process in the 2013 Handbook of Accreditation. These expectations build on past practice and include, for example, student success, quality improvement processes such as assessment and program review, planning, and financial sustainability. However, the 2013 Handbook also includes new foci: the meaning, quality, and integrity of degrees;
student performance in core competencies at the time of graduation; and institutional planning for the changing landscape in higher education. SPSU is encouraged to familiarize itself with the 2013 Handbook and to approach its challenges in ways that will address both old and new expectations.

Finally, the Commission wishes to express its appreciation for the extensive work that St. Patrick’s Seminary and University undertook in preparing for and supporting this accreditation review. WSCUC is committed to an accreditation process that adds value to institutions while assuring public accountability. Please contact me if you have any questions about this letter or the action of the Commission.

Sincerely,

Mary Ellen Petrisko
President

MEP/bgd

Cc: Harold Hewitt Jr., Commission Chair
    Melanie Morey, ALO
    Most Rev. Salvatore Cordileone, Archbishop, Board Chair
    Barbara Gross Davis, WSCUC Staff Liaison