REPORT OF THE WASC SPECIAL VISIT TEAM

To Brigham Young University - Hawaii

Date of visit:
March 5-7, 2014

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The team evaluated the institution under the 2013 WASC Senior College and University Commission 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.

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 WASC website.
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SECTION I – OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

A. Description of Institution and Visit

Brigham Young University-Hawaii (BYU-Hawaii) is a small comprehensive university located in Laie, Hawaii. Owned and operated by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), BYU-Hawaii was founded in 1955 as a two-year school known as Church College of Hawaii. It became a four-year school in 1961 and received its present name in 1974.

BYU-Hawaii is part of a three-campus system governed by a Board of Trustees who are general officers of the LDS Church; the other institutions are BYU-Idaho and BYU Provo. The university’s mission is “to integrate both spiritual and secular learning, and to prepare students with character and integrity who can provide leadership in their families, their communities, their chosen fields, and in building the kingdom of God.”

The student body at BYU-Hawaii comprises 2,901 undergraduates from 75 different countries. Many students (43%) are international, with 37% coming from the university’s international Asia-Pacific target area. In Fall 2013 there were 120 full-time and approximately 100 part-time faculty (40 FTE), with an overall student/faculty ratio of 16. The university’s academic departments are organized into four colleges of approximately equal size (Business, Computing and Government; Human Development; Language, Culture and Arts; Math and Sciences) offering a total of 25 different majors leading to the degrees of AA, BA, BS, BFA (Fine Arts) and BSW (Social Work).

BYU-Hawaii has been accredited by WASC as a four-year institution since 1961. The last accreditation cycle concluded in June 2008 with the Commission’s action to reaffirm accreditation, schedule a Capacity and Preparatory Review for spring 2017 and
an Educational Effectiveness Review for fall 2018, and require a Special Visit in spring 2012 regarding three issues: financial priorities, assessment of student learning, and faculty scholarship. The schedule has been revised according to the new handbook, scheduling the Off-Site Review for Fall 2016 and the Accreditation Visit for Spring 2017.

Concerns that arose during the 2012 visit regarding the Bachelor of University Studies (BUS) program led the Commission to request 1) an interim report in March 2013 on actions taken to ensure the efficacy of the BUS degree, and 2) a Special Visit in spring 2014 to demonstrate assessment of BUS outcomes, completion of a program review for the BUS degree, and steps taken to achieve financial sustainability and assure quality programs. BYU-Hawaii’s general degree-level approval for bachelor’s degrees was also suspended at this time is under review. The Interim Report Committee (IRC) further requested that the Special Visit in spring 2014 “address in both greater specificity and governing logic, the rationale, pathways to entry, and unique outcomes of the BUS degree within the context of the institution as a whole, and with reference to the meaning, quality, and integrity of the degree component of the 2013 Handbook” (IRC Letter, July 29, 2013, page 2).

Substantive change proposals for distance education offerings of the Associate of Arts and Sciences degree and the Associate of Science degree in Business Management were denied in October 2012 and February 2013; approval was granted in September 2013 with the recommendation that “future substantive change proposals will be stronger if more detail and clarity regarding academic planning . . . enrollment and assumptions underlying program finances . . . are provided” (Substantive Change Action Report).
B. Quality of the Special Visit Report and Supporting Evidence

The Special Visit report submitted by BYU-Hawaii directly addressed the specifics of the 2012 Commission Action Letter (accelerated learning environment and its impact on learning; student need for careful planning; increase of online enrollment and impact on learning; advancement of learning assessment and program review processes) and the 2013 Interim Report Committee letter (use of degree terminology, credit hours required for the University Studies major, entry requirements, and meaning, quality, and integrity of the B.S. degree in University Studies). In its focus on the University Studies degree, the original report overlooked the Commission concern for achieving financial sustainability and assuring quality programs. Supplemental material and evidence related to this last concern were requested by the team members and received from BYU-Hawaii in advance of the visit.

C. Description of the Team Review Process

The team received the Special Visit Report on January 9, 2014, and discussed it on a conference call on February 7, 2014. While on campus for the Special Visit on March 5-7, the team met with the President, President’s Council, Dean’s Council Institutional Effectiveness and Accreditation Committee, Academic Council, the 9 SiR (Semesters-in-Residence) Committee, University Studies faculty and administration, the librarian and IT/online staff, and small groups of representative faculty and students. In addition, the team received more than two dozen emails from interested stakeholders. The team was able to examine additional documentation made available by the institution, including supplemental material regarding the University Studies program and the 9 Semesters-in-Residence transition procedures.
The team appreciated the professionalism and attention to detail that was evident throughout the University’s preparation for the visit, and the generous hospitality extended to them during their time on the university campus.
SECTION II – TEAM ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUES

A. Efficacy of the BUS degree

The discovery of the Bachelor of University Studies degree by the 2012 visiting team prompted concerns about its design, which they felt lacked clear definition of student achievement, student learning outcomes, program review, and faculty oversight. Furthermore, there appeared to be a connection between the creation of the degree and the financial considerations of an accelerated learning 3-year, or 9 semesters-in-residence (SiR), academic model. The academic and curricular concerns are addressed in this section, leaving the discussion of the academic calendar to the later section on financial sustainability and program quality assurance (see page 11).

As reported in the 2013 Interim Report, BYU-Hawaii quickly addressed five of the six areas identified in the Commission action letter to give greater coherence to the Bachelor of University Studies degree (CFR 2.1, 2.2). First, a full listing of the degree requirements is now contained in the catalog and accessible to students. Second, the program was placed under the supervision of a lead faculty member and the oversight of the University’s deans, who are set to rotate responsibility every three to six years; the program is currently administered by the College of Human Development. Third, faculty created a set of eight program learning outcomes, which adequately describe the broad educational content, skills, and values of a general degree program. Moreover, these outcomes differ from the General Education outcomes of the University. Fourth, rather than placement in the program by an academic advisor, students now apply for admission to the program and complete a Major Academic Plan (MAP) with a proposed capstone experience. Major requirements align more with others offered at BYU-Hawaii, but the
minimum of 15 upper-division credit hours is still short of an adequate number (CFR 2.2a). The recommended program review was conducted in fall 2013; findings are discussed in section II.B. of this report. The Interim Progress Report did not address the final issue of preparing students for meaningful employment or future study through the University Studies degree.

The Interim Report panel acknowledged the changes made in response to the special visit team’s findings and requested that BYU-Hawaii next look more broadly at the program to define “the rationale, pathways to entry, and unique outcomes of the BUS degree within the context of the institution as a whole, and with reference to the meaning, quality, and integrity of the degree component of the 2013 Handbook” (WASC letter dated July 29, 2013, page 2). The University first clarified the program as a Bachelor of Science in University Studies and discontinued offering a companion Bachelor of Arts in University Studies. Rationale to support the nomenclature decision in the report was that the historic pathway of students who had received the earlier degree was more often in a Bachelor of Science program before entering the BSUS (CFR 2.1); document review on-site revealed also that the University had considered the definition in the 2008 WASC Handbook.

The purpose of the BSUS major is “to meet the needs of students who seek a general degree as an entry qualification to employment or further study/training,” according to a report by a faculty committee (“Flexible Bachelor’s Degree Programs at BYU-Hawaii,” Program Review self-study page 4). Although faculty noted the similarity of the University Studies degree to other such innovations in higher education as integrative studies programs and flexible degrees, no formal position paper or rationale
was presented to support the BS University Studies design. Faculty also compared the University Studies program with the BA or BS in Interdisciplinary Studies, which is similar in design and purpose. The Interdisciplinary Studies major, however, “is intended to meet the needs of students who have clearly defined academic and/or career goals that cannot be satisfied by completing any other established major program” (Program Review self-study, flex degrees, page 5). Faculty supported this as an adequate solution to the limited number of majors offered by the University and defended its rigor. As they stand, though, the two programs share a set of seven fairly general learning outcomes, with only a single outcome unique to each.

Pathways to entry are now more rigorous and under faculty oversight (CFR 2.2). Students desiring to enter the University Studies program can no longer do so with more than 100 credits but must declare the major before reaching 90 credit hours. The process described in the interim report for faculty advising in the program to guide the academic MAP and program proposals was confirmed by the team during the visit. In an application letter, students must include an explanation of why their current major does not meet current needs and expectations, identification of academic and occupation goals, curricular relevance and skills sets gained pertinent to those goals. In addition, the faculty advisor confirms that other entrance criteria are met, including course and cumulative GPA requirements. In the current academic year, more than two-thirds of the applications were approved (9 of 13). Since the addition of these new requirements in 2012, enrollment in the major has declined by 70% from a high of 82 in 2010 to 25 in fall 2013.
The issue of meaning, quality, and integrity of the degree was addressed in the Program Review conducted in November 2013 and reported in the next section below.

B. Program Review and Assessment of BUS Outcomes

The goal of the University Studies program is to provide “an opportunity for graduates to utilize their academic credentials in successfully obtaining gainful employment following graduation” (Program Review self-study, 2013, page 1). The program was designed in 2009 for students who found that completion of their original choice of major was not an option, either for personal or academic reasons. Questions of academic rigor were addressed after the 2012 special visit: changes include designation of a lead faculty member, training for academic advisors, a strict requirement that the capstone project be in the final year, and the design of academic clusters by the appropriate academic departments to provide more depth and coherence in the program (CFR 2.2)

Assessment of program quality explored student satisfaction, success of program graduates, academic rigor, and enrollment and graduation data. A satisfaction survey administered in 2013 to students who had experienced the program prior to the recent changes indicated frustration with lack of faculty contact and inability to find employment, but no indication was given that these data influenced program changes. Similarly, success of program graduates was difficult to measure, since only 12% of the 220 graduates responded to the survey (N=26). No assessment of student learning evidence was presented. Five-year program goals cite growth and flexibility to continue to offer the program to changing populations of students, while gaining faculty and staff
support for meeting “the needs of the students” (Program Review self-study, 2013, page 10).

In November 2013, a review team led by a member outside the BYU system and including two BYU-Hawaii faculty and one from BYU-Idaho visited the campus. The team found that “the BUS program does have a clear role to play within the institution, but in a significantly more limited way than has recently been the case” (Program Review Team Report, December 4, 2013, page 3). The role recommended by the program review team is to focus on the “non-traditional (older, non-resident, and local) student who previously attended BYU-Hawaii but did not quite finish their declared major and cannot do so now, in many cases because the original degree is no longer offered by the institution” (page 4). The program review team noted that the “cluster” of courses appear to be simply a list of courses, without competencies, outcomes, or sequencing. Finally, they observed that the learning outcomes are “vague and uneven,” and appear difficult to assess, particularly since the capstone experience lacks definition. In response to these recommendations, which were included in the BYU-Hawaii Special Visit Report, the University proposed establishing a Steering Committee for University Studies, revise the student learning outcomes, as currently stated, and align them with the Institutional Learning Outcomes, establish a five-year assessment plan, and conduct annual assessment beginning in fall 2014.

At the time of the WASC special visit three months later, the team found that in February 2014 assessment of three program learning outcomes had been conducted, narrowing the focus to quantitative skills, writing proficiency, and employment placement. The University administered the ETS Proficiency Profile to only 4 current
BUS students and reviewed data from two indirect measures, their Next Destination Survey and Graduating Student Survey. The BUS student scores on the ETS Proficiency Profile were comparable to the BYU-Hawaii mean and the national average in both categories. A majority of students reported satisfaction with quantitative and communication skills and their preparation for graduate school. Nearly one-half are gainfully employed. In the future, the University intends to embed direct measure of student learning by using the appropriate VALUE rubric to score signature assignments. Discussion with assessment personnel about the capstone experience in the major revealed the possibility of structuring the capstone project around the intended outcomes proposed by the student in their application paper, with the possibility of using the VALUE rubrics, or some modified version, to measure the summative experience and perhaps provide for internal peer benchmarking. Subsequent reports and visits should monitor University progress in this area (CFR 2.6).

Review of the Program Review documents on site revealed the background study for “flexible degrees,” a category of academic program with suitable fit for the interdisciplinary majors; integrative studies is another comparable area researched by the faculty team. The literature review was merely a catalogue of websites, without summary or analysis. However, in its review of the same documents on site, the team found that the upper-division credit component of ‘flexible degrees’ elsewhere was considerably higher than those in the BUS degree. Concern remains that the limited amount of 15 units of upper division credit is not sufficient to meet the WASC expectation that students “engage in an in-depth, focused, and sustained program of study as part of their baccalaureate programs” (CFR 2.2a). The team also discovered that
similar programs at sister BYU institutions require at least 30 upper division credits.

Internal comparison provided in the Program Review document, “Degree Program Lower and Upper Division Courses and Credits Required,” revealed a wide range of required upper division credits (from 8-60) in the BYU-Hawaii degree programs. One response to this observation was that the course numbering system had not been reviewed in recent times. As a result of these various and consistent findings, the team recommends that BYU-Hawaii develop and refine policies relating to the meaning, integrity and quality of degrees with consideration of establishing campus-wide minimal standards for upper division credit hours that meet or exceed degree requirements found within the BYU sister institutions as well as other peer or aspirational institutions, and to utilize these criteria in a formal review of the numbering system for all BYU-Hawaii courses (CFR 2.2).

Furthermore, the team recommends that BYU-Hawaii apply the newly developed policies and protocols to the Bachelor of University Studies degree in order to bring the degree requirements for upper-division coursework commensurate with comparable institutions for upper-division hour requirements. It is further recommended that additional consideration be given to the findings and recommendations of the BSUS Program Review document such that this degree be aligned to established standards or be discontinued (CFRs 2.1, 2.2, 2.2a).

Finally, the University should further mature and refine the approval process for new degrees to include standards, rubrics and protocols to avoid the controversy experienced with the implementation of the BSUS degree (CFR 4.4, 4.7).
C. Achieving Financial Sustainability and Assuring Quality Programs

The team commends BYU-Hawaii for its overall financial management and stability. The driving force behind the program and contract changes made in recent years is a worthy one: the need to adjust University resources to reflect reduced support from the LDS Church as well as insure educational resources can be shared by a larger student body. Several changes have been implemented that address the University's need for more careful financial stewardship. These include altering the academic calendar to a three-semester model, a new requirement that students must complete their education in 9 semesters (more recently changed to 9 semesters-in-residence, but not necessarily consecutive: the “9SiR”), increasing both the teaching load and the emphasis on teaching as the primary faculty role, as well as changing to a year-round teaching calendar. The history and process for determining and implementing the 9SiR are found in the BYU-Hawaii 2014-02-10 Supplemental Response to the Special Visit Report. Combined together, the above changes (along with others less related to academic programs) have enabled BYU-Hawaii to achieve the goal of reducing LDS Church support to 70% of the University’s budget. However, the team also found these program changes have created a number of challenges to academic success for important sub-populations of BYU-Hawaii students. As noted in the July 2012 Commission Action letter, the "Commission is concerned that the resetting of financial priorities...is also placing unsustainable strains on other parts of the academic enterprise, most especially on faculty and students."

To understand the source of these challenges, the University has a number of other goals and/or constraints that affect the same group of students. Important among these is the mission to serve primarily students from the Pacific Basin, many of who are
non-traditional English-learners who must rely upon university-provided work and financial aid (IWOR). Another constraint is the desire to allocate student housing and scholarships primarily to students continuously enrolled, which means that students who take a semester break may lose their housing and scholarships. A third is the need for many international students to take several EIL (English as an International Language) classes, which are included in their 9-semester program rather than being treated as outside their degree requirements. This results in fewer course slots available for required major and general education courses, as well as the pressure for some students to increase their course load.

In meetings with students, faculty, and academic administrators, as well as reviewing information from student surveys in the Special Visit Report and submitted by the University on the need for student counseling, the team found the 9SiR program continues to create both stress and a higher potential for failure in a mission-important group of vulnerable students. Of note, the original nine consecutive semester requirement was changed to 9SiR to address these concerns, and the team commends BYU-Hawaii for its willingness to modify the policy in response to the unforeseen complications in implementation. This change has been successful in allowing leeway for students to appeal the rule and most appeals for extra semesters are approved. However, the underlying challenges related to housing and scholarships remain for students due to inherent pressure to attain academic success while taking full course loads, working and attempting to complete their degrees in a timely manner. This is where the concerns over the BUS degree discussed above intersect with the 9SiR policy. Further, the availability of the appeals process and its success in creating ad hoc
pathways to graduation continues to be unknown to many students and members of the faculty.

As noted in both the Special Visit report and the Supplemental Response as well as meetings during this visit, the imperative to change academic calendars and policies had come primarily from the Board and senior administration, focused on achieving the financial goals within the constraints noted above. Problems with the original policy appeared quite quickly, as noted in the Special Visit report (pages 3-4). For example, it was not until after implementation of the 9SiR that “all departments began to look more closely at the sequencing of their coursework to make sure that it could be completed in nine semesters for new freshmen” (Special Visit report, p. 4). Further, surveys found that “a significant number of students still feel that these changes have had a negative impact on their educational experience” (Special Visit report, p. 5). These survey results were reinforced at meetings the team had with students, faculty, and administrators during the visit, where comments indicated the current application of the policy is still creating both confusion and stress.

Data provided to the visiting team about the appeal process indicate that well over 200 appeals for exceptions to the policy were made both in 2012 and in 2013, with around 90% approval. This is a significant percentage of the student population that must go through an appeal process to gain a successful path to graduation. We were assured by the administration that they and the Board are comfortable with what has resulted: a 10-semester average time to graduation. The visiting team is concerned that this ad hoc approach really isn't a policy, and believes that further consideration should be given both to communication over the policy and to changes that create a true policy rather than a
stressful hurdle to be jumped by an at-risk student population (CFRs 1.6, 2.12). Ideas for improving the situation were expressed freely by students and faculty, but how to incorporate those ideas into administrative policy was not clear to these groups.

Based on these observations and information, the team recommends that BYU-Hawaii use its experience with the challenges still being confronted in the design and implementation of the 9SiR academic program to guide a review of the University's processes for coordination of financial and academic planning, with special consideration of ways to more fully and formally involve key faculty and student stakeholders in both the development and assessment of program changes. We recommend enhanced attention to and valuing of faculty and student voice as more effective campus communications are developed (CFRs 4.3, 4.4, 4.7).
SECTION III – FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Commendations

The WASC Special Visit Team commends BYU-Hawaii on the following:

1. Careful stewardship of University resources consistent with the mission of the University. We specifically applaud the fiscal leadership given by the President and VPA.

2. Dedication to the Program Review process and to the ongoing maturation of learning outcomes that give evidence of attention to quality and process.

3. Willingness to modify the 9SiR policy in response to unforeseen complications due to the complexity of the various needs of the institution’s diverse student populations.

4. Evidence of a campus culture of open debate as witnessed by the visiting team in various faculty and students meetings and encounters.

Recommendations

The visiting team recommends the following:

1. BYU-Hawaii develops and refines policies relating to the meaning, quality, and integrity of degrees with consideration of establishing campus-wide minimal standards for upper division credit hours that meet or exceed degree requirements found within the BYU sister institutions as well as other peer or aspirational institutions, and to utilize these criteria in a formal review of the numbering system for all BYU-Hawaii courses (CFR 2.2).

2. BYU-Hawaii should apply newly developed policies and protocols (as indicated in the above recommendation) to the B. S. of University Studies degree in order to bring the degree requirements for upper-division coursework commensurate with comparable institutions for upper-division hour requirements. It is further recommended that additional consideration be
given to the findings and recommendations of the BSUS Program Review document such that this degree be aligned with established standards or be discontinued (CFRs 2.1, 2.2, 2.2a).

3. BYU-Hawaii further matures the approval process for new degrees to include standards, rubrics and protocols that would help to avoid the controversy experienced with the implementation of the BSUS degree (CFRs 4.4, 4.7).

4. BYU-Hawaii use its experience with the challenges still being confronted in the design and implementation of the 9SiR academic program to guide a review of the University’s processes for coordination of financial and academic planning, with special consideration of ways to more fully and formally involve key faculty and student stakeholders in both the development and the assessment of program changes. We recommend enhanced attention to and valuing of faculty and student voice as more effective campus communications are developed (CFRs 4.3, 4.4, 4.7).