REPORT OF THE WSCUC TEAM
SPECIAL VISIT

To American University of Health Sciences

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SECTION I – OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

A. Description of Institution, Accreditation History, and Visit

Founded in 1994, the American University of Health Sciences (AUHS) is a private, Christian, for-profit postsecondary institution located in Signal Hill, CA, with a mission to serve students of diverse backgrounds and prepare them to impact society through exceptional quality patient-centered care. A minority-owned and minority-serving institution, AUHS offers two undergraduate degree programs, the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) and Bachelor of Science in Pharmaceutical Sciences (BSPS); two graduate degree programs, Master of Science in Clinical Research (MSCR) and Master of Science in Nursing (MSN), and as of July 2019 a doctorate program, the Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD). Also as of July 2019, AUHS had a total student headcount enrollment of 454, with 257 (57%) students in the BSN program, 113 (25%) in general education, and 25 (6%) in the PharmD program. AUHS does not have any off-campus locations nor does it offer any online programs.

AUHS has been accredited by the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) since 2017; the BSN program is approved by the California Board of Registered Nursing (BRN) and is accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE); and the PharmD program was granted pre-candidacy status by the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) on July 1, 2019. As a faith-based institution, AUHS is also accredited by the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS).

As a result of the Seeking Accreditation Visit (SAV) 2 and the Commission's approval to grant Initial Accreditation in 2017, a Special Visit was scheduled for fall 2019 to address four recommendation areas: 1) formally embedding the institutional learning outcome of

Christian values through the academic curriculum, 2) faculty ownership of the assessment process, 3) tenure and effectiveness of the executive leadership, and 4) evaluation of institutional research's function and capacity. In addition to the four areas, while onsite an additional area, faculty workload, was explored by the team and is addressed in the Other Topics section of the team report.

B. Description of Team's Review Process

During the team conference call, team members divided the responsibilities for the writing and inquiry that would be conducted, enabling the members to explore questions, prepare lines of inquiry, and draft preliminary documents to guide the visit. Before the site visit began, the team had the opportunity to more precisely plan its inquiry during a preliminary meeting held on September 30, 2019.

Beyond the initial findings based on AUHS's report and supporting documents, the visit provided the team the opportunity to further understand the personnel changes and program improvements made at AUHS since the previous SAV2 in 2017. Original materials submitted for review by AUHS included plans, processes, and matrices for program assessment, annual program learning outcomes reports, curriculum maps, and faculty and staff workshop training documents. Onsite, the team was able to review all syllabi; agendas, minutes, and presentations from assessment and institutional research meetings; student work samples with rubrics applied and grades assigned; and curriculum vitae and resumes from the executive leadership as noted by positions on the comprehensive organizational chart.

To explore the three recommendations specific to formally embedding Christian values, faculty ownership of assessment, and institutional research functions, the team met separately with full- and part-time faculty, faculty and staff with assessment and institutional research

responsibilities (including leadership from the School of Nursing and the School of Pharmacy), and the institution's WSCUC Steering Committee. To explore the recommendation specific to executive leadership tenure, the team met with the president, the president's leadership team, and the board of trustees' executive committee members. Between the materials provided and the meetings held onsite, the team found that AUHS addressed the issues and concerns raised by the Commission and its request for a Special Visit, and at the end of the visit, the team chair presented two commendations and three recommendations to the president prior to presenting those statements to an assembled group of AUHS faculty and staff.

C. **Institution's Report: Quality and Rigor of the Report and Supporting Evidence**

The team found that AUHS's report was well organized around four recommendation areas as identified in the Commission's Action Letter dated June 30, 2019. The report included a brief concluding statement that allowed for reflection on the institution's progress to date since the SAV2. Although the initial institutional attachments were relevant at the time of the report's submission, during the visit the team requested additional materials in order to have the most current information possible (e.g., the Systematic Evaluation and Assessment Plan, student work, rubrics). When inconsistencies between the information provided in the AUHS report and the discussions that occurred in meetings (e.g., the point in the assessment process where faculty become involved), AUHS staff and faculty were extremely receptive to the highlighted discrepancies between what was stated in the report and what actually occurred on the ground. The team left the visit with a sense that AUHS embraced not only the formal observations but also the informal peer-to-peer suggestions.

SECTION II – EVALUATION OF ISSUES UNDER THE STANDARDS

Recommendation 1: Formerly embedding Christian values into the academic curriculum

Student achievement of one of the institution's key pillars, i.e. Christian values, by formally embedding the values into the academic curriculum. (CFR 2.2)

At the end of the SAV2, AUHS's identity, one that is grounded in Christian values, existed in a less formalized manner in its academic programs than it did in its co-curricular counterparts. Since then, and in response to the Commission's recommendation, AUHS has made significant gains by formally embedding Christian values into its academic curriculum and is assessing those values at the course, program, and institutional levels. The AUHS institutional learning outcome that comprises Christian values reads, "*Upon completion of the appropriate health science career program, graduates should be able to affect positive client-patient outcomes by sharing their Christian Values of love, caring, justice and respect, as an advocate of client-patient needs and rights.*"

Faculty from both the nursing and pharmacy programs have gone about their work informed by medical and health professionals' literature specific to patient spiritual needs. In turn, they have developed practices that are meaningful both to the program faculty and the students (e.g., Fisher 2009; Puchalski 2006; Purnell, et al 2019; Sokol-Hessner et al. 2018, VanderWeele et al, 2017). Nursing faculty have embedded Christian values into their existing curriculum, and pharmacy faculty, because of the new doctorate degree in pharmacy, have been able to embed Christian values into the new curriculum as part of its initial development.

As part of the visit meetings, the team heard from the president, deans, program faculty, and the assessment committees about the work that had occurred over the past 18 months. What was an "informal underpinning" of Christian values during the SAV2 visit, has become a deliberate and intentional alignment that is evidenced at the course, program, and institutional

levels. Additionally, all faculty have been able to attend monthly workshops delivered by an academic administrator from a nearby seminary who enhances and contributes to the assessment of Christian values across student work.

A review of 13 syllabi from across nursing and pharmacy courses, indicated that all 13 syllabi included course learning outcomes, assignments, and rubrics specific to the teaching and learning and assessment of Christian values. Examples of course learning outcomes in the nursing program detailed the art of caring; advocacy for social justice, equity, and ethical practices; and spirituality. Examples in the pharmacy program included humanitarianism, Biblical principles, and Old and New Testaments thematic elements related to patient care.

The syllabi also included a wide variety of student work assignments that supported the student learning and assessment of Christian values. For nursing, assignments included spiritual assessment interviews, class presentations, and research papers. For the class presentations, student were evaluated on the criterion of discussing Christian values related to personal or social reflections; for the research papers, specific requirements to be addressed included understanding how a patient's spirituality can influence overall well-being. For pharmacy, the assignments assessed included examinations, reflection papers, and oral presentations. All assignments for both programs included the rubric used so that students understood the expectations (and subsequent grading) of their work.

Although the Christian values assessment matrix and the spiritual assessment review rubric were included in the original materials to the team, an additional request was made onsite for actual student work to evidence assessed Christian values, the rubrics used, and a range of low to medium to high student work. Upon reviewing the student work (research and reflection papers), it was clear that Christian values assessment processes are consistent across assignments

and courses within a program. Faculty feedback included as part of the rubric and on the student work appears to be useful to the students in order to understand their grade and more importantly to be able to know where they need to improve going forward.

While not an area of concern during the SAV2, the delivery and assessment of Christian values within the co-curricular activities remains strong through a range of community service activities through health and wellness fairs, community drives, and mission trips.

Recommendation 2: Faculty ownership of assessment

Faculty ownership of student learning assessment beyond the use of test scores and examination pass rates; a systematic and regular review of disaggregated student achievement data, including student learning outcomes results, to inform improvements (CFR 2.3, 2.4).

Since the SAV2 in 2017, AUHS has expanded and improved the quality and quantity of assessment and evaluation information collected. Administrators, faculty, and staff are able to view aggregated and disaggregated data to assist with planning and decision-making. An area of concern during the last visit was the extent to which the AUHS faculty "owned" the assessment process and used the results for course, curriculum, and student success improvements. The faculty appear to be at the implementation stage in their assessment and evaluation plan, although it was initially difficult to determine what the current process is and what the faculty role actually was in this process.

The Special Visit report and the Systematic Evaluation and Assessment Plan (SEAP) detailed a robust plan for collecting data and making improvements based in that data. Both documents were surprisingly quiet about the faculty role, mentioning faculty responsibilities for individual student assessment and evaluation, and introducing the faculty role at step five of the SEAP process. The team spent a considerable amount of time trying to understand the SEAP process, because it became very clear during the visit that the 300+ page written plan did not

accurately and adequately describe the AUHS processes currently in use. Discussion with the faculty during the site visit provided a valuable and significant update to the written SEAP processes, one in which the faculty are involved in the assessment and evaluation process, and engaged in data analysis to inform planning, decision-making, and improvements. An updated SEAP was provided during the team visit, but the primary revision was to correct the membership and name of the Systematic Evaluation and Assessment Committee (SEAC) to include faculty members and administrators in congruence with the committee bylaws.

For example, information about the presence of school-based assessment committees and the appointment of a pharmacy program faculty assessment coordinator was not included in the SEAP. The process at the school level for submitting an academic improvement plan (AIP), including review by the school curriculum and assessment committees, the program faculty lead, and the dean, was described verbally to the team by faculty members, but not included in the SEAP. The team learned that each school has a faculty committee charged with assessment and evaluation, in addition to a committee responsible for curriculum decisions. These school-based committees interact and partner frequently to assure that assessment data inform curriculum and curricular issues drive the assessment and evaluation process. Data returned from assessment and evaluation activities, via the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA), were discussed in faculty meetings and documented in relevant meeting minutes. The documents provided to illustrate completed academic improvement plans varied widely and did not include a standard set of items. Some referenced the assessment and evaluation results that necessitated the revisions, and others did not. A universal template for this important form should be available to faculty to help facilitate the approval and communication process.

As the team understood the current AUHS assessment and evaluation process, individual faculty members create assignments for students throughout the course that directly fulfill one or more of the student learning outcomes (SLO) for that course. The SLOs are carefully mapped to the program learning outcomes (PLO), which in turn are mapped to be congruent with accomplishment of the institutional learning outcomes (ILO). Each course also includes a signature assignment that is used to determine student accomplishment of the PLOs and ILOs. Faculty members provide a grade for these signature assignments, but also forward the data to the OIRA to collate. These collated PLO and ILO data are subsequently reported back to the individual faculty member, the school assessment committees, and the school deans. After discussion at the school assessment committee, curriculum committee (if needed), and full faculty meeting, an AIP is created and the proposed course revision is described in detail. After approval by the faculty and the dean, the AIP is sent through the school assessment committee to the institution's SEAC. The data necessitating the AIP and the proposed action is review by SEAC and carefully considered in light of any implications for other programs or schools. Once approved by SEAC, the AIP actions are communicated by the SEAC to all relevant stakeholders.

Faculty members are supported by numerous faculty development activities related to assessment and evaluation. An ongoing relationship with an assessment consultant has led to several workshops for faculty about assessment, evaluation, writing outcomes, data analysis, including spirituality and Christian values in coursework, and writing tests. The director of institutional research and assessment also provides workshops and small group working sessions, in addition to one-to-one consultations with individual faculty members to review and analyze assessment and evaluation data. Nursing faculty have benefit of virtual and in-person learning opportunities about assessment and evaluation of nursing student learning offered through the

American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), the Commission of Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE), the National League for Nursing (NLN), and various textbook, specialized nursing content testing, and learning management systems such as the Assessment Technologies Institute (ATI) entrance and exit exams and Elsevier Publishing.

Subsequent discussions with staff and administrators directly involved in assessment and evaluation confirmed the essential role of the faculty in these processes and led to a recognition of the need to revise the current SEAP to better describe the work of the faculty and the role they play in the overall assessment and evaluation process. The current SEAP includes almost 200 pages of appendices, mostly data tables providing information about a wide variety of information useful for AUHS, making the actual SEAP more than 300 pages long and limiting its use and accessibility for daily processes and operations (more on discussions and findings regarding the SEAP are found in the Recommendation 4 section that follows). Given the progress shown by AUHS since the SAV2 visit, the team was encouraged by and pleased with the AUHS faculty's ownership of the assessment of student learning and authentic engagement in the continuous improvement process.

Recommendation 3: Sustained and consistent executive leadership

Sustained and consistent executive leadership characterized by integrity, high performance, responsibility and accountability (CFR 3.1, 3.6, 3.8).

While the university's president position has been held by the same individual since the SAV2, the provost and chief financial officer (CFO) positions, as well as the dean of the nursing school, have since been vacated and filled with new people. Meetings with the president and the board's executive committee highlighted the unexpected circumstances that the prior provost and CFO resigned from their positions, and in response, AUHS filled the provost and CFO positions with known individuals who had either worked with the president

prior to their tenure at AUHS or had served as a consultant for the university. The team found that the two new individuals were familiar with the roles and responsibilities of the positions they occupy and collectively, the leadership team has the credentials and experience to move the university forward—assuming they remain in their positions past the short-term. Since the SAV2 visit, the team also found that the new leadership team's effectiveness was evidenced by the significant milestones achieved by AUHS to include obtaining external accreditation approvals for the PharmD and the pre-licensure BSN degree programs.

With both the president and the board's executive committee, the team discussed possible factors that may have contributed to the leadership team's turnover other than unexpected circumstances. It was relayed that in the past, under prior presidents, the recruiting process consisted of a sole interview with the president; under the current president's tenure, multiple interviews are scheduled with various staff and faculty to allow for multiple perspectives and feedback. While the interview stage of the recruiting process has become more inclusive of the university's staff, the larger recruiting process appears to be by word of mouth or relational. During the discussions among the team, the president, and the executive committee, it was noted that AUHS might better explore criteria that could possibly serve as a note of caution during the screening process in a predictive way (e.g., motivation, education level, time on previous jobs, and geographical area of work).

Besides the hiring and screening process, based on discussions with the president and the executive committee of the board, the team also found that compensation may be another cause for leadership turnover. The board has completed a compensation study for the president and CFO, and the executive committee believes the leadership salaries are comparable to similar institutions. However, the uniqueness of AUHS's mission, size, and the students it

serves does not easily lend itself to comparable salary studies. Additionally, the commitment to the mission, a key criterion in the recruitment and hiring process, appears to be a priority over compensation versus both a commitment to mission with a complementing competitive salary.

Additionally, the team posits that the stereotypical culture of nursing (i.e., where regardless of the circumstances they ensure that day-to-day tasks get done) influences AUHS' sense of urgency with filling and retaining leadership positions. For example, when the university lost each previous provost, the president filled the void. And, when several AUHS constituents were asked about the effect of leadership turnover and vacancies the repeated response was, "we get what needs to be done, done." However, this kind of "filling in" is likely taking away from the role and responsibility to lead the university towards its vision and goals. While the team found the president to be impressively familiar with the program level assessment and the faculty ownership of program and course level assessment, the unanswered question was whether that intimate knowledge was because of necessity to be that close to a faculty process because of academic leadership turnover or was it optional engagement?

As mentioned earlier, the effect of leadership turnover is also evident at the director and faculty levels via the institutional research functions. The team observed and questioned whether the director of institutional research and assessment and faculty could be more focused on effective strategies if academic leadership tenure was more consistent and therefore able to guide institutional effectiveness priorities? Through various meetings with faculty and staff, the team believes that the academic leadership turnover may have had unintended consequences of increased faculty workload and its effect on student learning. The team hopes that by the next comprehensive review, the leadership tenure will have at least been sustained for a student's academic cycle.

Recommendation 4: Institutional research and assessment functions

Evaluation of institutional research and assessment functions to ensure the capacity to provide suitable data as AUHS expands its programs (CFR 4.2).

Disaggregated student data provided in institutional reports, as well as learning assessment data the team reviewed as evidence, supported AUHS's formal review to ensure the capacity to provide suitable data for institutional effectiveness. The SEAP, an articulation of the institution's policies and practices was also reviewed and led to the team's impression that institutional effectiveness and the assessment of student learning is a top down administrative process that includes little to no faculty ownership or interaction. However, the team quickly ascertained that the SEAP lacked clarity and was largely reported in interviews to be inaccurate or outdated in terms of outlining the true institutional effectiveness cycle as it plays out at the institution. In addition, questions regarding practices utilized to provide suitable data for institutional research and assessment were threaded throughout interviews with staff, faculty, and leadership; it was the answers to those questions that gave valuable context for the evolution of the institutional research function at the institution.

Discussions with faculty, staff, and leadership about revising the SEAP to be more "user-friendly" included the need to focus assessment and evaluation data collection on information that directly supports accomplishment of the institution's unique mission. This focused strategy could help sharpen the assessment and evaluation processes and lead to increased use of the data by faculty members. AUHS will also need to provide evidence about how assessment results are regularly informing decision-making, not just at the individual course level but across the institution. Given its unique mission, academic success information categorized by race and ethnicity will give direction to student services planning, and enrollment and recruitment services. AUHS should continue with its "assessment of assessment processes" to focus efforts

on information that will support the mission and the needs of its defined student body. The faculty members interviewed admitted to some amount of data fatigue in response to the sheer quantity of information available to them. An efficient review of what is essential data (rather than including everything) relative to the AUHS mission and student needs, will help increase efficiency and success.

While not complete yet, the implementation of three newly selected systems to help support less manual and more systematic data collection have been identified and are in various stages of implementation. To date, Moodle has been used as a preferred product for classroom use. Once Canvas, the newly selected learning management system, is implemented faculty and students will be required to use it for all classes to centralize learning, information and data. Thus, the institution is building an infrastructure that will support faculty to spend more time teaching and developing courses and less time trying to manually collect data. Implementation of Watermark for storage of assessment data and Via for faculty review of signature assignments and related outcomes mapping is also underway. Both academic administration and faculty will need to work together to find a manageable timeframe for the implementation of these systems and the ongoing data input by faculty that will be needed for meaningful outputs.

AUHS leadership utilized a professional recruiter to conduct a search for a new director of institutional research and assessment who was hired to more systematically extract and analyze data. The team found that a multitude of data are being analyzed and provided to staff and faculty but more direction by leadership on purposeful data collection and analysis is needed.

The team found that AUHS has undergone a review of the institutional research and assessment processes and functions to ensure the capacity to provide suitable data for

institutional effectiveness review. However, the resulting development of policies, systems, processes and practices of evaluating institutional effectiveness are in various phases of development and maturity. Strategic attention on institutional effectiveness that progresses from data collection and descriptions of cumbersome analyses to an emphasis on proactive interventions, decision-making and planning based on relevant analyses will serve to focus the institution on impactful discoveries. AUHS could evolve next towards shaping its future through a lens that reflects a cycle of strategically directed analysis, interventions, and outcomes that align with the mission of the institution and unique characteristics of its students.

The institution's decision to implement planned software updates that will support less cumbersome data collection, reporting and analysis such that the faculty and administration spend less time on collection and cumbersome analytical processes and more time on action related to the data is a positive change. The plan to update the SEAP to succinctly and clearly articulate the institution's assessment and student performance review policies and plans will help provide needed guidance to staff and faculty. AUHS might consider an approach that answers the questions of who are involved and their relative capacity to undertake related responsibilities (e.g., staff, faculty, students), what is to be accomplished (e.g., review of aggregate institutional level data, program data, course data), when will reviews take place (i.e., how often), why analyses and reviews will be conducted (e.g., identification of trends in certain student populations, with certain assignments or classes), and how information will be used to make decisions that impact the success of the students it serves (e.g., proactive programming for impacted populations, changes in course sequencing).

SECTION III – OTHER TOPICS, AS APPROPRIATE

Faculty Workload

As part of the meetings with faculty, executive leadership, and the assessment committees, and likely as a result of addressing the recommendation specific to faculty ownership of assessment, the team found that a consequence of empowering faculty's ownership of assessment is that faculty responsibilities have become additive versus embedded or substituted. AUHS evidenced institutional support for faculty to attend conferences and workshops focused on assessment, however the time needed for faculty to employ those best practices and processes was less addressed at the time of the visit.

AUHS faculty workload for full-time faculty averages 12-14 units per quarter with some faculty teaching up to 50 quarter units a year. In addition to their teaching loads, faculty are to be readily available to students both in their offices and online, participate in academic advising of students as assigned by their school program, consider opportunities to serve as faculty advisors for student organizations, collaborate with other AUHS faculty to produce academic or professional scholarship leading to presentations and publications as feasible, interact with and serve the local community via businesses and employers, and serve their profession through professional organizations. As part of the ownership of assessment, faculty who are already teaching in two highly time-intensive and demanding programs (pharmacy and nursing), will need executive leadership's support in order for them to re-prioritize the expectations of quality teaching and learning as part of a larger continuous improvement process.

Additionally, the current assessment infrastructure at AUHS appears uneven depending on which academic program is represented. Because the standards and expectations for teaching and workload in doctoral-level pharmacy programs accredited by ACPE are very structured and

regulated, the pharmacy school (student enrollment of 25) has an assessment coordinator (faculty with release time) who supports the assessment committee's work; the nursing program (student enrollment of 257, 10 times as many students as pharmacy), although monitored by programmatic accreditors (i.e., CCNE and the BRN), does not have the same support to address faculty workload accommodations, and therefore does not have an assessment coordinator to support its assessment committee's work. This unbalanced reality, originating with programmatic accreditor expectations and regional accreditor recommendations, has placed many of the nursing faculty in a position where long-term sustainability—at least through the cycle of a student's degree program— is not likely an option for them.

SECTION IV – FINDINGS, COMMENDATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Commendations

- The team commends AUHS for defining its Christian values that are formally embedded within the academic curriculum and assessed at the course, program, and institutional levels.
- The team commends the AUHS faculty for its ownership of the assessment of student learning and authentic engagement in the continuous improvement process.

Recommendations

1. AUHS pursue and support continuity among executive leadership to move beyond the completion of managerial tasks and focus on the vision and strategies needed for the long-term direction and success of the university. (CFRs 3.6, 3.8, 4.7)

2. AUHS establish faculty workload to ensure retention of quality faculty who are better supported to deliver the highly-prescribed and demanding curricula in a sustainable and continuous way, and are more meaningfully able to have time to assess and analyze student learning. (CFRs 3.1, 3.2)

3. AUHS purposefully focus its approach to assessing institutional effectiveness by progressing from data collection and implementation of complicated processes to an emphasis on analyses that align with its mission and the distinct students it serves and is used for planning and decision-making. (CFRs 4.1, 4.2, 4.4)

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