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On July 19, 2011 La Sierra University issued a press release regarding an “action letter” from the Western association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) in which WASC noted several points of concern over LSU’s handling of the recent resignation of four members of LSU’s board (Link). WASC was especially concerned over the “divisions on the board concerning the controversy over the teaching of science” and the actions of the board chair (Elder Ricardo Graham) that were largely independent of the board. WASC suggested that Graham “acted in his capacity as a church leader” rather than as part of an independent board – undermining “institutional autonomy.” Therefore, WASC issued a “Formal Notice of Concern” to LSU with a scheduled visit to LSU in the Spring of 2012 to evaluate the steps taken by LSU to address the concerns raised by WASC.

The following is an excerpt from the WASC letter:

Based on the bylaws and the statements of the board chair himself, it appears that he did not have independent authority as La Sierra’s board chair to take these actions and was not acting at the instruction of the board. The board chair reported that he consulted only with a few of the Church-designated trustees, members of national Church leadership, and university counsel before asking for the resignations of the four individuals involved. The Commission could infer from these facts that the board chair acted in his capacity as a Church leader, which would be a clear violation of WASC standards on institutional autonomy.

Here is La Sierra’s response to the WASC letter:

Though the University’s eight-year regional accreditation is not affected, WASC has identified concerns regarding the role and composition of the La Sierra University Board of Trustees and issues related to institutional autonomy. Those findings have led WASC to issue a Notice of Concern.

The WASC Commission has requested a meeting between WASC leadership and the university president, provost, and full governing board within the coming 90 days to offer further information as to the reasons for their actions and to discuss the University’s response plan.
WASC has also indicated that they will return for a follow-up visit to La Sierra in Spring 2012 to determine whether appropriate progress is being made in addressing their concerns.

The La Sierra Board of Trustees, which met on July 18 to review the letter, stated that it “takes WASC’s findings seriously,” has reconvened the Articles and Bylaws Committee “in response to concerns noted by WASC”, and plans to meet again in August.