

REPORT OF THE WSCUC TEAM
SPECIAL VISIT

To Reiss-Davis Graduate School

May 3 - 5, 2022

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The team evaluated the institution under the 2013 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 (WSCUC). 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 WSCUC website.

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SECTION I – OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

A. Description of Institution, Accreditation History, and Visit

1. Description of Institution

Reiss-Davis Graduate School (RDGS) is a private not for profit graduate school and a division of the community mental health agency, Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services (VDM). Both agencies are located at 3200 Motor Avenue in Los Angeles, California. There are no off-campus sites and the institution does not require student internships because its degree program does not lead to licensure.

Since its 2013 inception with the first cohort of ten students, Reiss-Davis Graduate School has offered a professional Doctor of Psychology degree. New cohorts enroll in the fall term to begin a four-year course of study, including three years of coursework and one year of guided dissertation completion. RDGS employs 22 faculty members, two are considered full time. Several staff members also have adjunct faculty roles. Each term, there are eight faculty members offering active courses.

VDM, the parent agency, offers mental health services for children and parents, including residential treatment, adoption, foster placement, a non-public school, preventive and early intervention, and outpatient programs. Services are provided on its 17-acre facility in West Los Angeles and in two neighboring communities, West Hollywood (Vista Village, which was previously known as HomeSAFE), and Santa Monica (Family Service of Santa Monica).

RDGS' mission is "To offer mental health providers a unique doctoral education integrating psychodynamic, neurobiological, and trauma-informed perspectives and prepare them with competency in theory, skills, technique, and professionalism to more effectively serve mental health needs of children, adolescents, and their families from a position of cultural humility, equity, and inclusion to make a difference in their lives."

2. Accreditation History

Reiss-Davis Graduate School interest in accreditation began in 2008 and submitted its eligibility application March 2015. Subsequent to its Seeking Accreditation Visit 2 from March 18-21, 2020, RDGS was first accredited in 2020. The commission's action letter at that time included scheduling a special visit for spring 2022 to address three areas of interest. An off-site review is scheduled for fall 2025 with an accreditation review in spring 2026.

3. Summary list of the issues addressed by Special Visit

In its July 8, 2020 Action Letter, the Commission listed a series of seven action issues, and identified three requiring attention during a spring 2022 Special Visit: a) diversification of sources of revenue to ensure financial stability and sustainability, b) student enrollment and retention consistent with the strategic enrollment management plan and that aligns with the budget plan, and c) succession planning to include all leadership positions.

B. Description of Team's Review Process

In preparation for the special visit, the team reviewed RDGS' special visit report, evidence files, and most recent Commission action letter. Additionally, team members held teleconference meetings with each other and with VDM's CEO, Lena Wilson, to gather information about institutional progress and status, to complete the special visit worksheet, and to develop further lines of inquiry. The team requested several additional evidence files, which were provided prior to the site visit.

Prior to the special visit, RDGS confirmed the distribution of an invitation for community members to contribute confidential messages to the site visit team through an email account, which was monitored by the evaluation team regularly before and during the visit. There were no confidential email submissions as of the last day of the special visit.

The review was conducted onsite according to a schedule prepared collaboratively with RDGS which included opportunities to meet with senior leadership of VDM and RDGS, faculty, staff, students, and a subset of the RDGS board of director members. The team reviewed evidence before, during, and after the visit. An initial teleconference between the team chair and VDM chief executive officer (CEO) was held prior to the visit, followed by individual, group, and virtual conferencing interviews on campus during the visit. Initial stages of report preparation preceded the onsite visit, continued during the visit, and concluded following the visit.

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

RDGS submitted a well organized and clearly written report, populated with evidence files which included data, analysis, and action plans. The overall report described a wide range of institutional interventions to improve recruitment, retention, and completion, as well as plans and projections for expanding revenue resources. The report captured institutional passion, commitment, collegiality, and creativity. However, it did not sufficiently articulate actions taken to address continuing financial deficits, insufficient enrollment, or lack of leadership.

1. Extent of institutional involvement in the review and report preparation

The special visit report was prepared by the VDM president/chief executive officer (CEO), VDM chief financial officer (CFO), and the following people from RDGS: board chair, board finance committee chair and members, chief operating officer (COO), chief academic officer (CAO), director of institutional research, admissions counselor, librarian, program manager, and director of registrar and financial aid services. The collaborative nature of report writing was also reflected across institutional initiatives and was noted to be a source of strength for individual employees and the campus as a whole.

Each identified special visit issue was addressed by describing institutional goals as well as available and aspirational resources. With marketing and consultant support, a broad range of interventions was proposed for each issue and tracked in regular meetings. In many cases, evidence relied primarily upon anecdotal experiences even in the absence of confirming evidence, particularly with regard to the effects of recruitment and enrollment efforts.

2. Effectiveness of institutional evidence, analysis, and conclusions

The institute's enthusiasm, collaboration, and creativity generated a wide range of remedies to address current revenue and expense issues. Faculty and staff articulated clear understandings about how the anticipated interventions could bring about positive institutional changes to remedy revenue and expense issues. Many of the interventions, however, had not developed into functional action plans and remained aspirational, such as affiliation agreements with feeder institutions. While RDGS evidence files included action plan artifacts, those documents generally lacked significant data, timelines, and responsibility entries. Therefore, many of the institutional conclusions reflected intentional rather than realized gains.

SECTION II – EVALUATION OF ISSUES UNDER THE STANDARDS

A. Issue: Diversification of sources of revenue to ensure financial stability and sustainability (CFRs 3.4, 3.9)

1. Overall financial conditions since the last visit

a. Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services (VDM)

RDGS is part of VDM rather than a separate legal entity. VDM's financial condition was negatively impacted at the start of the pandemic which coincided with the last accreditation visit in March 2020. Per the current review of audited financial statements, VDM had a net loss of \$1.7M and net assets of \$51.8M in the year ended June 30, 2020. VDM's financial condition, however, improved in the following year ended June 30, 2021, showing a net income of \$7.6M and net assets of \$59.3M. The

improvement was primarily due to an onetime \$6.1M from forgiveness of payroll protection loan. From interviews with VDM's CEO and CFO during the site visit, VDM has a negative outlook and projects operating deficits in several programs in the current fiscal year ending June 30, 2022.

b. Reiss-Davis Graduate School (RDGS)

VDM's audited financial statements included a supplemental Statement of Activities showing RDGS' standalone income statement. In fiscal year ended June 30, 2020, RDGS generated revenue of \$319K from tuition and fee income and \$113K from contribution but incurred \$1,124K in expenses resulting in a loss of \$690K. VDM covered the loss that year. In the following fiscal year ended June 30, 2021, RDGS generated revenue of \$489K from tuition and fee income, \$815K from contribution and incurred \$1,270K in expenses, resulting in a surplus of \$34K. However, without the \$750K contribution from a donor, RDGS' deficit would have been over \$750K. For the current fiscal year ending June 30, 2022, RDGS is projecting \$712K from tuition and fee income but \$1.6M in expenses. The operating deficit will be covered by another \$750K from the same donor.

In addition, RDGS continues to project operating losses in the next two fiscal years ending June 30, 2023 and 2024. While it expects to increase enrollment and therefore tuition and fee income, the revenue projected is not sufficient to cover all the expenses. For the year ending June 30, 2023, the deficit will be covered by the last of three-year-annual-contribution of \$750K from a board member. For the fiscal year ending June 30, 2024, there is not a concrete plan yet on how to cover the \$524K anticipated deficit.

In summary, RDGS has not been able to balance its operating budget by generating sufficient recurring tuition and fee income and other reliable on-going revenue to cover recurring operating expenses. It has been relying heavily on one-time contributions from either VDM's reserves or contributions from board members or others. It is unclear if these one-time resources will continue to be available or sufficient to sustain RDGS beyond FY22/23.

2. Actions taken by RDGS to diversify sources of revenue to ensure financial stability and sustainability

From review of RDGS' board minutes, Finance Committee minutes, Strategic Enrollment Management Committee minutes and Development Department minutes, RDGS has expanded its board's role in ensuring institutional financial stability and increased its board's coordination with VDM. In addition, RDGS board Finance Committee chair and members, COO, CAO, and VDM CFO participated in the report preparation for this topic according to the Special Visit Report.

Per review of the Special Visit Report and the additional evidence report dated April 26, 2022, RDGS had taken the following actions since the last visit to address revenue diversification:

a. Increase revenue from tuition and fees

RDGS became eligible to provide federal financial aid to students. This had positive impacts on enrollment starting fall 2020. Currently 60% of the students receive financial aid.

RDGS' small admission team enhanced enrollment planning, tracking and marketing. Examples include:

i) RDGS Admission Office prepared a detailed enrollment tracker to record the status of prospective students. Per review of the FY 21/22 tracker, there were 143 leads from July 1 to April 12 through Google, landing page, open house, email campaign and alumni referral. To date, one student was admitted and 3 were in progress for the fall 2022 cohort. RDGS' target was to enroll 10 for this new cohort.

ii) RDGS prepared a five-year tuition projection from 2021-2026, projecting 10 students in each of the future cohorts. From interviews with RDGS management, the targeted enrollment of 10 each year is below the breakeven point and will result in operating deficits. In addition, inconsistent target enrollment such as 15 per cohort was used in different evidence documents and onsite discussions.

iii) RDGS developed a plan to build partnerships with community agencies and other universities to identify feeder schools and organizations. The execution of this plan is pending recruitment of a new executive director.

b. Fundraising efforts

RDGS secured a donor's commitment to donate \$750,000 annually for three years to cover deficits. FY22/23 will be the last of the three years. This allowed RDGS more time to develop enrollment and revenue diversification strategies. RDGS also received a donation of \$341K from the estate of the previous chancellor as announced in the April 7, 2022, board meeting minutes, which has been confirmed will be distributed between RDGS and the two Reiss-Davis postdoctoral fellowship programs.

In addition, RDGS hired an outside development consultant to explore fundraising opportunities. The consultant recommended that all fundraising activities should go through VDM's development department. In the April 7, 2022, board meeting, RDGS shared they had activated a plan to reach out to alumni, planned to launch an online fundraising campaign, and to build an endowment from \$1M to \$10M. However, these efforts appeared to be in an early stage. For example, RDGS was still building its alumni database before prospective donors could be identified. In addition, the fundraising goals seemed to be aspirational and concrete plans such as development of case for support, identification of prospective donors, and timeline to engage and educate prospective donors about RDGS had yet to be fully developed.

The board had also agreed to establish annual dues. Board minutes for the April 7, 2022, meeting documented a very modest commitment of \$10K in total (\$1K per board member) to be raised annually.

c. Grant development

As part of the revenue diversification effort, VDM engaged a federal grants agency to identify grant opportunities for all VDM programs including RDGS, although it is not clear what the actionable plans are. VDM has also received forgiveness of PPP loan of \$6.1M as well as pledged tuition support for up to three employees to enroll into RDGS.

d. Budget review process

The RDGS finance committee met quarterly with a goal to balance the school's budget in year five. They improved budget clarity by adding revenue per cohort and set realistic enrollment targets for FY 22/23 and FY 23/24 at 10. However, the revenue generated at this enrollment level is insufficient to balance the operating budget.

3. Analysis of the effectiveness of institutional actions taken in response to the Commission's concerns

While RDGS developed many initiatives as discussed above, it is too early to tell if these initiatives are effective, partly because some of these initiatives are still in the conceptual phase and RDGS needs to develop actionable plans to implement them. The pandemic as well as the significant change of senior leadership and staff during the last two years may have also hindered the institution's progress. The full impacts from these new initiatives, especially on enrollment and fundraising, are not fully understood or realized.

It is recommended that RDGS aggressively focus on the stand-alone financial sustainability of RDGS by: a) balancing annual revenue and expenses without reliance on external contributions, b) developing a three year budget of revenue and expenses aligned with evidence based enrollment projections, c) addressing projected deficits through financial contingency plans that have been approved by VDM and RDGS boards. (CFR 3.4)

It is also recommended that RDGS create and implement a professional action plan to diversify viable revenue sources through non-tuition channels including fund-raising development, advancement, and governmental resources. (CFR 3.4)

B. Issue: Student enrollment and retention consistent with the strategic enrollment plan and that aligns with the budget plan (CFR 3.4)

1. Evidence reviewed

Evidence reviewed by the team on this issue included the 2020 SAV2 Team Report, Commission Action Letter, and Institutional Response Letter; Institutional Report for Spring 2022 with attached evidence documents; and additional requested documents,

including student cohort and tuition projections, enrollment tracker meeting minutes, RDGS meeting principles, and newly developed job descriptions for the CEO and CAO.

2. Analysis of the effectiveness of institutional actions taken in response to the Commission's concerns

In response to the 2020 WSCUC Commission Action Letter recommendation to develop a multi-year enrollment management strategy, RDGS focused efforts on maintaining "...student enrollment and retention consistent with the strategic enrollment management plan and that aligns with the budget plan." A Strategic Enrollment Plan was created to guide institutional enrollment efforts toward meeting sustainable cohorts. The plan identified individual offices or committees as strategic leads and included undated progress notes, which would benefit from additional details to facilitate tracking. Funding was noted where applicable, although direct budgetary sources were not identified. Initiatives included: Reinforced branding; evaluated marketing techniques; enhanced outreach methods; search engine optimization; and additional efforts to recruit underserved populations for students, faculty, and staff. Also, faculty and staff diversity hiring was intended to provide more accurate student demographic mirroring, thereby improving student success. (CFR 3.4)

The institution also held enrollment tracker meetings with sustained attention to calendared processes for each stage of recruitment and enrollment. Weekly student interest data from initial lead to program admittance was included, and brief weekly entries indicating follow up intentions were added. At the time of the special visit, the student enrollment group reported an improving conversion rate for the next academic cohort, attributed to new enrollment management efforts. (CFR 3.4)

Increased personal student outreach appears to have been well received per anecdotal reports, but insufficient to turn attrition around due to typical adult student issues, such as health, family, or career obligations. Despite additional student support, the two current cohorts enrolled a total of 15 students. An additional 28 students who completed coursework remained in the dissertation pipeline. (CFR 3.4)

RDGS identified and then responded to four specific challenges impacting student success: 1) research assistance; 2) balancing academic, personal, and work demands; 3) financial strain, and 4) technical issues with required connectivity. According to the special visit report, eight responsive services were employed to address these challenges. However, as noted above, despite anecdotal reports about positive student responses to these interventions, enrollment metrics affirming positive outcomes were not available. (CFR 3.4)

Academic interventions to address recruitment, enrollment, and retention included additional faculty hires, enhanced program learning outcomes, and additional monitoring of and support for students' dissertation efforts. The dissertation group received focused attention and support from faculty and staff who sought to encourage and streamline students' research progress, and it was anticipated that several dissertation completions

were imminent. Alumni outreach was supported by a one day per week work-study high school student, whose workload also included several other administrative support functions. (CFR 3.1, 3.2)

Financial aid opportunities were expanded subsequent to RDGS' new accreditation status. As an example of addressing potential recruitment and retention issues, RDGS increased the number of student loans from 36% in 2019 to 60% in 2020. That intervention, however, was not correlated with a change in student enrollment. (CFR 3.4)

With regard to environmental scanning for tuition ranges as well as other enrollment metrics, RDGS had not yet established a network of institutions with whom they could confer, compare services, or take counsel. There were no environmental benchmarks for targeted enrollment strategies, tuition levels, or revenue remedies. As a result, faculty and staff had been working diligently on an increasingly wide range of remedies while attesting to the burden of heavy workloads. (CFR 3.1)

On the other hand, RDGS identified a few institutions with whom they might establish affiliation agreements or other partnerships to generate enrollment pipelines. Although internal conversations about the value of those agreements had begun, formal negotiations and MOUs had been on hold pending their anticipated CEO hire. (CFR 3.4)

In a supplemental evidence document, Five Year Tuition Projections, 2021-2026, enrollment projections were based upon annual cohorts of 10 retained students and revenue was anticipated to increase from \$532,978 to \$1,203,081 over the 5 year period, which remained short of stated expenses at approximately \$1,500,000. (CFR 3.4)

Summarizing their student enrollment management efforts, RDGS acknowledged the importance of setting phase specific target goals along with a range of key initiatives. According to evidence and interviews, the target enrollment goal to meet institutional expenses ranged from 10-15 students per cohort, a range which did not account for attrition or for generating a sufficient tuition revenue stream. It was acknowledged during the site visit that 20 students per cohort would produce a tuition stream, which would be more likely to cover expenses. However, effective strategies to realize a minimum of 10 students per cohort had not yet been implemented. (CFR 3.4)

3. Findings and conclusions about the institution's progress in addressing the issue

RDGS faculty and staff worked collaboratively during weekly meetings to address the Strategic Enrollment Plan from multiple high level perspectives. Collaboration was often cited as significant, inspiring, and motivating to faculty and staff, ensuring their continued engagement. (CFR 3.1) The campus-wide efforts are noteworthy although it is too early to tell if they are effective. Campus representatives indicated expectations that their anticipated CEO hire would provide the leadership needed to operationalize several major initiatives and generate effective enrollment outcomes. (CFR 3.4, 3.8)

C. Issue: Succession planning to include all leadership positions (CFR 3.9)

The evaluation team reviewed the following evidence to drive analyses and conclusions related to succession planning and leadership stability: 1) Board minutes that discussed succession planning and organizational restructuring of leadership roles and titles. Of specific note was a November 2021 change in the title from chancellor to executive director, 2) Updated job descriptions in November 2021 for the executive director, chief academic officer, and chief operating officer, 3) February 2022 organizational chart showing the executive director reporting directly to both the RDGS board of directors and the Vista Del Mar president, 4) February 2022 board minutes that discussed beginning the search for the executive director, CAO, and COO with dual reporting lines to the VDM president and executive board.

The team met with the VDM president independently to discuss board bylaws for both VDM and RDGS, and the leadership succession plan. Of particular interest was who made the final decision on hiring a new executive director as well as whether RDGS was an asset to VDM. Three RDGS board representatives were also interviewed to discuss financial stability, enrollment targets, board bylaws, and updates on hiring a new executive director.

The team also met with the faculty and staff to discuss shared governance, leadership sustainability and visions for the future of RDGS, including a new executive director.

1. Analysis of the effectiveness of institutional actions taken in response to Commission concerns

The search for a new RDGS executive director appears stalled. Enrollment growth, financial stability, and sustainability hinge on this hire. (CFR 3.8, 3.4, 3.6)

The March 2021 death of a beloved, long serving RDGS chancellor has been deeply felt by the institution. The impact required the institution to restructure leadership roles and responsibilities, while searching for a new executive leader and envisioning the institutional future.

Currently, the CAO and COO are charged with leading RDGS during this challenging transition and enduring pandemic. It was observed that the CAO and COO are committed and hardworking leaders. Under their leadership, based on conversations with the VDM president, staff, and faculty, RDGS made strong progress toward building shared governance. However, without the appointment of a new executive director, enrollment growth and financial stability remain a continuing concern. (CFR 3.8, 3.4)

RDGS launched a search to recruit and hire an executive director in March 2022, vetted finalists, and selected a strong practicing clinician candidate with a RDGS affiliation. The board made an offer to the candidate but it was declined. According to the compensation information received by the evaluation team, the initial salary and benefits were far below market for a university executive director. In their meeting with the evaluation team, the board expressed concern about lack of authority and autonomy to negotiate the salary and benefits offered, due the board's dotted reporting line to the VDM president as presented in the organizational chart. However, RDGS has subsequently clarified that the dotted line represent solely a working relationship rather than an indirect reporting line and the organization chart has been updated to reflect that. (CFR 3.4.3.9)

Although the RDGS board representatives and VDM president appeared to address and potentially resolve the hiring issue, the timing of this issue during the special visit and the need for clearer reporting lines were concerning. Moreover, high expectations were noted for the new executive director to stabilize and grow RDGS. This may be challenging for a new leader if they have limited administrative and community engagement experience. (CFR 3.8)

2. Findings and conclusions about the institution's progress in addressing the issue

The evaluation team concluded that RDGS was well intentioned in moving forward with a search for the RDGS executive director but the institution lacked a sense of urgency and the autonomy necessary to make progress on leadership succession. (CFR 3.8)

The position of RDGS within the organizational chart of VDM is unique. The board bylaws of VDM and RDGS are not in alignment or clearly understood by respective parties regarding the authority and responsibility to hire and evaluate a senior leader (i.e., executive director) for RDGS. (CFR 3.9) The evaluative team also explored the value proposition of RDGS to VDM, as RDGS deficits have been and are currently incurred by VDM. (CFR 3.4)

RDGS has no contingency plans for a potentially stalled/failed executive director leadership search, financial instability, or decreasing enrollment, which makes them vulnerable as a viable institution. (CFR 3.4, 3.8)

SECTION III – FINDINGS, COMMENDATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While RDGS developed many initiatives to address diversification of revenue through enrollment and fund raising, it is too early to tell if these largely conceptual phase initiatives will become effective. Additional recommendations are offered to operationalize institutional intentions. (CFR 3.4)

The campus-wide recruitment, enrollment, retention, and completion efforts have been broad and collaboratively delivered, although their effectiveness is yet to be determined. There was anticipation that a new RDGS CEO (executive director) hire would operationalize major initiatives to generate effective enrollment outcomes. (CFR 3.4, 3.8)

RDGS' unique relationship with VDM requires further clarity, particularly with regard to board bylaws and decision-making authority. (CFR 3.4) Contingency plans for financial instability and decreasing enrollment are needed. (CFR 3.4, 3.8)

Commendations. The institution is commended for its:

1. Openness to embracing a culture of continuous improvement.
2. Evolving strong shared governance and articulated guiding principles.
3. Inclusive cross campus participation in preparation for the visit.
4. Commitment to the RDGS mission by the board, faculty, staff, and students.

Recommendations. It is recommended that the institution:

1. Prioritize hiring an executive director. (CFR 3.8)
2. Clarify, revise, and align the VDM and RDGS board bylaws, particularly to ensure appropriate oversight for institutional decision-making authority regarding hiring and evaluating senior leadership. (CFR 3.9)
3. Aggressively focus on the stand-alone financial sustainability of RDGS by: a) balancing annual revenue and expenses without reliance on external contributions, b) developing a three year budget of revenue and expenses aligned with evidence based enrollment projections, c) addressing projected deficits through financial contingency plans that have been approved by VDM and RDGS boards. (CFR 3.4)
4. Create and implement a professional action plan to diversify viable revenue sources through non-tuition channels including fund-raising development/advancement and governmental resources. (CFR 3.4)
5. Develop and implement effective evidence based recruitment and retention strategies including affiliation agreements and MOUs to create enrollment partnerships. (CFR 3.4)