

The Challenge of Framing Our Future

As everyone in our campus community is well aware, the challenges facing us in the coming months are unprecedented in many ways. Used to the dynamic growth that has driven California and the U.S. for so many years, the challenges we now face were, not too long ago, unimaginable. The future we imagined, at least in the short-term, has changed. What we face now is a tougher, more difficult reality, one that we cannot simply wish away.

The greater challenge for all of us is to keep our focus on our long-term future and the brighter possibilities that it represents, and to implement the immediate steps that will help take us there. In our strategic plan, *Framing the Future*, we set “high aspirations” and “high expectations.” Now, more than ever, we need to hold onto those high standards and push ourselves to do what is necessary to meet those standards. There will certainly be some painful sacrifices along the way, but I believe that if we truly commit to working together, we can arrive at that perhaps more distant, but certainly better future.

Watching the divisive tenor of national political debate today over healthcare and other topics, it is easy to see how inflamed rhetoric and a refusal to hear those who disagree with us can lead to legislative paralysis. Very simply, we cannot afford to be trapped in a deadlock of disagreement. Now, more than ever, we need to turn to the sense of community that has sustained us and to reenergize our sense of community engagement. We are in this together and if we allow our community to splinter into “us” versus “them” factions, no one will win. Everyone will lose.

To move forward in these turbulent times, I would like to outline some of the key elements of my vision and invite your comments and engagement. Knowing that we have a shared responsibility for our success, it is vital that we have a shared vision and are headed in the same direction.

Our strategic plan is our primary guideline as we move forward. I invite you — faculty, staff, students, and administration — to review it once again. At the same time, we need a blueprint for an agenda that achieves our strategic plan and works within the framework of near term reality. Here are some of the key areas on which I believe we need to focus.

First, and foremost, we need to focus on our core academic mission: to engage as students and scholars in the joy of teaching and learning. And, we need to do this within the very specific circumstances of our university, recognized as a Hispanic-serving university with a large base of first-generation college students in a fast-growing and developing region. In this context, a major priority for us is to help K-12 education increase the number of high school graduates who complete the a-g curriculum and are fully qualified for admission to the California State University. Compared to the rest of California and the nation, the numbers of students who meet these criteria for our region are extremely low. Therefore, we have a moral imperative to work diligently with our local K-12 school districts to help bridge that achievement gap. We also must support and enhance the efforts currently underway by our respective

faculty and deans in the colleges of Education and Natural Sciences to increase the number of qualified math and science teachers in the region and throughout California.

Our opportunity to serve as an agent of positive change in partnership with our communities, as they face the ongoing challenges of economic and social development in the central valley, is one that we need to continue to embrace wholeheartedly. To be able to make a difference here, where we live and work, is a commitment we are privileged to be able to embrace.

At the same time, we need to recognize that the environment in which we are seeking to meet these noble challenges is radically changed. Although I would like to think that we have always operated in an environment of shared responsibility—that the work of designing and delivering a world-class education has always been a partnership between the state and the university community—the reality is that the burdens within that partnership have shifted. The state is simply not going to be able to pay for many of the things it has paid for in the past. We must seek ways to be more self-supporting and more self-sufficient. Although we will always work in partnership with the state, we will be more responsible for our own economic health now than we have ever been.

Specifically, to serve the students in our region, we need to pay close attention to the needs of our communities. In so doing, we will be able to create programs that will draw students—and ultimately help pay for themselves.

We have the opportunity to create exciting and meaningful new programs in three primary areas: in the health sciences, in green technologies, and in reengineering businesses. In each of these areas, CSU Stanislaus can establish a leadership position and make a significant difference in our communities and contribute to the continued growth and success of our university.

In the areas of health sciences we need to examine, add and improve our offerings to train students to work as speech pathologists, radiology technicians, physician's assistants, clinical lab technicians, physical therapists and occupational therapists. With the growing national focus on health care, these occupations will be ever more vital as there is increased scrutiny about the effective and efficient delivery of health care. The time is ripe to take advantage of this attention to design outstanding programs, attract top students, and produce thoughtful and skilled graduates who will bring distinction to CSU Stanislaus as they move out to serve their communities here and across the nation. With the spotlight of the media turned on the issues of health care now and into the foreseeable future, we have a tremendous opportunity to recruit students for programs such as these.

Similarly, national concern for the environment provides us with a platform to develop and offer new degrees in green technologies and energy solutions. Here we should build on our strong, highly recognized ecology and sustainability research programs. Training our students to research and build effective alternative energy sources, such as wind and solar projects, will be a vital industry and growth area in the years to come. We are especially well positioned to capitalize on the ample sunshine we enjoy year-round here in the central valley. Our location provides us with the ideal laboratory for this kind of research and offers us the opportunity to take a significant leadership position in this field. Alongside of these efforts, we can deepen and broaden our studies of conservation efforts, again, having

a natural laboratory in which to work. I can't think of anything more exciting than the opportunities that are open to us in this arena—opportunities that will help put the name CSU Stanislaus on the map and allow us to break ground in ways that are absolutely vital to the environmental and economic health of our state and our nation.

The difficult economic times our nation faces have also opened another door for us to expand our educational offerings in areas of vital importance. The United States in particular must come to grips with the pressing need to reengineer businesses in many sectors, but in particular in banking and finance. There is also a critical imperative for business to review and revise existing corporate structures in ways that increase accountability along with effectiveness and efficiency, while maintaining productivity and quality outputs.

At CSU Stanislaus, we should explore innovation at all levels to meet these needs. We can revamp the offerings of our college of business administration. For example, developing new programs in business ethics that will address a changed business culture of the future. Again, the crisis of today offers us opportunities for tomorrow that are not only important, but truly exciting in terms of what we can do together as an educational institution to be responsive to the needs of our community and our nation.

As we build these new programs and emphases, we must keep in the forefront of our thinking and planning the reality that there will be virtually no state money for development. Rather, these programs will likely have to be self-supporting. We will have to secure private funding for these kinds of start-ups. But given the importance of each of these areas—health services, green technologies and business reengineering—I imagine the business community and private funders will be supportive, if our programs are dynamic and well designed. We will certainly have to charge students for the majority of the costs of mounting these programs, with perhaps some state support once things are moving forward, but if we build attractive and successful programs, they can become self-supporting through enrollment growth as they mature.

As we work together to create new programs that meet the needs of our times, we must not forget the need to review and revamp our current programs and procedures to meet our own goals of efficiency and effectiveness. Chief among these needs must be paying attention to increasing the quality and delivery of our student services. In tight economic times, student retention is more important than ever. Once we have matriculated a student at CSU Stanislaus, it is vital that we maximize our investment in that student by helping him or her stay and graduate on time. We will need to review our pre-registration and advisement processes to insure that they are operating at an optimal level. To the extent that we can help students effectively plan their courses of study and graduate on time, both they and the university will benefit. As more students graduate on time, more students can matriculate, thereby maximizing the service we can provide to both our students and our communities.

At the same time as we work on these areas, we need to embrace innovative thinking as to how we deliver our education. We need to examine flexible scheduling more closely. We need to look at new forms of pedagogy and to take advantage of creating effective and exciting online classes. We need to use our satellite centers more efficiently and offer more focused programs with schedules that best

serve our students. In every aspect of educational delivery, we must focus on quality at the same time that we understand that there is ever greater pressure on our students to maximize their use of their own time and resources.

We can expect students to respond to the flexibility of online delivery when courses are stimulating and educational outcomes clearly defined. We must be careful to look at ourselves here as well and resist the temptation to do things as we have always done them because change is uncomfortable. While face-to-face classroom exchange remains preferable in most situations, it is not always practical, and we need to embrace a variety of delivery methods that will enable students to complete their coursework within a reasonable time frame. Understanding the pressures they face—of scheduling, of the demands of work and family, of the cost of travel to and from campus—as well as accommodating our own preferences can create a hybrid model that will preserve the strengths of several educational options.

Within our university community, we will also need to reflect on and make changes to accommodate the impact of rising tuition and fees. As costs rise, we are likely to see increasing quality among our students. Admission will become more competitive as we are forced to cut the numbers of students we can accept. To some extent, this might be considered a welcome trend. But the downside is also very real. More students in our service areas will be left behind. More students will need remediation. We will need to work with our secondary education partners to help lift these students up so that can be competitive, so that education in the central valley does not see a widening gap between the numbers of students who have access to a college education and those who do not. We will need to help retool the educational system from top to bottom to prepare the next generation of CSU Stanislaus students for success.

In the midst of all of these challenges, we will also need to focus on our research and scholarly activity within the context of our mission and within the broader societal context today. This is a key recommendation we have received from WASC and I know that our faculty feel strongly about the importance of this goal. I am also well aware that there is great concern that the need for increased research and scholarly activity will either get lost among the many competing demands that these difficult times demand or that it is simply impossible to accomplish, given the heavy teaching loads our faculty carry. Certainly there is no easy answer here, as we seek to find a balance between supporting our students and meeting new educational and financial needs at the same time that we seek to support the very lifeblood of the faculty—the research and creative activity that feeds their teaching. Thus, I believe that we must continue to highlight our commitment to this goal, so that it does not get lost or pushed to the back burner, and we must work together to seek innovative solutions to these difficult problems.

Critical times demand critical thinking. As an engaged intellectual community, we are perhaps better prepared than most to create innovation from crisis. But to do so successfully, we must be clearly self-aware. We must not fall back on habit, or allow ourselves to be tangled up in processes that were developed many years ago. New times demand new processes and the courage to break free of traditional ways of thinking.

I call upon all of the members of our university community at every level—faculty, students, staff, and administration—to break out of our perceived roles and stations within this community to come together under the true spirit of collegiality. California State University Stanislaus is a unique institution with a significant heritage and a clear mandate for the future. We have defined ourselves as a learning organization founded on close collaboration that creates responsive and engaged communities. Now, more than ever, we need to live up to the spirit of our commitments. In doing so, I expect that we will see that brighter long-term future that we have imagined. The road we must now travel to reach that destination is not the one we expected, but our destination is as exciting and important as ever.

I invite you to join me on what is surely bound to be a rigorous but deeply fulfilling journey.