

**REPORT OF THE WSCUC SPECIAL VISIT TEAM TO  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, STANISLAUS**

**Oct. 1 - 3, 2014**

**Team Roster**

**Chair: Terry MacTaggart, Senior Fellow, Association of Governing Boards**

**Assistant Chair: Laurel McCabe, Sonoma State University**

**Robert Stein, California State University, San Bernardino**

**WSCUC Liaison: Melanie Booth**

The team evaluated the institution under the WSCUC Senior College and University Standards of Accreditation and prepared this report containing its collective evaluation for consideration and action by the institution and by the WSCUC 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 WSCUC website.

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**WASC Senior College and University Commission**

**Special Visit Team Report**

**California State University, Stanislaus**

**Oct. 1 - 3, 2014**

**I. OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT**

**A. Institutional Context**

California State University, Stanislaus is a component of the 23-campus California State University System. It was established by the California State Legislature in 1957 as Stanislaus State College, was accredited in 1964, and moved to its current location in Turlock, California in 1965. It achieved University status and its current name in 1985. Its Stockton Center was opened in 1998.

The University enrolled 9,084 students in fall 2013. It offers 42 bachelor's degrees, 23 master's degrees, and one doctoral program. Its non-traditional degrees include an off-campus M.S. in Genetic Counseling degree in collaboration with Bay Area educational and medical institutions, and an online MBA. It serves its Central Valley service area with a highly diverse student population that includes many first-generation college students. Approximately 59% of its students are non-white minorities, making its 52% 6-year graduation rate for full-time first-time freshmen remarkable and exemplary.

The University's Educational Effectiveness Review visit was conducted in spring 2010. In its July 2010 letter to President Hamid Shirvani, the WASC Commission reaffirmed accreditation of the university, scheduled the CPR visit for spring 2019, and the EER visit for fall 2020. Due to concerns regarding leadership and shared governance, the Commission scheduled a Special Visit for fall 2011. Lastly, the Commission requested an Interim Report in

spring 2015 focusing on progress in student learning assessment, program review, and leadership and governance.

In its July 2010 letter, the Commission stated that the atmosphere of administration and faculty mistrust was so deeply pervasive that it threatened to undermine the effectiveness of the University in meeting its institutional goals. The Commission directed the university administration to initiate steps to remedy the conflicts that were dividing the campus. The Commission also asked the university to provide an update on its progress in student learning assessment and program review.

The Special Visit was conducted in November of 2011. In its March 2012 letter to President Hamid Shirvani, the Commission recognized the administration's initiatives to repair the campus climate of mutual distrust between administration and faculty. It described the University's research on this issue as a "modest at best" beginning to the challenging and difficult work of repairing a deeply divided campus community. The work of the faculty Ad Hoc Trust Restoration Planning Committee was singled out as providing a model of collaborative work and transparent relationships in gathering and disseminating relevant information.

The Commission urged the administration "to play a leadership role in modeling collaboration and creating an atmosphere in which courageous conversations about divisive issues can be had with safety and mutual respect." The Commission particularly highlighted the need for addressing "historic points of tension" within the university, including the role of faculty in strategic planning, and the "formalization of faculty policies dealing with retention, promotion and tenure (RPT)." The Commission emphasized that "faculty must fully engage with the administration" to establish RPT policies that are "institution-wide and include

rigorous requirements that reflect good practice in higher education.”

The Commission scheduled a Special Visit in fall 2014 to evaluate progress in addressing the issues of shared governance, campus climate, the faculty role in strategic planning, and faculty engagement in the formulation of rigorous criteria for retention, promotion, and tenure. The Commission continued the scheduled comprehensive review in spring 2019.

In January of 2012, Dr. Hamid Shirvani, President of the university, responded to assure the Commission that “the University is committed to implementing their recommendations as we continue efforts to foster a culture of collaboration and shared governance.”

Following discussion with the university regarding new Commission requirements, the CPR visit was replaced with an Offsite Review in fall 2018 and the Accreditation Visit in spring 2019. A Mid-Cycle Review is scheduled for 2015. Evaluation of the EdD program in Educational Leadership was scheduled to coincide with the fall 2014 Special Visit.

The fall 2014 Special Visit focused on the following areas:

#### *Campus Climate*

The Commission stated in its letter of March 7, 2012 that the Special Visit team was concerned with “ongoing tensions between the senior administration and faculty,” and that “[e]xpressions of mutual mistrust...were found to pose a serious threat to the otherwise effective educational programs at the institution.” The Commission directed the administration to take the initiative in resolving campus tensions and in repairing the mutual mistrust that characterized faculty-administration relations. [CFR 1.3, 3.6, 4.3.4.4]

#### *Shared Governance*

The Commission urged the administration in its letter of March 7, 2012 “to play a

leadership role in modeling collaboration and creating an atmosphere in which courageous conversations about divisive issues can be had with safety and mutual respect.” The Commission emphasized the need for the University to include faculty perspectives in strategic planning, and in formalizing faculty policies on retention, promotion and tenure. [CFR 1.3, 1.7, 2.8, 2.9, 3.6, 3.7, 3.10]

### *Strategic Planning*

The Commission urged the administration in its letter of March 7, 2012 to include faculty perspectives in strategic planning.

### *Faculty Retention, Promotion and Tenure Policies*

The Commission urged the administration in its letter of March 7, 2012 to include faculty perspectives in the development of faculty policies for retention, promotion, and tenure. [CFR 2.8, 2.9, 3.2, 3.7, 3.10]

## **B. The Institution’s Special Visit Report: Quality of the Report and Supporting Evidence**

The university formed a self-study team to report on progress and challenges in the four inter-related areas identified in the March 2012 Commission letter. The team was composed of representatives of both administration and faculty who worked collaboratively to produce a final report that provided substantial data-driven evidence, meaningful analyses, and detailed descriptions of collaborative campus work and outcomes. The report was submitted to WSCUC on July 28, 2014 by President Joseph Sheley. The four areas identified by the University are 1) campus climate, 2) shared governance, 3) strategic planning, and 4) retention, promotion, and tenure.

The team found that the university’s processes in responding to the Commission’s mandates were thoughtful and thorough in the areas of campus climate, shared governance, and

faculty involvement in retention, promotion and tenure policies. The discussion of the area of faculty involvement in strategic planning was thin in the self-study.

The self-study group reported that discussion on the faculty role in strategic planning and the retention, promotion and tenure process sparked differing perspectives, disagreement and healthy dialogue—all of which they noted are a part of healthy shared governance. The self-study group identified four action themes contributing to a climate of trust based on the results of a campus inventory—outreach, transparency, reciprocal communication, and shared governance. They identified many university groups, initiatives, and practices where these themes were visible.

The team notes that significant and effective groups were the following: Senate Executive Committee, Committee on Committees, University RPT Committee, University Budget Advisory Committee, Ad Hoc Trust Restoration Planning Committee, RPT Survey Group, Strategic Plan Working Group, and the Holistic Academic Program Review Committee. Administrative officials that the team noted as significant initiators or collaborators in sustaining trust were the president, provost, vice president for faculty affairs and human resources, vice president for business and finance, and the vice president for enrollment and student affairs.

The team particularly commends the ad hoc faculty working groups such as the Trust Restoration Planning Group, the University Budget Advisory Group and the RPT Survey Group, who faculty noted were significantly instrumental in developing new ways to collaborate and model shared governance. The team commends the RPT Survey Group, in particular, for its use of exemplary online research methodology, its use of data-driven evidence to inform institutional decision-making, and its thoughtful, meaningful analyses of complex

data.

In the area of strategic planning, the team found modest evidence in the report of intensive faculty involvement in strategic planning processes. The team understands that since the new president began in 2012, he has been developing a climate of trust, mutual respect, and mutual collaboration between administration and faculty. For this reason the university's strategic planning processes have been on the back burner. During the visit, the team inquired further in the area of faculty involvement in strategic planning and found that faculty were indeed involved in different ways in processes of strategic planning. This is discussed below.

### **C. Description of the Team Review Process**

The 2014 Special Visit team studied the university's report, and based on the evidence and the narrative conducted a preliminary analysis of the university's areas of good practice, areas needing improvement, and areas needing further inquiry during the visit. The team developed a list of additional information needed and gave it to the university ahead of the visit. Some documents, such as the RPT Survey Report and the departmental RPT elaborations, were requested for study ahead of the visit, which the university provided.

## **SECTION II. EVALUATION OF ISSUES UNDER THE STANDARDS**

The team agrees with the university's observation that the four areas of campus climate, shared governance, faculty roles in strategic planning, and faculty roles in developing retention, promotion and tenure policies, are highly inter-related. The areas of strategic planning and RPT in particular provide focal lenses to examine shared governance processes and campus climate issues. Because of this there is some overlap in the team's discussion of these issues below.



## **A. Campus Climate and Trust**

The university's self-study noted the significant leadership change in June 2012 of the installation of a new interim president, with the president's permanent appointment by the California State Legislature in May 2013. The self-study noted that prior to the new presidency, the university experienced high levels of administrative staff turnover, and that the new president instituted permanent job positions to those who had held interim positions. The team's perception was that the new president's sensitivity to staff and faculty needs reversed the high turnover rate in administrative positions and gave the university new stability in its organizational and staffing structures. [CFR 1.7] This in turn positively affected the campus climate and perceptions of trust.

The self-study reported data showing that some respondents attributed reductions of tensions and hostilities in the campus climate to the absence of the prior president and installation of a new president who was committed to providing a stable, predictable, and collaborative environment. Respondents also noted that specific faculty members, such as the speaker of the academic senate, and administration personnel, such as the provost, contributed mightily to the new spirit of collaboration.

Several committees contributed to the development of a culture of trust over the time period from 2012 to 2014. These committees, each with a different purpose, clarified processes of information-gathering, evaluation, analysis, and decision-making in multiple areas of university functioning. These committees include the Senate Executive Committee, Committee on Committees, University RPT Committee, University Budget Advisory Committee, Ad Hoc Trust Restoration Planning Committee, RPT Survey Group, Strategic Plan Working Group, and the Holistic Academic Program Review Committee. [CFR 1.3, 4.3, 4.6]

The team emphasizes that the issue of campus climate and administration-faculty trust cannot be separated from the issues of shared governance, strategic planning, and retention, promotion and tenure policies.

## **B. Shared Governance**

The new president made shared governance a major thrust of his administration. The team heard from multiple persons that after some initial skepticism, his efforts were reciprocated by faculty leaders, who currently use phrases like “fresh air” and “sea change” to describe the resulting changes in campus governance as well as campus climate. During the team visit one faculty leader stated that after two years of multiple faculty and administrative initiatives studying and developing shared governance processes, “we’re at a point where we can authentically participate.” [CFR 3.6]

The effort to make shared governance a reality has several components. One of these is an effort to handle decisions through established processes. For example, when an ad hoc committee is to be formed, the faculty membership is determined through the Committee on Committees, in contrast to the practice, under the prior administration, of administrators selecting faculty aligned with their interests for such duties. [CFR 1.7, 3.7, 3.10]

The University Budget Advisory Committee (UBAC) is another example. UBAC meetings are now open and videotaped for all to see. Ideas presented by faculty members, students, and others are given due consideration. Faculty members now understand and are sympathetic to the administration’s efforts to deal with difficult budgetary issues.

It appears that more women are actively participating in shared governance. A few female faculty members reported that under the previous administration, they avoided any governance roles. The number of women chairing faculty committees has now increased

dramatically.

Another component of the effort to increase shared governance has been the effort to increase understanding between faculty and administration through informal brown bag lunches and through more formal channels, such as campus open forums and the Ad Hoc Trust Restoration Planning Committee (TRPC). These initiatives have been fruitful. Indeed, TRPC members now question the need for their committee's continuation, saying that the conversations between faculty and administration for which the committee provides a venue are now happening in their "proper places." [CFR 4.6] The observations described above are strongly supported by the 2014 Phase 2B Substantive Actions Census Technical Report. This report also makes clear that improvements in shared governance go hand in hand with other important changes, such as improvement in the campus climate. The result is that when mistakes or misunderstandings about shared governance occur, as have already happened and will no doubt happen in the future, they can be resolved with good will instead of rancor.

The team commends the work of the Ad Hoc Trust Restoration Planning Committee and the senior administrative team for their commitment to creating shared decision making processes and to practicing collaborative, trust inducing models of behavior. The team also recognizes the remarkable progress done in a two-year period in cultivating a community of reciprocal dialogue, collaboration and consultation, and in ensuring that decision-making processes are in place to effectively maintain a culture of shared governance.

As emphasized in the Recommendations section of this report, the team encourages the university to consider shifting the focus on special groups created to shore up shared governance and cultivate trust to the standing committees which, when they operate as intended, underpin these same goals. [CFR 3.7]

### **C. Strategic Planning**

Historically, strategic planning at many colleges and universities represented an end in itself to satisfy accreditation requirements or state mandates. These plans typically rested “on the shelf,” failing to significantly influence real strategic directions. In 2007, on the eve of the great recession, the university developed a plan that understandably was shelved as substantial and repeated budget cuts eliminated the resources for new initiatives. The recent unpleasantness between faculty and administration that elicited the 2011 Special Visit contributed to the continued shelving of the plan, as did the substantial workloads of faculty and administration.

During the 2014 Special Visit, the team found that faculty and administration were slowly returning to the work of strategic planning. This work needs to be accelerated. It needs to grow out of a candid assessment of the fiscal, political, and demographic realities confronting the university. For example, the elimination of Proposition 30 funding will tighten budgets further and there is little evidence that the state funding picture will improve anytime soon. The legislature’s appetite for limiting tuition increases reduces one common avenue for revenue. [CFR 3.7, 4.3, 4.6, 4.7]

On the other hand, the university has opportunity for enrollment and revenue growth through international recruitment and off campus programs, to name two options. To be sure, university leaders are aware of these obligations and opportunities, and are pursuing some of them. Now that a more productive and collaborative working relationship has been established, it would be timely for the university to engage in structured conversations around its environment and future, conversations that would result in a new or substantially updated plan that actually guides university plans going forward.

The team believes that it would serve the university well to begin a new round of

strategic planning that directly involves multiple stakeholders, including faculty and administration but reaching out to students, community, and alumni as well. It's imperative that the university develop new ways of meeting its mission that take into account its complex state, regional, and economic environment.

#### **D. Faculty Retention, Promotion, and Tenure Policies**

The faculty role in evaluation of faculty retention, promotion, and tenure has historically been a touchstone for tensions within the university. As such, the progress in this area, albeit limited, reflects in microcosm the steps taken toward a collegial climate of mutual dialogue and trust, as well as shared governance.

The university's first step in formalizing policies regarding faculty retention, promotion, and tenure (RPT) was to form the RPT Survey group. This group used best practices in assessment to gather two stages of data from faculty and administrators on their views regarding the RPT process. Their first open-ended questionnaire inquired about the primary strengths of the RPT process, limitations, concerns, and recommendations for addressing concerns. Their second stage was an online survey, open for four weeks and with an impressive 46% response rate, which inquired further into these areas. [CFR 4.3]

Their 73 page report is notable for its clarity, transparency, and thoughtfulness in interpreting the data. The survey group concluded that one strength of the RPT process is the faculty's ability to provide discipline-specific expertise to evaluate the nature and quality of faculty research, scholarship, and creative activity. They noted that the multiple levels of review (faculty department committees, college deans, the University RTP Committee (URPTC), provost, and president) and the discussion between these levels should evaluations differ, provide transparent processes for insuring that each candidate receives fair and equitable

treatment. They recommended that each candidate, department committee, and dean, as well as the URPTC and provost, stay informed of the department- specific criteria for RPT review and the stages of the review process. [CFR 3.2]

Faculty in some schools reported a discrepancy between the department and provost level of review, and sometimes with the URPTC level of review. Some department RPT chairs described occasions under the prior administration when the provost failed to provide what the faculty regarded as compelling explanations for disagreement with departmental recommendations. Some department faculty observed that the provost has stated that candidate review should be in the hands of administration rather than faculty, a view which they dispute.

The report noted differences in specificity of department elaboration criteria. The team often heard this referred to as “flexibility” of criteria. Some departments choose very flexible criteria that lack specific goals for a candidate being evaluated for promotion or tenure to follow. Departments reason that this allows candidates to meet department expectations in a way unique and fitting to each candidate’s goals for teaching, research, scholarship and creative activity. Deans and some faculty saw this as a double-edged sword. Vague departmental criteria give the administration very wide latitude in choosing to endorse or reverse recommendations.

The team realizes that this important topic deserves much further discussion and review by faculty members, departments, deans and administrative personnel. In particular, the academic community should strive to develop standards that are fair, transparent and encourage faculty to aspire to superior performance in teaching, research, scholarship, creative activity and service. [CFR 2.8, 2.9, 3.2, 3.7, 3.10]

The team commends the work done by the RPT Survey group in gathering and disseminating information on faculty and administration views on the retention, promotion and

tenure policy, department elaborations, and decision-making processes. [CFR 4.3] The team also recognizes the good work done by faculty in some departments in reviewing and revising department elaborations with the goal of providing clear expectations for teaching, research, scholarship, creative activity, and service to candidates seeking reappointment, promotion and tenure. [CFR 2.8, 2.9, 3.2]

The team recommends that faculty continue to develop clear department expectations for research, scholarship, and creative activity that reflect disciplinary practices, are aligned with the university's institutional purposes and educational objectives, and provide clear guidance for promotion and tenure. [CFR 2.8, 2.9; 3.2, 3.7]

### **III. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **A. Findings**

With respect to the four foci of the special visit, the team finds that there has been a substantial improvement in the climate and trust, and that shared governance is operating consistently at the level one would expect from a public university. With respect to strategic planning, the team finds substantial faculty involvement in planning discussions, but as noted below, the team recommends greater attention to developing a new or updated strategic plan. With respect to retention, promotion and tenure, the team finds that real progress is being made, but that the university would benefit from continued diligent effort to develop greater consistency in these processes.

#### **B. Commendations**

##### *1. Shared Governance and Trust*

The campus atmosphere has moved from one featuring animosity and conflict to one

punctuated by reasonable levels of trust and collaboration. To be sure, unresolved conflicts remain as one would expect in any academic community. But what seems to have changed is a commitment to civil, even friendly, discourse in addressing them.

## *2. Collaborative Processes*

In particular, the team commends the work of the Ad Hoc Trust Restoration Planning Committee, the RPT Survey group, and the University Budget Advisory Committee, as well as the efforts of other faculty members and administrators, who have been proactive in modeling behaviors and adhering to agreed-upon processes that underpin genuine shared governance.

## *3. Student Success*

The university community remains exceptional not only in its dedication to student success, but to actually improving student retention rates. National publications recognize these remarkable achievements in comparison with peer institutions. Increasing the participation, retention, and graduation rates of students in the region (and beyond) represents a major contribution to the quality of life and the range of opportunities for people in the region the university serves.

# **C. Recommendations**

## *1. Shared Governance and Institutional Climate*

In light of progress in reestablishing a climate of trust and collegiality, it is time for the University to begin shifting the focus on special, ad hoc committees to the standing committees charged with shared decision making and governance. [CFR 3.7]

## *2. Strategic Planning*

It is time for the university to collaborate in a systematic analysis of the changing economic, demographic, and political environment and to update the existing plan or create a new one to respond to these realities. [CFR 4.6 and 4.7]



### *3. Scholarship and Creative Activity*

More work needs to be done in developing retention, promotion, and tenure standards that are fair and transparent, and that encourage faculty to aspire to excellence in teaching, research, scholarship, creative activity, and service. [CFR 2.8, 2.9, and 3.2]