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**REPORT OF THE WASC SPECIAL VISIT TEAM To California State University
Stanislaus**

November 7-8, 2011

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The evaluation team in conducting its review was able to evaluate the institution under the Commission Standards and therefore submits this Report to the Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges for action and to the institution for consideration.

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SECTION I. OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

Context

A component of the California State University System, California State University Stanislaus (CSUS) was founded in 1957 as Stanislaus State College; moved to its current location in the heart of the Central Valley in 1965; and achieved university status twenty years later. A comprehensive university, CSUS offers some 42 undergraduate degrees, 24 graduate degrees, one doctoral degree and many credential and certificate programs. Nearly 450 full- and part-time faculty teach over eight thousand students (6,727 full-time equivalents).

When it comes to the key indicators of student retention and graduation statistics, CSUS performs above comparable institutions. It ranks in the top quarter within the California State System in six year graduation rates. Several ratings agencies—the *Princeton Review*, *U.S. News and World Report*—rank the University high compared with its competition as well.

Like virtually all public institutions in California and indeed the country, CSUS faces continuing reductions in state support. In FY 2011 and FY 2012, total state support dropped by more than a quarter or over \$16 million. It is fair to assume that its budget perils are far from over.

Recent Commission Actions

A July 13, 2010, letter from Ralph Wolff conveyed the Commission's actions to affirm the accreditation of CSUS, schedule a Capacity and Preparatory Review in the spring of 2019, an Educational Effectiveness Review in the fall of 2020, an interim report due in the spring of 2015, focusing on continuing progress on assessment, program review, and leadership and governance, and this Special Visit in the fall of 2011.

The foci of the present visit include:

- Assessment of learning, and especially the use of direct assessment methodologies which the 2010 Visiting Team and the Commission found to be “still uneven across the various academic disciplines.” The letter cites CFRs 2.2 and 4.4.
- Program review, with special attention to identifying external benchmarks, employing external reviewers and monitoring follow-up action plans. CFRs 2.7, 4.4 through 4.8 are referenced under this heading.
- Leadership and governance issues, especially the history of dysfunctional relationships between the faculty and the senior administration which “have risen

to levels of potential disruption to academic operations.” The relevant CFRs are 1.3, 3.11, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.6, and 4.8. Of the three foci, the leadership and governance questions are the most serious and occupied most of the team’s attention.

Quality of the Institutional Report

CSUS’s report adequately addressed the assessment and program review issues, and confirmed the depth of dysfunctional relations as well as the progress in ameliorating them. The core of the report is a summary of surveys administered to faculty leaders and administrators. The intention of the research, as reported in the institution’s self-study, was to “document and evaluate administration’s efforts to respond to the trust, leadership, and governance issues” that occasioned the Special Visit. The Special Visit Research Team (SVRT) surveyed six senior level administrators and 37 faculty leaders, of whom all administrators and 28 or 76% of faculty leaders responded.

This approach adequately confirmed a fairly negative view among faculty leaders who responded as to the efficacy of the administration’s efforts to rebuild trust. Not surprisingly, it also revealed more positive views from respondents in the administration. When asked why they reviewed only faculty leaders and not a representative sample of the rank and file, SVRT members replied that they felt the leaders represented the views of the faculty at large and would be more familiar with the administration’s initiatives.

These views represent a limitation in the research model. However, in open meetings with faculty, albeit sessions likely dominated by faculty leaders, negative comments far outnumbered endorsements of administrative actions and intentions. The fact that a more representative survey of the entire faculty would have been preferable does not diminish the reality that many faculty members profess to distrust the administration.

Team process

The team reviewed the extensive materials provided, interviewed the senior administration, faculty leaders, the institution’s Assessment Group, the Ad Hoc Trust Restoration Planning Committee, and the members of the Special Visit Research Team. The visiting team met frequently in executive sessions. While the visit was short and interviews necessarily brief, the team believes it achieved a sound understanding of CSUS’s progress toward greater functionality in leadership and governance and the other areas of focus.

SECTION II. ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUES

Assessment of Learning

The WASC Commission Action Letter of July 13, 2010, recommended that CSUS continue to apply direct assessment methods across the various disciplines and in co-curricular units. The University has actively responded to this recommendation and displays evidence of significant attentiveness to the importance of assessment across the academic disciplines as well as in special endeavors such as the First-Year Experience program.

There is an active faculty assessment group, supported by the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs. A campus-developed plan, *Advancing Educational Effectiveness*, builds upon the work done by the faculty coordinator for assessment as well as individual program assessment coordinators, and suggests a systematic approach to assessment.

Faculty facilitators, receiving a stipend for their work, meet monthly with an assessment team including the director of the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, the coordinator of the Graduate Education Assessment Consortium, the associate vice president for academic affairs, and the assessment specialist. To buttress this ongoing attention to assessment, a campus-wide “Assessment Spotlight” meeting was conducted on May 13, 2011. It featured several presentations of model practices by four of the academic departments, as well as by the offices of service learning, institutional research, and the library. Assessment is also a key feature of CSUS’s First-Year Experience program, including the deployment of electronic assessment materials to build electronic portfolios of student work.

In sum, the University has been diligent in addressing the recommendations on assessment made by the prior Visiting Team and repeated in the Commission’s Action Letter.

Program Review

The WASC Visiting Team EER Report of 2010 recommended that “as the institution gains experience in administering program reviews that it also pay attention to best practices, incorporating periodic and systematic monitoring of implementation plans, using external evidence and benchmarks, and engaging external reviewers.”

The University is making serious efforts to comply with these suggestions. For example, the Office of Assessment and Quality Assurance has started to meet regularly with faculty to discuss the selection of external benchmarks and the use of external reviewers.

Interestingly, CSUS substitutes the term “external consultants” for external reviewers at times to emphasize the supportive and collegial character of the most useful external review interactions. With the goal of “closing the loop” during the seven-year Academic Program Review (APR) cycle, various administrative offices work with faculty in the 52 programs in the cycle to ensure that effective program review includes change actions based on evidence and reports from external reviews.

In sum, the University continues to be responsive to the recommendations on program review offered by the prior Team.

Leadership and Governance

Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* famously begins with the observation that all happy families are alike in their happiness, while each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. What factors contributed to the current unhappy state of affairs at CSUS? What are the early results of initiatives now underway? What actions must be taken and what attitudes changed going forward in order for Stanislaus to develop into a well-functioning academic community?

The 2010 Visiting Team made the lack of trust a centerpiece in a report that overall praised CSUS for its success with students. While not placing blame, the Commission charged the administration with the responsibility for remediation by designing “the initiative and circumstances that will provide for a resolution of this problem.”

The atmosphere of distrust on the part of faculty toward administration is palpable. There is far less distrust from senior administrators toward faculty. It is also the team’s view that, as recommended in the prior WASC visit, the administration is making genuine efforts to engage faculty in serious conversations on issues of importance to the performance and future of CSUS.

However, the attitudes underpinning the 2009 no confidence vote persist in the minds and hearts of many faculty members. Emotions run high among some faculty. One quote from the report of the Special Visit Research Team captures this mood: “It would be very helpful if faculty could FEEL and FIND EVIDENCE [emphases in original] that administration care about their department’s future.”

How did what appears to have been a reasonably happy campus descend into an acrimonious one? Several factors contributed to this state of affairs.

The current president exercises a “strong executive” leadership style that includes consultation with faculty before a decision is made, but does not necessarily seek out faculty participation in the decision itself. He employed this approach in deciding to eliminate a winter academic session that many faculty preferred to keep. This choice

among others spurred a subsequent no confidence vote.

The turnover among senior administrators, some of whom enjoyed positive relationships with faculty, meant a loss of institutional memory and understanding of the culture. The ability to rely on informal agreements that are the *sine qua non* of trust decayed as new administrators appeared on the scene. Turnover contributed to suspicion of motive and intent.

The faculty culture at Stanislaus seems to be one that holds especially strong regard for faculty rights, privileges, and a voice in shared governance. The faculty at CSUS were one of the first in the CSU system to form a union. By some accounts, the leadership of the union and the faculty senate often coincide. To be sure, collective bargaining need not be an impediment to solving problems and working toward common solutions, but it requires experience and willingness to reach agreement within the framework of a labor contract—factors that have not always been present in abundance at Stanislaus.

Finally, the times call for difficult conversations around unpleasant realities, for adapting to an environment where state support for academic programs has sharply declined and will likely continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Closing the winter term is but one example of the hard choices required by the state's economic slide. CSUS has made other adjustments to accommodate the 'new normal' such as putting its winter intersession and summer session on a financially self-sustaining footing. Decisions like these and more difficult ones that lie ahead, tough in the best of circumstances, become even more divisive where trust and a history of courageous conversations have been absent, as has been the case at CSUS.

What has been the result of current efforts to improve working relationships?

Initial steps called for in the 2010 Team Report have been launched by the administration with the cooperation of faculty leaders. The Ad Hoc Trust Restoration Planning Committee is one of these. Additional formal and informal actions are highlighted in the work of the Special Visit Research Team as outreach actions, transparency actions, communications actions and advocacy actions. These actions range from the President inviting faculty to dinner to the work of specially formed groups like the Ad Hoc Trust Restoration Planning Committee.

The Special Visit Research Team's report confirms that restoring a reasonable level of trust at CSUS is a developmental process coupling progress with periodic setbacks. The report reads in part: "Overall, the picture that emerges is one in which some progress has been made in restoring the climate of trust. However, this progress has been limited almost entirely to the earliest stages of the trust restoration process: facilitating information sharing and encouraging open discussion." The report goes on to state that

many faculty remain skeptical of the intentions behind these initiatives. The team found a similar skepticism in its open session with faculty.

What should faculty and administrative leaders focus upon to recreate a well-functioning academic community?

In the words of one long time faculty member and administrator, it is essential that the entire academic community—faculty and administration— “own” the problem of dysfunctional relationships. The University enjoys what is likely to be a temporary respite from budget cuts. Now is the time for the factions to come together to plan how it will not just survive, but excel in serving students at least as well as it currently does.

If administrative turnover, hard choices, and leadership styles have contributed to the fissures, faculty must bear some responsibility as well. During the team’s open sessions for example, the team heard plenty of complaints about perceived administrative missteps, but precious little about what faculty members were doing to help improve relationships. An exception to this pattern is the good and courageous work of tenured faculty on the Ad Hoc Trust Restoration Planning Committee and no doubt positive actions in other, less formal venues as well. The team holds that, if more faculty members contributed their best efforts to making governance work at CSUS, the return to genuine shared governance would be more quickly achieved.

It is not too grand to assert that the University needs to recreate an academic community featuring mutual respect and a shared recognition of difficult choices that lie ahead. How that community will plan for its future (strategic planning), standards for membership and progress through the ranks (retention, promotion and tenure policies), and how members of the community will work together to make decisions (shared governance) are all up for grabs at Stanislaus at the moment.

One model emerging strongly across the country is to place most of the responsibility for hard decisions with the administration, while minimizing the role of faculty and marginalizing their influence in shared governance. A second model, much more consistent with the standards of the Commission and the traditions at CSUS, calls for a higher level of collaborative leadership around the tough choices ahead. The Special Visit team encourages the administration and faculty to continue the early steps they are taking to realize the second model.

SECTION III. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Assessment and program review

With respect to assessment of learning and program review, the team finds that CSUS is actively addressing the issues and recommendations made in the prior team reports and confirmed in communications from the Commission. The University is to be commended for the serious work of faculty and administrators engaged with assessment of student learning. Similarly with program review, the systematic, campus-wide, multi-year efforts to engage in best practices surrounding program review and to apply the results of reviews are to be commended.

Recommendations

The University is encouraged to continue its thoughtful efforts to fully implement both the recommendations of the prior team and the University's own plans for both assessment of learning and program review. (CFRs 2.2, 2.7, 4.4-4.7)

Leadership and Governance

If the gulf between many faculty and the administration remains wide, there are good faith efforts on both sides to abbreviate it. Notable among these is the work of the Ad Hoc Trust Restoration Planning Committee, comprised of faculty and administrative leaders. This group and others are patiently working through important and divisive issues such as a process for long range planning, definitions of shared governance, and criteria for retention, promotion and tenure. The team, and the faculty members and the administrators with whom the team spoke, recognizes that the goal of developing well-functioning working relationships will be a long term effort requiring daily attention. The team's recommendations reflect this fact of life.

Recommendations

The team recommends that the administration and faculty:

- Continue the good work of the Ad Hoc Trust Restoration Planning Committee in addressing forthrightly the important issues facing this academic community
- Continue and intensify the work of other joint faculty-administrative committees such as the University Budget Advisory Committee for purposes of communicating and discussing important University issues (CFR 3.8)
- Continue the work of the Special Visit Research Team and expand its occasional surveys to include a larger representation of all faculty (CFR 4.8)
- Engage in serious conversations around strategic directions and plans for the

future that take into account economic realities, CSUS's mission and distinctive strengths, and the importance of continuing its comparative excellence when it comes to student achievement (CFR 4.1)

- Engage in candid discussion of verifiable standards for faculty retention, promotion and tenure that align with CSUS's mission (CFR 3.8)
- Engage in respectful dialogue over the meaning of shared governance that takes into account California State University System policies, WASC standards, collective bargaining agreements, and the importance of striving to sustain the ideal of an academic community. (CFRs 1.3, 3.8, 3.11, 4.6, 4.8)