

ACCESS TO EXCELLENCE CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Report of the Campus Conversation -- March 21, 2007

*Prioritization and selectivity are keys to
successful strategic planning
----- Anon.*

Collaborative efforts of the Cal State Fullerton University Planning Committee and the WASC Re-Accreditation Steering Committee set the format and topical structure of the afternoon conversation that was held on March 21, 2007. Following a luncheon and convening by President Milton A. Gordon, roundtable discussions enumerated campus strengths as well as arenas where we could be doing better (assessment component), defined what may be needed to make improvements happen (the planning component), and considered various ways that the CSU system office could support those improvements (structural and resource components).

Several weeks in advance of the event, the University Planning Committee gave the nine-member WASC Steering Committee the charge of defining the specific themes for discussion. This latter group believed this event could provide an ideal opportunity to meld several of the Chancellor's Office proposed domains with the framework of accreditation standards and campus-defined research themes. It was decided to focus the Access to Excellence conversation on two domains and five themes. Those were presented, along with prompts, as questions for discussion. The key domains and themes are as follows:

DOMAIN: Ensuring Success in Student Learning

Theme 1: In what ways do we demonstrate the achievement of outcomes-based competencies among students, and communicate these outcomes in ways that are clear and accessible to students, parents, and the public? To answer this question, consider . . . *[Discussion tables were given prompts.]*

Theme 2: In what ways do we ensure that comprehensive student advising occurs continuously from entry through graduation at Fullerton? To answer this question, consider . . . *[Discussion tables were given prompts.]*

Theme 3: In what ways do we support student participation in the research and scholarly and creative activities of faculty? To answer this question, consider . . . *[Discussion tables were given prompts.]*

DOMAIN: Faculty / Staff Excellence to Promote Student Success

Theme 4: How do we support high performance by faculty, staff, and administrators, and recognize multiple contributions from both faculty and staff, including service to our broader external communities? To answer this question, consider . . . *[Discussion tables were given prompts.]*

Theme 5: In what ways do we ensure service excellence in every area to support student achievement, satisfaction, and persistence? To answer this question, consider . . . *[Discussion tables were given prompts.]*

The basic format for conversations was a “table talk” structure, with each table having a pre-assigned discussion leader and a volunteer recorder, the latter being provided with a wireless laptop computer for recordation. Each table was assigned just one of the above five themes for a 45-minute conversation. Five members of the WASC Steering Committee later presented concise summaries of the discussions. That segment was followed by an Open Forum period and concluding remarks by President Gordon. Two hundred sixty-three members of the campus and external communities participated, representing a diverse mix of faculty, staff, students, alumni, administrators, and the Orange County community.

Theme 1: Ensuring Success in Student Learning

We recognize that in order to demonstrate the achievement of excellence in student learning we need a solid foundation of clearly articulated student learning goals and systematic assessment processes. Many academic departments at CSUF make excellent presentations of their program learning goals in advisement materials and their catalog program descriptions. Those presentations, admittedly, are uneven across and within the eight colleges. We continue to invest in meeting the challenges of basic skill development, particularly in the areas of writing and computational skills. For example the University Learning Center and the Writing Assistance Center are well staffed and heavily utilized. We also commend the CSU system for instituting the Early Assessment Program, which helps to communicate expectations for college readiness to high school students, using faculty-developed instruments. All General Education courses, new course proposals, and new degree proposals now are required to have clearly articulated student learning goals. Participants noted the highly positive collaboration between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs in promoting student learning. The Student Affairs Division conducts its own program assessment efforts in many of its operational units, such as the University Learning Center, the Women’s Center programs, and the Athletic-Academic Services office. Fullerton’s numerous partnerships in cross-disciplinary teaching and learning, internships, and opportunities for service learning are evidence of our commitment to bridging and connecting the work and interests of the university to communities beyond the campus boundaries.

We can improve upon several processes and activities that are integral to demonstrating student competencies. Roundtable groups specifically mentioned the following:

- Explore a requirement that student learning goals be articulated in the catalog descriptions for all degree programs
- Work toward greater uniformity in course syllabi
- Add an ethics component to writing activities
- Give greater attention to development and integration of critical thinking and information literacy opportunities
- Communicate our student learning expectations more strongly to our community partners
- Obtain more frequent, systematic feedback from our alumni about skill competencies and co-curricular experiences that have proven to be most important in their careers

To make improvements happen in these areas we can acknowledge and disseminate “best practices” examples of learning goals, local assessment practices, and model course syllabi from within our campus. The campus has taken initial steps to recruit a new Director of Assessment and Educational Effectiveness whose responsibilities will include providing support and resources to the faculty and campus in this area. The university should also make greater use of technologically-mediated strategies (e.g., web blogs and list serves) to provide enhanced communication with and information sharing with internal and external stakeholders, including alumni.

With our massive number of new faculty hires at Fullerton comes the challenge of building a stronger sense of campus community and ownership of responsibilities for ensuring success in student learning. As an institution committed to supporting diversity in all its forms, we must remain open to diverse practices and methods of ensuring student learning and its assessment --- one size would not, and should not, “fit all” in the CSUF campus culture.

Theme 2: Assuring Comprehensive and Continuous Student Advising

Among our strengths in the student advising arena are the mandatory orientation program for freshmen and, beginning with 2007-08, mandatory transfer student orientation. The college-based Assistant Deans (jointly supported by Student Affairs and Academic Affairs) play a central role in all orientation efforts. Each semester, the university also hosts well-attended orientation programs for our international students, athletes, future teachers, honors students and students interested in the health professions. Academic advising information also appears on web sites at both the campus and departmental levels.

We appreciate that providing excellence in student advising requires continual tailoring of these opportunities and materials for distinctive segments of our

student population. Compartmentalization in advising certainly has its benefits but can lead to important gaps, where critical information and support may be overlooked. Advisement for first year students, transfers, graduate students, and international students must emphasize different aspects of our institutional regulations, expectations, and provide selective information about those services that are most meaningful to each specific cohort. Fine tuning that advisement requires on-going attention.

Discussants brought out two other places where advisement deserves improvement: (a) uneven advising for transfer students, including gaps between community college advising and departmental-based advisement for incoming majors; and (b) the existence of a “dead zone,” between GE requirements and advisement for the major. Students need more counsel about ways to use “free electives” to strengthen basic skills and/or enrich the overall breadth of the collegiate learning experience. One must remain mindful that unevenness in advising arises in part from the wide range of student expectations about the meaning and scope of what constitutes “advisement” as well as the institutional knowledge and experiences of those who are engaged in providing that advisement.

What then is needed to make such improvements become embedded in everyday practices?

- Integrate advising forms and general advising records across the campus, while maintaining the valued diversity of advisement content
- Consider hiring “Professional Advisers,” who can strengthen institutional knowledge and provide continuity in practices
- Require a “Study Plan” that outlines the remaining units to be taken by undergraduates when they complete the first 90 units toward their degree
- Assist students to understand that knowing and following policies and procedures is a shared responsibility ---- theirs and the universities
- Provide more advisers at the Irvine branch campus
- Create a network or formal roundtable organization open to all persons engaged in advisement – to meet regularly, share best practices and solution strategies
- Engage in stronger advisement collaboration with our Community College partners

The CSU system office can assist in these efforts by supporting organized collaborative advisement with the community colleges, providing more opportunities and resources for adviser training, and helping to codify technicalities in transfer matters that are common to all campuses in our system.

Theme 3: Supporting Student Participation in Research and Scholarly / Creative Activities

Support for student research is a campus value that is expressed in our Mission and Goals statements and widely shared in practices. It takes many forms, ranging from solo student research or creative activity and collaborative student projects to students working alongside faculty mentors in research labs and performance settings. Cal State Fullerton takes pride in having highly engaged faculty and inquisitive students across the university. Specific markers of student excellence in this regard are:

- Research-intensive capstone courses exist in many undergraduate majors.
- Two-thirds of all Biology students are conducting research projects in any given academic year.
- Active collaborations are hallmarks of Chemistry, Health Sciences, Civil Engineering, Geography, Geology, Psychology and other disciplines leading to jointly-authored professional articles and conference presentations.
- More than two dozen Theater Arts students have been selected to give performances at the American College Theater Festival held at the Kennedy Center, placing CSUF in the top-tier nationally.
- CSUF students document immigrant community histories through participation in the Oral History program.
- Each spring 25 students in the College of Communications plan and implement an elaborate Communications Week program
- Several departments in the College of Natural Science and Mathematics incorporate student research collaborations into their faculty personnel standards.
- Fullerton has strong representation at the annual CSU student research competition
- Associated Students, Inc. provides conference travel stipends to student participants.
- Our McNair Scholars Program is known regionally and nationally
- Independent study courses (499 and 599) provide vehicles for student research and creative projects

It is clear that we should be doing a far better job of communicating these kinds of accomplishments to external audiences (as potential sources of support and projects of mutual interest) and to our own students (expanding the numbers of participants). We could be increasing research and scholarly opportunities within

our existing CSUF research centers. Table discussants also suggested the need to streamline processes for students to obtain intramural grants, consider ways to infuse research opportunities into General Education, expand the uses of technology to connect student scholars with each other and with faculty / program-based research prospects, and to provide faculty with adequate resources and support for mentoring student research. The university must also recognize and reward faculty specifically for engaging students in research and creative activities.

The CSU system can further our goal of striving for excellence in this area in a number of ways:

- Promote settings for collegial discussions about best practices and challenges of engaging students in scholarly and creative pursuits
- Revise the resource allocation formulae to recognize that space for research extends beyond the STEM disciplines
- Increase the amount of funding for the CSU Student Research Competition
- Broadcast the word more forcefully to the legislature that CSU campuses are active in research and being recognized for the quality of products

Theme 4: Supporting Faculty and Staff Excellence

In the broadest sense, the university is obligated to have clear processes that are used fairly for accountability and to provide support systems for all personnel employed by the university. In short, an interest in administrative excellence must exist in concert with interest in faculty and staff excellence. At CSUF all personnel groups are made aware of, and held to, accountability measures through the annual performance evaluation processes. Those processes are aligned with the university's Mission and Goals.

Cal State Fullerton supports professional growth and recognizes achievements throughout all employment groups in the campus community. The structures and mechanisms that the discussion groups considered to be Fullerton's strengths are

- Diversified Employment Training and Development program
- Faculty Development Center whose programs are tailored to enhancing faculty teaching and learning
- Monthly Titan Award Program and annual service recognition events that reward excellence in many different aspects of campus work
- Outstanding Professor Award; Carol Barnes Outstanding Teaching Award
- Early promotion and tenure available for faculty

- Availability of CSU Fee Waiver program for staff to work toward academic degrees
- Faculty / Staff Housing Program administered through our Auxiliary Services Corporation
- Assigned time for faculty for research, particular service activities and/or special projects of campus-wide interest
- Special investment in new faculty

Possible areas for improvement within this theme could include conceptual as well as programmatic efforts. Some participants at the campus conversation hold the view that too many members of the campus work in silos and have a limited understanding of the relevance of their work to the larger university goals [big picture]. Others perceive that administrators do not necessarily hold the same priorities as the faculty and staff or may have divergent points of view as to the purposes of the university. The expected workloads on individuals are quite high across the entire spectrum of university employees --- staff, faculty, and administrators alike. Those must be reduced if the university is to operate within anything that resembles a reasonable work / life balance.

At the program or operational level the following items were also considered areas in need of improvement:

- Low staff salaries, perceived to be non-competitive with those in the private sector
- Lengthy time and protracted process for staff hiring
- Balance in the orientation for newcomers and provision of a more extensive acculturation for those individuals
- Limited incentives for taking on leadership roles
- Integrating the staff and faculty more fully into campus planning processes
- Making better use of our University Advancement division in this area

So what is needed to make these kinds of improvements become realities? Calls are being made to streamline the “bureaucracy” as well as streamlining the personnel process. In addition, there are sentiments to bring the rewards system into closer alignment with the institution’s Mission and Goals.

There are calls for enhanced support from the CSU system office to promote excellence in the faculty and staff environment by taking these actions:

- Take a more aggressive stance toward the state legislature in the press for adequate resources – “vigorous advocacy”
- Work with the collective bargaining units to define more realistic [reduced] workloads and to fund those adequately

- Employ a more realistic methodology for providing faculty research space – one that “reflects the realities of today’s comprehensive university”
- Allocate specific funds for undergraduate and graduate student research assistantships
- Provide resources to increase the size and diversity of our graduate programs as well as the new independent doctoral program

Theme 5: Ensuring Service Excellence in Every Area to Support Student Success

A core strength of Cal State Fullerton is our responsive service to the diversity that is a hallmark of our institution. Like so many large institutions, those services are highly compartmentalized, which poses challenges for “reaching across that diversity.” As was noted in an earlier theme of this report, the Student Affairs Division regularly conducts assessments to measure the effectiveness of their operational units and the programs operating within those units. Faculty and staff in Academic Affairs, however, have little awareness of that effort and how student feedback and input are being used. Moreover, many offices within Academic Affairs, do not conduct systematic reviews of their interactions with students. The views expressed in the “table talk” suggest that topical coverage of certain kinds of information is very deep and systematic (i.e., accountability measures compiled by Institutional Research and Analytical Studies) but desired information on some aspects of campus interest may be dated, not collected, or is not widely disseminated. Just how much of this sentiment may reflect limited faculty / staff awareness and what share of those views represent true gaps in our knowledge base is unknown.

Aspects of our service functions that are considered to be strengths:

- Annual evaluations of services within Student Affairs such as the Housing and Residence Life satisfaction survey
- Associated Students’ reviews of learning outcomes and assessment among volunteers (approximately 360 reviews annually)
- Welcome to Fullerton Day as a resource / service information event
- Richness of the demographic and enrollment trend data on the Institutional Research web site

What are the apparent gaps and what can we do better?

- Conduct “exit surveys” among graduating students
- Offer student participation in faculty meetings

- Gather more information from students through focused thematic surveys — expressions of their needs, priorities, and satisfaction with specific service aspects of the institution
- Obtain feedback from faculty and staff regarding student services
- Essential service offices typically function 8-5 even though we are a 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. campus
- Inconsistent implementation of policies and procedures across academic departmental and program units
- “Hearing and acting upon student input and feedback”

Participant recommendations for tools and strategies to close those gaps and make continuing improvements include:

- Consider an electronic “one-stop” shopping kiosk on the campus website for critical information and support (virtual locations)
- Create an on-campus location providing one-stop assistance
- Provide workshops and training materials on customer relations management and consistency in policy implementation
- Extend operating hours into the evenings for key student services
- Shift to more contemporary methods of “information marketing” that are in forms and at locations [electronic] that are likely to be used by students

The CSU system can support improvements in facilitating student services success by providing technical assistance and resources on “best practices” in student surveys; helping to see that routine student processes are more automated and database driven; and providing information to students in a readable and accessible fashion. Provide enhanced resources to address these activities, “then stand back and allow us the flexibility to define, implement, and evaluate processes according to local criteria.”