

Provost Hellenbrand's Spring 2005 Message

The Learning-Centered University: Why Now, What Now?

PRINCIPLES:

Cal State Northridge has had a conversation about being a learning-centered university. In bits and pieces—through Beck grants, CELT, Community Service Learning, Online instruction, living and learning communities in Residential Life, and many other programs like the Freshman Seminar—we are developing a working understanding of *learning-centered*. Three principles, I believe, guide this thinking:

1. **ACTIVE LEARNING:** CSUN should empower faculty and staff to regard students not as vessels that receive knowledge, but rather as agents who assume responsibility for learning and, in fact, construct learning collaboratively. (The current University Mission statement speaks to this, too, under *Values*.)
2. **MANY MEANS, ONE END:** CSUN community members should act on the belief that all the services and functions in the University—plant maintenance, counseling, student recruitment, as examples—converge on one end only: enhancing students' readiness to learn.
3. **PARTS OF ONE WHOLE:** CSUN community members should work together to create learning outcomes not just for individual courses and experiences, but also for whole programs and pathways to degrees. We assess how well these programs and pathways enable students to learn these outcomes for two reasons: to guide students and to improve the conditions for learning across campus.

CONCERNS:

At Cal State Northridge and at other universities, however, people have questioned such initiatives. (See, for instance, the winter issue of Academe.) Don't learning-centered initiatives deflect from the rigor that links teaching—and students' absorption of that teaching—to the academic disciplines? Learning-centered *this or that*, in other words, can institutionalize the coddling of students, detour faculty from subject matter to pedagogy, debase standards, and surrender the university to its customers' whims. In this interpretation, internal values yield to external pressures.

But the external pressures are, in fact, urgent and compelling. Either we will confront them head-on, or we will suffer a further erosion of learning and teaching. Shortly, I will sketch these pressures and outline how we can respond. But I want to put these doubts in perspective, briefly.

A great strength of American higher education has been its relevance, based on its capacity to bridge the world of higher learning and the public. In democratic societies, the inhabitants of the ivy tower must let the drawbridge down for the public. Why? Always remember that there is no prince or prelate to protect the tower, without the support of the public. And as the public enters, those in the tower gain something beyond protection. They learn from and about the world.

EXTERNAL FORCES:

Of the many external forces affecting higher education, these six impel us to respond now to who our students are and how they learn:

- **First, demographics:** the college-going population, especially in Southern California, will surge for ten years and become more diverse. Demand has overtaken supply (allocated enrollments) while classrooms become a whirl of dialects and cultures.
- **Second, preparation for college:** because of seismic upheavals in funding, staffing, and teacher training, the gap between K-12 preparation of students and universities' expectations of them when they enter has deepened and widened.
- **Third, the budget:** the tax revolts of the '70s and '80s and the financial crises of the '90s and '00s have been compounded by the public's (public or government's ????) increasing reluctance to fund elective services like higher education. As a result, our capacity to teach the ways that we have in the past has been constricted.
- **Fourth, competition:** we forget that the apparent necessity of a collegiate degree is a recent cultural invention, not a natural inevitability. While we are swamped by demand, proprietary schools—which teach just-in-time skills for jobs—corrode our claim to relevance, sap public support for universities, and cloud the future.
- **Fifth, accountability:** what we now see is a twist on the Puritan impulse to hold learning accountable for good works. Accrediting agencies and associations, legislative benchmarks, and CSU indicators require us to report institutional performance. In the economic world, the federal Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 raised the bar for corporate financial reporting. In K-12 education, the Bush Administration's No Child Left Behind Act imposed similar scrutiny. Universities now are patrolled by public accountability, too.
- **Sixth, demands on time:** As university fees increase, students work more to afford college. Work time competes with school time. And as the CSU's teaching mission has branched into research and regional service, faculty and staff experience more demands on their time, too. When the 50-60 hour, multifaceted

work-week of faculty collides with the 24-7 demands of the college-going public, traditional schedules either bend or break.

PERSISTENT PROBLEMS:

The root causes of these problems only can be addressed by the combined efforts of the public, the governor, the state legislature, and California's whole P-16 educational system. But at Cal State Northridge, we must treat the local symptoms now. To do so, we can apply what can be gleaned from learning-centered initiatives under way at CSUN to these persistent problems:

- **First, college preparation:** Entry Level Mathematics (ELM) and English Placement Test (EPT) scores are improving; and the CSU's Early Assessment Program, albeit severely under-funded, will get college-minded sophomores and juniors on track earlier. Meanwhile, CSUN's Teachers for a New Era (TNE) initiative promises to infuse the whole range of teacher preparation programs on campus with a school-as-clinic model in which teaching strategies are determined by on-site research into pupil learning. But this only is a start. Since the vast majority of CSUN students originate from the Los Angeles Unified School District, we must coordinate a campus-wide commitment, beyond singular projects like the San Fernando Valley Science Project, GEAR-UP, and TNE, to improve K-12 education—from the quality of teachers whom we prepare to the basic skills with which high school seniors graduate.
- **Second, orientation:** College orientation is a process, not an event. It begins with our recruiters. It should be reinforced by the interns and community-service-learning students whom we place in schools. Of course, it appears to culminate in events in late summer for many new freshmen and transfers. But it must continue in introductory General Education and major courses. Across this range we must communicate a challenging vision of college. That vision must be very clear. It must emphasize the academic work and out-of-class activities that college success requires, the purposes of general education and the major, the advising services that can facilitate academic success, and the advantages of staying in—not stopping out—in order to graduate in six years. With better preparation for college and coordinated orientation for students, we can begin to bridge the gap to college.
- **Third, retention:** Retention builds directly on preparation and orientation. Data suggest that once students achieve upper-division status at CSUN, they persist and graduate at rates that are comparable to elsewhere in the CSU. But freshmen do not. At the junior and senior level, we involve students in clubs that are linked to majors, tie them to department mentors, and place them in settings where they begin to apply what they have learned so that they actually construct knowledge. As freshmen, though, many students are unmoored. EOP, the Freshmen Seminar, and the Living and Learning experiments in the residence halls buck this trend, however. They meld students into supportive groups; and they practice intrusive

mentoring with immediate diagnosis of individual academic needs. These experiences need to be scaled across the first two years so that new students not only survive but thrive. In sum, we need to formulate an academic Marshall Plan for first-time freshmen students' first two years.

- **Fourth, credit for demonstrated knowledge, not just term time:** We are caught in a vicious squeeze between the complicated needs of a growing student body and the harried time of a faculty and staff that under-funding relentlessly reduces. Since the state funds us per full-time-equivalent student, teaching fewer students in order to concentrate on fewer complications is not a solution. With fewer students, resources ebb, the workforce spirals down, and funds for support services diminish. We need to think outside the formulae of term, classroom, seat time, and fixed credit, even if artifacts that we use to report workload seem to imprison us. We have some alternative models at hand. ELM, EPT, AP, and other placement exams test for either credit or competency. PACE, Extended Education, and Online have pioneered the asynchronous classroom. We must adapt these lessons so that we can dedicate faculty and staff time where we think it is needed most, not where formulae and habit dictate.
- **Fifth, accountability and assessment:** Accountability is the public face of assessment. The Higher Education Reauthorization Act, the CSU Compact with Governor Schwarzenegger, and our many accreditation reports tally—among other things—retention, graduation, and remediation rates. These figures—rather than indicators like library size and advanced degrees held by the faculty that were common a generation ago—are now forming a university's national reputation, which in turn affects faculty recruitment, student admissions, and funding. So, there are formidable reasons to improve these trends. But accountability is merely a game of numbers unless we develop assessments that help us to explain, as well as to measure, these trends. With results fed back into the design of curriculum and services, we can make change rational.
- **Sixth, faculty and staff development:** To be learning-centered requires that we focus development on research and activities—K-12 preparation, orientation, retention, alternative means of instruction, and assessment—that promise solutions to the problems that face us as an institution. Otherwise, we leave that to speculation and *ad hoc*, un-replicable patches. CSUN certainly can—and does—support disciplinary research. But CELT has led the way in demonstrating how to achieve improvements in learning by leveraging small grants and the rewards for professional development in personnel policies. The harder task remains though. It is cultural: convincing ourselves that research and service that directly tackle the university's problems can be esteemed as highly as research and service in the disciplines.

We cannot assume a future reservoir of students for CSUN if we do not attend to these problems. The college-going numbers are increasing, yes. But the trend is tenuous since the K-12 population in Los Angeles County is projected to decrease through 2015.

Meanwhile, to the west, the CSU system has authorized the Cal State Channel Islands campus to grow. And to the north, the Antelope Valley Center (a success already) attracts northern Ventura and southern Kern students to Bakersfield. Right here, Los Angeles Unified has joined other urban school districts in taking over teacher preparation because, they say, universities have failed them miserably. Finally, the just-in-time training that industry prefers in response to a morphing economy fits easily into the community colleges and the proprietary institutes that surround us. As I emphasized earlier, no prince or prelate protects us from these forces. Instead, our future success depends on what we say we value the most: agile intelligence. That is our asset. We must use it to reshape how we act and, as a result, how our students learn.

Harry Hellenbrand
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
California State University, Northridge

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