

# **The Learning-Centered University: What the Conversation is About**

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A lesson from my discipline for today's presentation is the concept of "knowing your audience." Communication faculty who teach advanced public speaking advise students that a key element in making presentations is to understand their audience. In order for me to understand this audience, I would like to ask you a series of questions related to our work on campus on embracing the learning-centered university:

- How many of you were at the 2003 President's Convocation address or read the speech?
- How many of you were at the 2004 Convocation or read that speech?
- How many of you heard William Plater's presentation to the members of the campus community last spring?
- How many of you participated in the brown bag dialogues?
- How many of you have read any of the material that is on the University's Web site related to becoming a more learning-centered university?
- Finally, how many of you attended the October 2004 conference on becoming a more learning-centered university?

Your answers to these questions tell me that this faculty and staff have already fully embraced this conversation about becoming a more learning-centered university. I anticipated there would be this high degree of participation. My appreciation to all of you for being willing to engage in this set of dialogues and conversations. I really appreciate your willingness to imagine a new future for California State University, Northridge as we respond to what is going on in the rest of our world of higher education. I want to join with Ron McIntyre in particularly expressing appreciation to Mark Sergi, Department of Psychology; Veda Ward, Department of Leisure Studies and Recreation; and Jennifer Zvi, Center on Disabilities, for working on the program and pulling this all together. I also want to thank Ron as the faculty president for representing the faculty so well.

Let me describe for you the topics or elements of this discussion that I will review and talk about with you this morning. The first point will be a review of why it is we are having this conversation or, to put it another way, how did Cal State Northridge come to this point in our planning. My second point will be to describe what the conversation we are having is *not* about. And then, of course, my third point will focus on what the conversation *is* about. Fourth, I will describe what I am asking you to do, individually and collectively. Finally, and most appropriately, I will address what it is I intend to do

and what I intend to ask the members of the University and the administrative team to do as part of this University's commitment to become more learning centered.

So let me go back to the beginning—and to my beginning with Cal State Northridge—and review for you how it is we have reached this series of intense and focused discussions about becoming a more learning-centered university.

When I began at Cal State Northridge in 2000, I identified four priorities for myself and members of my administrative team, using a variety of mechanisms. The relevant priority for this discussion—improving graduation rates—came out of interaction and discussion with then-Provost Louanne Kennedy and the members of the Academic Affairs staff. I had asked for information to help me better understand Cal State Northridge. In response, the Provost and her staff presented to me their deep concerns about the University's rate of graduating students. It didn't take a lot of persuasion to share their alarm about the graduation rates of our students. And, in fact, I saw an incongruity between those low graduation rates and the emphasis on student learning that I know characterized this faculty and staff. I saw that faculty and staff here had a genuine concern for students and student learning. But the formal measure of student learning—the graduation rate—showed Cal State Northridge to be in a very negative position.

To investigate, we established a Graduation Rate Task Force, which is what academic institutions do. The Task Force was co-chaired by Provost Kennedy and then-Faculty Presidents Diane Schwartz and her successor, Michael Neubauer. The Task Force consulted widely through many different iterations and made numerous recommendations for change.

But the premise of the Graduation Rate Task Force—that Cal State Northridge has a problem because our graduation rates were very low—was accepted by only some members of the University community. Others accepted it with explanations or rationalizations of why our history of graduating students was so poor. And for other members of the University community, the premise was rejected entirely. Sometimes it was rejected because some believe that the responsibility for the low graduation rates rests with others—not the University. During the last several years, we have worked on the recommendations from the Graduation Rate Task Force with greater and lesser degrees of affection. We have embraced these recommendations differentially. Keep that in mind as I continue with this story of our journey on this issue....

One of the responsibilities of being president of a university is to always look at the “big picture.” One of the responsibilities of a university president is to be aware of what is happening not just in the institution itself, but also what is happening in the world outside, particularly the University's role in the community, the state, and the larger national—and to some extent, international—scene with respect to higher education. Because of that responsibility, in the fall of 2003, I described in the annual convocation address three major forces affecting all of higher education.

I try to remind everyone of these forces at every opportunity because all three forces are very critical to us and to our discussion of becoming a more learning-centered university.

The first force was, and still is, the eroding financial base. That has not and will not go away. The second force is the increasing demand for access to higher education. That too is not going to go away. The third force I initially described, and will continue to describe, as two faces of the same coin. To understand this force requires us to be more thoughtful and deliberate.

The force—external to the institution—is best described as accountability. This force is exemplified by people who say that higher education needs to do a better job of explaining, of documenting, of proving, and of convincing the public that students learn what we say they are going to learn. Higher education now is expected to “prove” that the money being provided by the state, parents and students is used effectively. The other side of the coin, phrased in ways more acceptable to those of us in the Academy, is that we need to work to become more learning centered.

After the 2003 Convocation address, the campus agreed to respond to the three forces by beginning with the force of becoming more learning centered. We choose this starting point because it is more positive and closer to our operating values. For example, if we had framed the discussion around accountability, there would have been less of an enthusiastic response. I doubt that we would have had a faculty retreat on that topic!

Becoming more learning centered was a wise starting point for us at California State University, Northridge. The conversation framed in this way provides motivation and intrinsic reward for us because we care fundamentally about learning.

Nevertheless, it is important to be aware that while we are having this conversation and framing it in terms of becoming more learning centered, other groups and other portions of the higher education and public sector worlds have, in fact, continued to exert pressure around that force framed in accountability terms. External to the campus, these forces have continued to swirl and to bring pressure. There are many indicators of these national forces, but I am not going to detail them now in the interest of time. But just accept for the moment that there are large numbers of organizations, people, and initiatives on the national scene that are continuing to frame this force in terms best captured by the word “accountability.” It should be of concern and interest to us that within the California State University (CSU) system there are several accountability efforts underway. Let me describe these to you.

About four-and-a-half years ago, the CSU Board of Trustees committed the California State University system to accountability reports. This is a CSU commitment to be accountable to the people of the state for the resources we receive and to demonstrate how well we are performing on a variety of key indicators. These indicators include the graduation rates for our first-time freshmen, graduation rates for our community college transfers, the numbers of units that our first-time freshmen have taken at the point of graduation, and the numbers of units that our community college transfers have taken at graduation. At the beginning of this accountability process, there was a greater sense that the process was benign—simply because the “results” were so far in the future. But, of course, amazingly, time marches on and campuses are now presenting their progress or lack thereof. In November, the first substantive report with comparative and longitudinal data in the accountability process was presented. I’m not going to spend a great deal of time talking about the Cal State Northridge specifics at this point because I don’t want to confuse graduation rates with becoming learning centered.

They are not one and the same. I mention this to remind you that here, close to home within our governing board, accountability is a major force.

Another action of the Board of Trustees during the last four years, which also indicates their interest in holding campuses accountable, was their work with the statewide Academic Senate and personnel from the campuses studying the graduation rates of students, and with the Board adopting formal recommendations that hold campus presidents accountable for improving the graduation rates on their campuses.

At the upcoming Board of Trustees meeting (January 2005), I will make a presentation to the Board on what we have done here at Cal State Northridge. Again, I want to be very clear about this, graduation rates are not the same thing as becoming learning centered. But out there in the world around us, there is a tendency to collapse and to simplify, making it even more critical for us at Cal State Northridge to be very, very energetic with our efforts at becoming more learning centered. Inherently, I believe that we are responsible people and want to do our work well. We would rather not have to respond to federal legislation, state legislation, or Board directives. We would rather, as Faculty President McIntyre said in his introduction, decide for ourselves how we are going to respond to and implement these calls for greater accountability and learning centeredness.

So this is a brief summary of how we came to have this faculty retreat with its theme of “Thriving in a Learning-Centered Environment.” The conversations that we are having are natural evolutions of the environment within which we do our work. Cal State Northridge is not isolated; we are not only part of a system but we are part of the national scene.

My second major point this morning is to tell you what this conversation is *not* about.

There have been many conversations by many of you and others on campus about becoming more learning centered. “What does she mean?” “What does she not mean?” “She must mean this,” followed by, “She couldn’t mean that!” I know that these conversations have occurred because many of you tell me about them.

Let me start by declaring what the conversation is not about. First, this is not about blame or praise. It is not a criticism of what faculty and staff at Cal State Northridge have done in the past. It is very, very important, I believe, for you to hear me when I say that.

Second this is not a criticism of students. It is not a criticism of the preparation our students have received. It is not a criticism of their willingness to learn or their desire to read the University Catalog. The relevant point for all of us engaged in this conversation is that praise or blame is really not part of the motivation of this discussion.

Third, let me also say our efforts to become more learning centered are not about administrators trying to do something to faculty and staff. I have heard some people say that. Please be assured that administrators are with you. All of us in this room are working together toward these goals. We bear responsibility for what Cal State Northridge becomes just in the same way that you do. So instead of constructing this as a dialogue or initiative with opposing sides, think of all of us together working from a large round table.

Fourth, this conversation is also not about only making changes in the academic part at the University.

Fifth, on the flip side of that, the conversation is not about only changing things in the administrative side of the University.

Sixth, this is not a conversation that says that Cal State Northridge has never focused on learning before. Obviously we have focused on learning, but this is a sharpened, different way of prioritizing learning.

And, seventh—this is my former-Faculty President Michael Neubauer memorial line—This is not a fad. May I quote? “This discussion may continue into the future using refined or different language, but the force of accountability and becoming more learning centered is going to be a persistent, consistent, steady feature of the higher education world for the next decade. Whatever we call it, becoming more learning centered is going to be an imperative in our world.”

When I was much younger, I remember a friend to whom I was describing some personal neurosis saying, “Jolene, you just have to stop fighting it. It’s yours. It’s who you are, know it and accept it.” I offer similar advice: accountability, educational effectiveness, and becoming more learning centered are part of our world. So let’s embrace it and celebrate it. Finally, the last thing this conversation is not—and Ron McIntyre related this in his introductory comment—is this conversation is not about me telling you what to do. This conversation is not about me giving you specific steps that have to be followed or should be followed.

Naturally, then, you wish to hear us delineate what this conversation is about. Much of what I am going to say here is not a surprise because the elements have been presented in previous presentations that I have made, or are in the materials on the Web page, or already have been discussed in the brown bag dialogues and informal conversations on campus. I want to acknowledge that some of the specific vocabulary I am going to use derives from a national project called “Documenting Effective Educational Practices.”

First, this conversation we are having is about making student learning a deep and abiding focus of the entire University. An alternative phrase to describe this is that we are creating an unshakeable focus on student learning at Cal State Northridge.

Second, this conversation is about being willing to commit to specific learning outcomes in courses, in programs, in majors, and in the University as a whole.

Third, this conversation is about being willing to commit to having evidence that demonstrates that students have achieved the learning goals.

Fourth, this conversation is also about having clear marked pathways for student success.

Fifth, this conversation is about being willing to rethink the current invariant relationship that structures the relationship between faculty and students and what we now define as learning.

Sixth, the conversation is about being willing to say that what we do now is not perfect and that improvement is necessary. Another way of saying that is that we must support an “improvement-oriented ethos.”

Finally, the conversation is also about the recognition that all parts of the University play a critical role in achieving a learning-centered university and assuring that our students learn.

Let me give you some key phrases or key words to remember these elements by:

- Focus on learning
- Learning outcomes
- Evidence
- Clear pathways
- Rethinking our pedagogy
- Improvement
- All university responsibility

These elements are what this conversation is about.

My fourth major point in this presentation is to describe what I am asking from all of you, individually and collectively. The first thing I want to ask is that you participate fully in this conversation, and that you participate critically using the intellectual and analytical skills that all of you have.

I am asking you—in your programs, your departments and the University as a whole—to articulate student learning outcomes and to develop a means by which to have evidence that those student learning outcomes have been achieved.

I am asking you to accept that there is joint responsibility for student learning, and yes, that means students must be responsible—and not all of them are. But we also must accept our responsibility for student learning.

I am asking you to recognize that all parts of the University play a role in student learning. If you are faculty, that means I am asking that you accept that Student Affairs, University Advancement, Administration and Finance, and the departments of those divisions within the University have a profound impact on what it is our students learn. I am asking that you recognize, and celebrate, and collaborate with all administrative departments in order to improve student learning at Cal State Northridge. For those of you who are from those other parts of the University, I am asking you to step up to the plate and refocus what you have been doing to support student learning. Our Student Affairs Division has done a marvelous job of identifying its role and its part in student learning outcomes.

Much of this work is already on the way, but I am asking you to recognize that all of us in the University share in the responsibility of whether or not Cal State Northridge can be said to have a deep and abiding focus on learning.

I am asking all of you to be willing to innovate. Many of you in this room are here because you have already started to innovate. The poster sessions and workshop presentations, as I look at this program, demonstrate that a wonderful set of examples within this University is already underway with innovations linked to becoming more learning centered.

I am asking you to be willing to innovate pedagogically. I am asking you for a willingness to experiment about that current invariant relationship between faculty and students and what we now call learning.

Before this presentation started this morning, Professor Veda Ward and I were sharing comments about one of her disciplinary colleagues who was one of my former colleagues at California State University, Sacramento. She said that this person is still

teaching a very large lecture course but has many assistants in the class. I assured Veda that we have that same flexibility here. We have a great deal of flexibility in terms of how we do our teaching, how we do pedagogy, and how we do our work for students that we don't take advantage of because we think we can't. But we can!

I am asking you to innovate. I am asking you to accept that, while as a University we are excellent, we also know that we can improve. We can become better. I am also asking you to set aside all of your preconceived notions about our students, about resources, and how we spend them. Many of you ask how can we do anything new without new money. And I am saying that, perhaps if we did our work in different ways, we could free the resources to support new efforts.

I am asking for much from all of you, but I also am willing to make a substantive commitment for myself and members of this administrative team.

First, I commit the Provost, the deans and the other administrative leaders of the campus to put becoming more learning centered at the top of their intellectual and organizational agendas. I also commit that becoming more learning centered is going to be a priority in the strategic decision making and resource allocation of the University.

We will be working with you to help make this an institutional reality. We are well on our way. I will commit to you that the administrators will work with me in support of innovation. That change may not always be done exactly the way you want it. Using the language of computer software programs, we may need some "work-arounds" and "bolt ons" in order to accomplish our goals. But I do promise to support and assure flexibility to accomplish agreed upon changes.

Finally, one of the most important pledges I can make is to continue to celebrate the incredible strengths of this University and its faculty and staff to audiences both internal and external to us. While we have a lot of issues and challenges to pay attention to, the strength of all of you, and those with whom you work in the departments and the divisions, is really quite extraordinary. I said in the beginning that I will be working with faculty and staff as we respond to the forces that are out there in our world as we work to become more learning centered.

I urge you to think about what it is I have described today: the context for this conversation; what the conversation is not about; what the conversation is about; what I have asked from you; and finally what it is I pledge for myself.

The fact that we are all here together for about the fourth or fifth time in Cal State Northridge's recent history to talk about becoming learning centered says to me that we will effectively respond and we will focus the institution's attention on becoming more learning centered. We will do so in a way that fulfills the mission of the University.

I am pleased to be here with all of you. Thank you very much for working with me to help make Cal State Northridge a better place—one with a deep and abiding focus on student learning.