



November 7, 2007

**SUBJECT: SDSU SENATE'S RESPONSE TO THE CSU *ACCESS TO EXCELLENCE*
DRAFT DOCUMENT**

The strategic plan for the CSU, embodied in the “Access to Excellence” document, correctly identifies the demographic, fiscal, and political challenges faced by the CSU, including the changing demographics and shifts in population patterns in the state, diminishing public support for higher education, and the need for greater accountability. Given the changing physical and economic environment, changes in technology and the market, as well as the changing public and legislative attitudes toward higher education, a strategic realignment and recommitment to a set of core values on the part of the CSU is both necessary and inevitable. However, both the general assumptions underlying the draft strategic plan as well as many of the specific steps it recommends bear questioning in light of the environment described and the experiences of the CSU institutions as articulated in many prior documents and statements by CSU administrators, faculty, staff, students, and university and Academic Senates. The SDSU Senate’s response to the plan focuses on six major issues.

A CSU that is Mission-Centered and Market-Smart

- The document lacks a conceptual center. Such a center could be provided by a set of *core values*, while leaving room for the creative potential of university administrators, faculty, staff, and students to respond to changing conditions in light of these values.

In an important study of the American university on the brink of the 21st century, Zemsky et alⁱ suggest that confronted with exactly the kind of environment the CSU faces, universities, especially public ones, need to become “mission-centered” and “market-smart.” Being market-smart and mission-centered means focusing on a set of agreed-upon core values and then pursuing the appropriate means to realize these values in light of the “understanding [of the institutions’] real strengths and capacities as honed by market competition” (Zemsky et al 194).

The draft “Access” document is focused on outcomes and performance indicators rather than values, thus constraining rather than releasing the creative potential of CSU universities, its faculties, administrators, staff, and students. The university’s core values revolve around education; accountability, while desirable and necessary, is the outcome of a commitment to such values and of smart strategies in their realization, not a goal in itself. The current document makes accountability the goal rather than the outcome.

More Focus on Creativity, Flexibility, and Problem-solving

- As acknowledged in the draft document, the CSU is a tremendous public resource. Making the best of this resource in the face of current challenges requires, above all, *maximizing flexibility and independence.*ⁱⁱ The System Office needs to recognize that imperative and develop strategies to allow the universities in the CSU to be creative, flexible, responsive, and problem-focused in responding to challenges in its diverse and ever-changing environments.

The document is too focused on a standardized list of goals and requirements that may not be applicable to all the universities in the CSU system. It also valorizes existing programs at the expense of allowing for creativity and innovation in addressing the changing quality of civic and economic life in California. The CSU should not be conceived of as a centrally steered behemoth, but as a problem-focused, creative, responsive, and flexible resource. While the business metaphor is clearly implicit in the “Access” document, the assumptions of centralization, standardization, and uniformity run contrary to principles widely accepted as imperative for business success today. In relation to the CSU, a decentralized, responsive, entrepreneurial, just-in-time philosophy embraced by successful businesses, but one, in the case of the University, centered on core values focused on education would appear most appropriate. Such a philosophy emphasizing flexibility and problem solving may in turn encourage problem-focused collaboration among the universities in the CSU system.

Emphasize the Relationship Among Research, Creative Activity, and Learning

- The draft document reflects too little emphasis on the contribution of faculty research and creative activity to student learning.

In the statement and recommendations “The Role of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activities in the CSU,”ⁱⁱⁱ CSU provosts emphasize that “these activities enhance student learning, help us recruit and retain high-quality faculty, develop new knowledge, and contribute to scholarly dialogue”--all of which “serve California and strengthen the economy” (1).

The statement further notes that “there are highly valued synergies between teaching and research” and that “the ability of the CSU and the state of California to maintain and build economic capacity so that its citizens can compete in the global marketplace can only be achieved if the CSU actively pursues excellence in both teaching and research.” The provosts recommend that the CSU emphasize the role of research and creative activity of both faculty and students and the scholarly expectations of faculty in internal and external advocacy messages. The “Access” document needs to reflect this role and, quoting again from the provosts’ statement, to “actively articulate the role, significance of, and benefits deriving from research [as well as scholarship, and creative activity] in the CSU system today” (6).

Research and creative activity may include a wide variety of faculty work, much of which is closely related to student success. Such work includes projects related to the environment and/or to the various communities with which CSU universities are involved. They not only constitute the universities’ involvement with various communities, but they also involve students in ways that both prepare them for their careers and constitute a form of civic engagement and of “giving back.”

The CSU boasts (and rightfully so) about the achievements of its faculty (as in the recent case of Prof. Jeff Price’s participation in a Nobel-prize project), but the “Access” document provides neither the resources nor the explicit recognition of the need to support a broad variety of faculty work beyond the classroom. The document should demonstrate a commitment to building increased support for research, scholarly, and creative activities of faculty and students. Increased investments are needed to recruit and retain high quality faculty and to grow the research and scholarly activity required to enhance the state, national, and international image of the CSU as a leader, innovator, and model public university.

More Focus on Excellence

- In spite of its title, the document focuses on access but offers little in the way of excellence.

Of the twin poles bridged by the title “Access to Excellence,” the document ultimately focuses only on access, in spite of its initial lip service to student success. That success is ultimately predicated on the excellence of CSU faculty and of the quality of the education it provides. The document initially mentions the “integrative dimensions of quality in the CSU,” such as teaching *and* scholarship or faculty *and* student research, but does not subsequently build on these dimensions. It also acknowledges that “[a]ccess and success can not be genuine unless the postsecondary education that is available to California’s students is of high quality” (2). These are noteworthy sentiments; unfortunately, they appear only in the introductory part of the plan; the rest focuses mostly on access without attention to the dimensions of quality that make access meaningful in the first place.

For instance, in Goal 1, “Access with Success,” success is understood largely in quantitative terms: high school and college graduation rates, numbers of degrees granted, relative proportions of student groups, retention, and so on. Non-quantitative measures of success are articulated only in terms of assessment measures. But to measure something, one must first provide it; to account for student learning, one must first teach. Student learning *is* also faculty teaching, as well as the resources on which both depend. Learning occurs a variety of ways: in large, small and one-on-one settings, by low-tech or high-tech means. Recognition of diverse learning is therefore needed to maintain and promote teaching excellence. Student knowledge *is* also, ultimately, faculty knowledge; student currency in issues, problems, technologies, and solutions that give an edge in the fast-changing global environment is dependent on faculty currency. For students to learn, faculty members need to continue to develop professionally. The CSU has to provide the resources for such continuous professional development through research and creative activity.

Goal 3, Sustain Institutional Excellence also fails to deal with the substance of excellence. All of its accountability indicators, save for the second, focus on external measures rather than substantive content of excellence. Item 2, besides mention of reducing compensation gaps (certainly one important way of attracting and keeping excellent faculty), contains only vague language but no specific plans.

To present a responsible and “accountable” plan of action to the people and the legislature of California, the plan needs to develop both of its twin and interdependent poles: access *and* excellence. The latter also implies other components of student success: the various forms and sources of student support in the form of appropriate programs (for instance, programs that help students in need, that help students graduate successfully and in a timely fashion, or that provide scholarships) and the staff necessary to run such programs. Such forms of support also need to be part of the CSU’s plan for increasing student success and have to be provided for in any funding plans.

More Attention to Funding

- The plan includes no funding mechanisms to pay for itself.

The document pays little attention to funding, beyond promises (which may turn out to be impossible to keep) to keep fees low and cautionary statements about the state budget. In this way, it avoids making the hard choices that may become necessary, such as raising student fees or limiting enrollment if no additional state funding is forthcoming, or having to put resources into providing competitive compensation to sustain faculty excellence rather than increasing investment in technology. The plan cannot detail such potential choices, but it can and should provide a set of core commitments (related to core values) that would provide the foundation and

rationale for making such choices when they have to be made, for asking for resources when resources are limited, and for making choices in the commitment of the resources that exist (the plan's commitment to measure and report everything is itself a costly investment).

More Leadership, Less Management

- To make the best of its potential, the CSU needs leadership, not management. The current document implicitly treats faculty and administrators at individual universities as employees, rather than as partners in responding creatively to challenges. The document envisions the Chancellor's Office as the agent of accountability, rather than as the agent for creative, problem-focused change.

The process of generating "Access to Excellence" was an example of a flawed process of shared governance, as described in the Mach 2001 report by the CSU Academic Senate "Shared Governance Reconsidered: Improving Decision-Making in the California State University."^{iv} The report notes that administrators often view the shared governance as "a process that seeks faculty input and uses that feedback to craft the final documents," rather than "jointly conceive and birth" initiatives and documents such that the "input" should affect the key features of the resulting document (6). It is the question, the report points out, of *who sets the agenda*. The agenda for the "Access" process, as well as for the draft document, was set by the CSU administration. Had the administration begun the process with an attempt to define the problem or problems to which the initiative was to constitute a response, the process would have been more genuinely collaborative and, in the final resort, more effective. Imposed bureaucratic "solutions" more often produce the appearance and rhetoric of a solution rather than the solution itself.

Concluding Remark

The draft "Access" document emphasizes "the need for improved communication at all levels" (7). We submit this response in the spirit of improved communication and hope that it may be considered, in the spirit of shared governance, not as an afterthought or an inconvenient voice but as fundamentally constructive to the project of making the CSU system the best it can be in responding to the challenges it faces and in continuing to serve the people of California.

ⁱ Zemsky, Robert, Gregory R. Wegner, and William F. Massey. *Remaking the American University: Market-Smart and Mission-Centered*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005.

ⁱⁱ As emphasized by Zemsky et al, p. 13.

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http://www.calstate.edu/acadaff/System_Strategic_Planning/docs/ResearchScholarshipActivities-acc.pdf

^{iv} http://www.calstate.edu/acadaff/System_Strategic_Planning/docs/ASCSU-SharedGovReport.pdf