Steering Committee Reflections

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Introduction

Cal Poly is a Center of Learning. That is the basic premise that has informed and guided the work of this self-study. At the outset it seemed a somewhat self-evident remark, one unlikely to cause much serious questioning or controversy. It seems obvious that learning is what a university is all about, and the students, staff, faculty, and administration at Cal Poly take considerable pride in what they believe are their contributions to learning. The Steering Committee that managed the work of the self-study believes that the several reports, separately and combined, clearly demonstrate that such pride is appropriate and that this University is, indeed, a center of learning.

That said, the fact remains that the purposes and processes of the self-study led to the identification and exploration of issues that are problematic and frequently controversial. An institution as multi-faceted and complex as Cal Poly will contain a great variety of attitudes toward and beliefs about what constitutes real learning, about how best to enable students, faculty and staff to achieve it, about how to measure it, and about how to reward those responsible for delivering it. There will be difficult decisions to be made about how to spend and/or use resources. There will be constant discussions about what departmental, college, area, and institutional priorities ought to be, and there will be equally constant efforts by members of the various groups that comprise the University to (re)define their roles and to assert their specific value(s). And all this will go on in an environment that is dynamic in the way it both shapes and is shaped by these discussions and efforts.

Discussion

One of the most difficult issues for the subcommittees, and for the University, to deal with is assessment. The very word can cause equal excitement and dismay among the various constituencies of the University. There are those who welcome it and who speak fluently of a new culture of assessment. There are those, also, who disparage both the term and the idea of such a culture. To some, assessment means merely a process for evaluating how well the University goes about its business of being a center of learning. To others, it implies a threat to academic freedom and/or a change, if not in the general mission of the University, then in its

specific focus. To others, it only signifies unneeded busy work. Several subcommittee reports reveal that conflicts over assessment probably will not lend themselves to simple solutions.

What is assessment? Does it mean the same thing to a faculty member, a secretary, a freshman or a senior student, a department head, dean, or upper-level administrator? The reports suggest not. The Foreword to the Student Learning Report details some of the history of efforts to develop assessment models at Cal Poly. That development has been and continues to be an ongoing process involving considerable faculty and staff effort and time. The body of the report points out both successes and failures of segments of the University to define and to implement effective methods of assessment. It asks whether or not a single assessment model can be designed to fit all departments, and it notes a "concern that the goal of expedience in the assessment of student learning might blind those involved in such assessment to the complexities of various academic endeavors." (Student Learning Report, 20) In reference to a model for assessing student learning, one size does not fit all.

Assessment involves the collection, compilation and interpretation of data. Every administrative unit of the University is responsible for assessing activities that fall within its purview. Collectively the University should assess student learning, faculty teaching, faculty research efforts, staff and administration performance, purposes and values of uses of technology, adequacy of buildings and other facilities, recruitment efforts, program development, planning effectiveness, programs to improve student retention and to accelerate time-to-degree, etc. The list is not inclusive, but even a partial list makes clear that different kinds of data must be accumulated through different methods if the assessments are to have value to the planning and priority setting activities of the University.

A recently appointed Task Force on Institutional Accountability and Learning Assessment is a good, proactive step in the direction of developing a focused, well-defined approach to assessment for all the divisions of the University. Its charge from the Provost is to provide the University with "critical guidance for accountability and assessment, with an approach that is sensible, clear, and simple and to propose a structure for accomplishing it." To accomplish this, the Task Force must first explore and articulate answers to questions about "who we are," "what we value," "how we preserve what we value," and " how we act on our critical identity and purpose." The work of this group must lead to continuing discussions at all levels. Units of the University involved in assessment need to understand one another's aims and goals in order to be able to implement effectively a variety of assessment tools and methods.

The Scholarship of Teaching and the Scholarships of Discovery, Application, and Integration reports indicate other difficulties in the University's efforts to participate in the culture of assessment. Is Cal Poly, by virtue of its membership in the CSU, a "teaching institution"? Does that phrase imply a singular, somewhat narrow focus for the assessment of the faculty, or does it imply a primary emphasis only? Does it exclude or devalue traditional scholarship that leads to publication? What is the role

of traditional faculty scholarship in an institution whose primary mission is teaching? Does the political differentiation of Cal Poly from the UC system of "research institutions" suggest to the faculty that traditional scholarship is of minor importance in the evaluation of their performances for retention, promotion and tenure? If not, what are the correct assessment criteria? What are the assessment criteria that will allow someone to judge not only the quality of teaching and scholarship, but also the appropriate balance between the two?

Cal Poly has prided itself not only on being a "teaching institution," but also on being an institution where good teaching takes place. What is good teaching? What are the methods and techniques used by good teachers? Do different disciplines—even different subject matters within disciplines—require different methods and techniques? Can good teaching be taught at the university level? What place do these questions have in the evolution of an assessment culture and in the reorientation of the University toward a focus on itself as a center of learning, rather than as a "teaching institution"?

The two paragraphs above offer questions that the University must explore at the same time it recognizes that there will be those who view such exploration and the accompanying discussions with suspicion. Many faculty at the University tend to resist formalized discussions on pedagogy. They are unlikely to be receptive to what they believe is an effort to engage in the study of pedagogy in ways that resemble the approaches of "educationists." There is resistance to the use of the language of assessment—feedback loops, learning outcomes, hard distinctions among goals, aims, and objectives—because it is associated with "education" as a discipline. It is a language that seems to inspire a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding. The Technology subcommittee observes that they believe "that the faculty, generally, are not trained to develop assessment strategies." ([Technology Report,](#) 16) Discussions that can lead to clear definitions and understandings of assessment purposes and processes are critical to the University's realization of itself as a center of learning. Because the discussions will involve questions of faculty morale and trust, it is important to make them as widely based and thorough as possible.

The Scholarship of Teaching Report recommends that the University establish a Center for Teaching and Learning. The creation of such a Center would demonstrate that the "scholarship of teaching" is considered a priority at Cal Poly. The discussions leading to its creation would create an opportunity to define the phrase, "scholarship of teaching," in ways most appropriate to Cal Poly. The name of the Center is important, also, in that it combines the names of two concepts often viewed as disparate to one another and implies they are equally valuable in the realization of a University ethos centered on learning.

The questions addressed by the subcommittees are difficult enough in themselves, but the subcommittees had to explore them during a period of protracted and often acrimonious contract negotiations between the faculty and other bargaining units and the CSU. These negotiations fueled suspicion and distrust, especially as a result of the CSU's insistence on the development of a Faculty Merit Increase (FMI) system. In the past, FMI systems have most prominently been used in research

institutions where research and publication are given primary emphasis. It is widely - though not universally- believed that these areas of faculty endeavor are easier to quantify, and therefore to assess, than teaching. This belief leads some people to wonder how an FMI system can be adopted at a presumed teaching institution. Others acknowledge that merit-based systems have been employed successfully at all kinds of colleges and universities, including those that primarily emphasize teaching.

In some people's minds, however, Cal Poly is in the process of reorienting itself, becoming something of a hybrid institution. Are the faculty feeling uncertain about their roles and even the security of their jobs because they believe they are receiving mixed signals about what is important to the University, about what the administration, or even the legislature, believe truly contributes to learning? In any case, the introduction of an FMI system means that the University at all levels needs to engage in difficult conversations about the nature of faculty activities, the priorities given them, how they are measured in relation to their contributions to learning, and how they are rewarded.

The discussions about how priorities are assigned to scholarship and teaching must take into consideration the impact of faculty workloads. Class loads at a "teaching institution" are greater than those at a "research institution," and those in the CSU are higher than at many similar teaching institutions The Cal Poly faculty member who wants to engage in traditional scholarship often feels his/her work is not valued simply because he/she is denied official time or other resources for it. Although the faculty themselves typically argue for a meaningful role in decision-making, the tendency of both administrative and faculty units to involve faculty in broadening areas of governance is generally seen as taking time away from scholarly activity and the kind of preparation necessary for the highest quality of teaching. The efforts of both administration and the faculty to find a balance between shared governance and commitment of faculty time need to be continuous.

Both the Scholarship of Teaching and the Scholarship of Discovery reports comment on the negative impact of what seem to be inexorable increases in demands made on faculty members' time. There seems no end to requests and/or demands for participation on committees, councils, panels, and advisory boards. Within departments and colleges, procedures of peer evaluation for retention, promotion, and tenure purposes are sometimes seen as draconian in the demands they make on faculty energy, focus and time. Program reviews, program and course development, university wide planning councils, requests to accept overloads in order to direct senior projects, student advising, and more—all impinge on faculty time. The different claims often compete with one another and their demands on faculty and staff time create frustration, resentment, and, often, even greater distrust. These responses are exacerbated when those who evaluate faculty and staff performances respond ambiguously to the work and time spent on such activities.

The combined subcommittee reports reveal the perception of a dichotomy between institutional mission and action or planning and action. In the Staff Learning report

such a dichotomy is articulated in terms of the difference between having policies that promote staff learning and implementation of the policies. Official published University policies encourage staff employees to engage in continued training in a job area and/or to pursue learning for learning's sake, what the report refers to as life-long learning. The report points out that even good and well-intentioned policies are ineffective if there is no mechanism for insisting on and overseeing their acceptance and implementation. Some departments and areas cooperate with staff members who want to pursue further learning; some do not. Some information about learning opportunities is broadcast to staff members; some is not. The staff evaluation (assessment) process provides no method for managers to consider the importance of continued learning. Thus, staff have no leverage with managers who choose not to implement University policies that encourage staff learning. One result is that the other segments of the University seem too often to be telling staff that they are neither respected nor valued.

The most important recommendation made in the Staff Learning report is that the University create a new administrative department to address both policy and process issues concerning staff development and training. Such a department would be responsible for ensuring that staff employee training and opportunities for life-long learning are available, appropriate, publicized, and consistently applied across departments is an important one which deserves serious consideration. A clear message needs to be sent to the campus that "staff knowledge contributes both to student success and to the success of Cal Poly as a center of learning."

Similarly, the Campus Climate Report and the Retention and Time to Degree Report deal with the perception that University policies and values statements are not always reflective of University actions. The Campus Climate Chapter focuses on efforts to develop a more ethnically and culturally diverse University community and on the need to make the University a more amenable environment for students, faculty and staff of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Although in the past the University has made modest progress in this direction, the passage of Proposition 209 has placed a serious obstacle in its way. Increased recruitment, outreach, retention and support for a more diverse student population, faculty and staff could enrich the concept of Cal Poly as a center of learning by increasing our awareness of the ways in which diversity contributes to learning. Student learning, specifically, could be enhanced by an integration of diversity topics into the total curriculum. Proactive workshops, committees, and other types of working groups could make available opportunities for members of the University to develop sensibilities and to engage in dialogue that would enable understanding, and thus mutual participation in pursuit of the goals of the University. Whatever form these efforts take, they need to be made rigorously and unceasingly. The recent establishment of a University Diversity Council is a major step in this direction.

Long-standing problems in the areas of Retention and Time to Degree for Graduation broadly affect Campus Climate. The achievement of a degree within four years from entry into the University seems to be becoming almost the stuff of legend. The 1989 WASC Report identified retention and time to degree as critical

issues, and nearly every major planning and/or assessment effort at all levels spent significant time on them. These studies and the current report suggest little progress has been made in removing roadblocks to student progress to degree. The more obvious roadblocks include the requirement that a student choose a major on application, academic and bureaucratic barriers to students changing majors, restrictive patterns in offerings of GE courses, class scheduling problems caused by staffing and/or budget limitations, aspects of the senior project requirement, and the absence of automated degree audit and predictive scheduling programs. "At-risk" students identified in the Campus Climate report seem especially affected by these and other roadblocks, many of which seem to resist change mainly through the force of custom. The work of this subcommittee needs to be continued and allowed to lead to a complete rethinking of customary ways of designing and managing degree programs. Such rethinking then needs to be followed by actions that effect the changes that will remove major obstacles to students' timely progress to degree. We anticipate that some of these issues will be addressed by the Advising Council currently being formed by the University Administration.

Cal Poly has a clear, vested interest in information technology requirements (equipment, software, training, and support) that enhances the programs and functions of a center of learning. Available technology at Cal Poly opens avenues of research and creative expression for faculty and students. Technological advances have made available collaboration, information and teaching/learning tools available that were unavailable at the time of the last WASC report. Faculty are no longer bound by the necessity of what the Technology Report refers to as the "Same Time/Same Place" mode of teaching/learning. Technology gives University employees tools that make the accumulation of data easier and its analysis more timely.

All of the critical elements are in place to fulfill University needs for information technology in the teaching/learning process, but teaching and learning must drive technology planning, not the converse. Cal Poly has been evolving processes to ensure that this occurs. Constituents (faculty, students, and administrative offices) communicate with their representatives on committees that act in an advisory role to Information Technology Services (ITS) and the Chief Information Officer. The chairs of these advisory committees have primary responsibility for ensuring that constituents and their representatives are able to voice their concerns and opinions.

Although the campus has developed an excellent infrastructure for providing information technology services, some difficulties still exist. Understanding information technology proves to be baffling and difficult for some members of the academic community. Some are concerned that information technology will place additional demands on faculty and staff without a reduction in other required activities.

The Technology subcommittee made the discussion of the relevance of assessment to technology a significant part of its report. It is recommended that the University develop processes and tools for the assessment of the use of information technology in the teaching/ learning process. The report also points out various

ways in which technology can enable the process of assessment to contribute to increasing dialogue among faculty, "to enhance the teaching experience," and "to provide more flexible patterns of learning." (Technology Report, 15)

In regard to technology, our campus discussion must address how well we are doing with respect to technological (informational and instructional) sophistication and progress. In particular, Cal Poly, as an institution, will answer such questions as:

1. How can information technology assist Cal Poly to gain/preserve what it most wants/needs in order to be true to its mission and identity?

2. How can information technology help Cal Poly not lose what it most values?

3. How can information technology strengthen Cal Poly's core institutional characteristics, such as: polytechnic, "learn by doing," undergraduate focus, teaching emphasis, residential, competitive admission, statewide service area, etc.

The Facilities Design subcommittee examined and assessed every space on campus used for instructional purposes. They photographed and surveyed the spaces and compared them to a model of an ideal classroom. These explorations dealt with existing spaces, and while the subcommittee concluded that most spaces on campus support instruction reasonably well, they were surprised to discover that their assessments did not always match up with those of the users of the spaces. There is a basis for continuing discussion to determine ways to maintain, repair, and renovate spaces based on the perceived needs of the faculty and staff who use them.

The subcommittee observed that there are serious flaws in the design and construction process that are responsible for problems in existing facilities and problematic for the creation of future structures. Some of the problems arise from policies made by political units outside the University. Formulas for allocation of space are "insufficient and inflexible," and efforts to raise private funds for construction are discouraged by penalties. Another problem is the absence of a funding formula that takes into account life-cycle costs of a building. This has a negative effect on the attempt to use higher quality materials in construction that may, in fact, result in significant savings in maintenance over the life of the structure. The report points out that "for the same reasons, the funding issue is especially detrimental to decisions concerning environmental sustainability and energy efficiency." (Facilities Report, 11)

It is important to note some of the significant questions the self-study did not answer and some of the important issues it did not address. In large part, this is because choices among competing areas of inquiry had to be made at the very beginning, and these were based primarily on each area's centrality relative to the study's overall theme. For example, the self-study makes no mention of the impact of the expansion of the role of athletics on the University, nor does it examine the role played by the University Foundation at Cal Poly. The Foundation is involved in many

functions including administering research grants and projects for the University, being the depositor for financial gifts to the University, and running campus dining and the campus bookstore. While the Foundation is an important and sometimes controversial player in the affairs of the University, the self-study concentrated on the various areas the Foundation serves, e.g. research, rather than on the Foundation itself.

As the University continues to change and to confront the intersecting issues noted especially in the reports on Teaching and Scholarship, greater attention must be paid to the area of graduate education. Basic questions such as "what is the role of graduate education in a 'teaching institution'?" have not yet been fully resolved. If Cal Poly is becoming something of a hybrid formed by a mix of the guiding principles of both teaching and research institutions, there will be wide-ranging and significant impacts on assessment criteria for present faculty and on recruitment criteria for future faculty. We understand that the Provost has recently decided to assign a continuing role to a university-wide task force that has been studying graduate education at Cal Poly. As with any university, the relationship between the administration and the faculty varies with the times and the issues. In matters of the budget, there has been very little opportunity for proactive faculty input. Most of the faculty consultation on the budget occurs after the decisions have already been made. This includes expenditures of funds for direct academic purposes such as faculty positions, as well as non-academic purposes such as athletic fields. Efforts can be made to streamline the curriculum process. Collegial governance requires continual effort on the part of all parties.

Questions for the Visiting Team

Visiting members of the WASC team invited the Steering Committee to identify problem areas and to develop questions that might enable the WASC team to be more helpful to the University. With whole-hearted acceptance of this offer, the Steering Committee has engaged in conversations to identify those areas and questions. One member has referred to the "meta-questions" the University needs to address. Some examples include: How does the University set priorities, especially where these actions result in funding gaps? How does the University balance shared governance with faculty, staff, administrators, and student overload on committees? How do we unite the staff, faculty, administrators and students and dispel the isolationist attitudes of these groups? How do we solve problems of educational impoverishment of students who come to us at most risk, without reducing the quality of our programs for those who are most prepared? And how do we make certain we are engaging the whole University in dealing with the problems of, as one member put it, "assessment, assessment, assessment"?

The University does not expect the WASC team to solve its problems. That is our job. What we do ask of the WASC team are insights and suggestions about how best the University might continue the work that has begun. The WASC team can be helpful by suggesting ways that various elements of Cal Poly can overcome the prejudices of custom and self-interest that are imbedded in the framework of any

institution with as much history behind it as Cal Poly has. The Steering Committee recognizes that its recommendations and suggestions for change have little value without mechanisms for initiating and sustaining their implementation. The WASC team can be of inestimable value in whatever effort it makes to assure that this self-study is a beginning and not a conclusion.

More work needs to be done. That seems to be the recurring theme that emerges from all of the subcommittee reports that comprise this self-study. It was an apparent theme in the ideas and points of information every member of the Steering Committee made toward developing these reflections. It was also apparent in their suggestions that many questions remain about what Cal Poly needs to do to re-enforce the strong commitment that faculty, staff, and students have already made to continuous improvement of the University as a center of learning.

In its final form as a series of documents presented to a WASC Visiting Team and to the University, a self-study tends to present a static view of the world of the University. The Steering Committee recognizes that our world is dynamic and that it did not stop while the study was being conducted. All of the subcommittees had to explore issues and examine processes that were developing and changing as they were being studied. It is essential to the growth of the University as a center of learning that these documents not be allowed to become static, ending up "on the shelf," never to be revisited. The University—administration, staff, students, and faculty—needs to commit itself to pursuing answers to the questions raised and solutions to the problems and conflicts confronted. More, much more, needs to be done.

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