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## Interview with David Spence

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Vice-Chancellor David Spence

## INTERVIEW WITH DAVID SPENCE

Vice-Chancellor of the CSU

Mark Kay Harrington

*MK: There are many who see the university running on an MBA model, with students as the clients we must serve. But couldn't it also be the case that what they want may not necessarily be what they need?*

*DS:* To think about students as our clients or customers is not helpful in a university where faculty and students engage together in teaching and learning. However, believing that students are central to our mission does make sense. It's the way the CSU works—certainly not the same as in research institutions.

Nevertheless, the budget pushes us to think more and more about results. We do need to be more efficient. For example, a student's path to a degree should be more direct. After all, the CSU has tremendous enrollment pressures. I'm not talking about increasing class size, though, or changing or reducing student requirements. However, there is much we can improve—better advising, more efficient degree audits, clearer transfer procedures, understandable paths to the degree, and many others. We must assume that the majority of the students want to graduate as quickly as possible. It seems a legitimate goal. Except of course the students in San Luis Obispo—why would they want to leave? Seriously, it's our job to see that students graduate quickly.

MBA notions of efficiency are certainly okay in some ways. After all, business must be very sensitive to the needs and views of its public, looking at things from different points of view. For example, it's good for the CSU to understand the perspective of the state and the public, who believe, for example, that the transfer process is entirely too cumbersome.

We don't make top-down decisions in the CSU. Individual CSU campuses have autonomy. However, to be efficient, the Chancellor's Office has to deal with the budget, distribute it, and we try to get the best deal on technology and other services and functions that make sense to be centralized. We have centralized legal counsel and purchasing, for example.

Individual campuses decide program requirements, academic and faculty affairs, RTP [Retention/Tenure/Promotion], etc. In addition, CSU faculty is afforded much more protection than workers in private enterprise are.

As for student attitudes, certainly there's been more demand for services, especially for classes when needed and better advising. However, I think most faculty agree with this desire and are responding. In terms of influence, the csu faculty maintains the integrity of the academic core, the programs, the curriculum, etc. Our faculty has more autonomy than in any system I've been.

*MK: Because of changes in the way the csu is funded, the university has had to rely more and more on corporate donations. How has that affected decisions than are made about education?*

DS: Changes in funding and corporate donations haven't changed the way the csu views its mission. We're probably too new at this business. We're late coming into it. Private universities have had to deal with these issues for years. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the basic operation of the university has not changed. Our faculty and academic leaders ensure that.

*MK: Some faculty have a sense that the csu has a job to merely manufacture workers to fit rather mindlessly into the corporate culture, that having workers who question very much is not appealing. Their job is to make the economy run, and they're to make money for their employer. We have watched the disasters of Enron and major accounting firms. Should universities do something different from what they've always done?*

DS: Well, that's a provocative question! We're more than about economics. Sure, our system's based on capitalism, but we've got quite a bit of socialism mixed in. Of course, the university supports the values and culture of the society. But our faculty encourages students to question, too. Yes, we prepare workers for the job market. We expect our students to contribute to the economy. For example, we prepare 60% of California teachers and 70% of the state's professional engineers. That's what distinguishes us from the uc.

*MK: Those of us in the Liberal Arts often feel as if the rest of the university sees us as mere "service" areas—and that the real work of the university is to "train" students for their professions, not to educate them about literature, history, art, etc.*

DS: Well, that's too bad. I don't think that's true. Compared to most systems, the csu has a lot of GE, which I support.

*MK: But often the faculty in other disciplines encourages their students throughout their careers at Cal Poly to get GE "out of the way." Many of our faculty talk about GE with great derision. Therefore, the students have an attitude already embedded when*

*they sit in our classes—GE isn't very important.*

DS: That's really too bad. We have, before the terrible budget, looked into team teaching cross-disciplinary courses. We know that we need to make it easier for faculty to work together teaching. Mutual respect might remedy some of these problems.

*MK: Isn't it true that university presidents resemble CEOs sitting on a number of corporate Boards of Directors? How can we remain true to our mission and have these relationships?*

DS: I know that some college presidents sit on boards. However, these relationships are kept separate. On the positive side, college presidents get better ideas as to what private enterprise is about, what their concerns are. Faculty is too diligent to allow even the appearance of conflict of interest. However, the problem comes if these relationships take too much time, take presidents away from their duties of the university. I don't see that happening.

*MK: In the book *The Knowledge Factory*,<sup>1</sup> Stanley Aronowitz says that a BA or BS signifies that a person can tolerate boredom, and knows how to follow rules.*

DS: I wonder where he went to school or if he has visited the csu. We're tried to pay attention to the changes of the times, to focus on outcomes and assessments, to make education more meaningful. 

## Notes

1. Aronowitz, Stanley, *The Knowledge Factory* (Boston: Beacon, 2000).