Summary from Meeting with President Armstrong  
Semester Review Task Force Report Discussion  
January 8, 2013

Armstrong – I want to thank the members of task force, especially the chair, student members, faculty staff, alumni participant, and everyone who participated. The task force put in a big effort and successfully answered the question within the context of Cal Poly. Because the task force says something, you should not back away from putting your voice forward. I think it was a good report, it did what I asked them to do and in a timely manner. I want to remind you that final decision rest with the Chancellor and Board of Trustees. I will not share with you at this time what I will recommend to Chancellor because (1) we have a process and is important that you get your thoughts on the table. I need to be armed with what the people at Cal Poly think and what it will mean to Cal Poly and (2) I do not think is wise to do before I meet with the Chancellor.

You indicated that you are under some pressure from the Board of Trustees, what can we do moving forward to give you ammunition to fight the battle?
Armstrong – Part of it is unknown. The Board of Trustees has discussed this but it is an ongoing issue. I do not know where the new Chancellor will come down on this. The best thing to do is to take the report, digest it, and add your thoughts. What it will mean to students, faculty, and staff, in that order. I think we should lead with students.

Do other CSUs on quarter system have a similar process?
Armstrong – I do not know, but our report is the most thorough. They have followed different strategies. I am in contact with my counterpart in Pomona; faculty there said no to conversion if there is no money. I am interested in Pomona because we are the two polytechnic campuses in the CSU. I do not think East Bay has done much. Los Angeles’s president is ready to convert.

The conversion will cost a lot of money and the CSU is not going to provide funding. What will happen to us?
Armstrong – If there is no support from the CSU for conversion, it will make it extremely difficult regardless of my assessment of the report. One of the reasons I got involved with the presidents’ group was to find out if there was money. There is $25 million minimum for the 6 campuses. Chancellor Reed did not want to commit the new Chancellor so it was left in limbo.

Can you restate the arguments for conversion that you are hearing from the Chancellor and the Board of Trustees?
Armstrong – From a bigger perspective, the whole country is moving to semesters. In general it does make sense. The whole state of Ohio moved to semesters. Senate Bill 1440 is also part of this, the master plan for community college transfers; the task force addressed this topic specifically. Other arguments include a uniform calendar, and some things can be centralized to save money. At last forum I raised the question – just how important will it be in 10-15 years for a university to be in quarters or semesters. For Cal Poly, it is a big question because of learn by doing and what we value. What I heard from the report is that variety of courses is important as well as the idea of pace. The task force brought all that down to the level of Cal Poly and that is what we need to present to the Chancellor, Board of Trustees, and other presidents. Why is Cal Poly different and why is it important that we remain on quarters?

The task force said that there is no evidence that moving to semesters would improve student success.
Armstrong – the task force report is making statements about Cal Poly only. In the comments and documents we put together with the president’s group, there was sizeable information there that the pros outweigh the cons for semesters. For me, I am looking at what it means to Cal Poly. There is a big difference; it is a debatable point.
If the Board of Trustees and Chancellor say, “Thanks, I understand that semester is not right for you but we recommend that you change” What is the recourse? Can we just say thank you for your suggestion?

Armstrong – CMS has not been implemented by all campus as it was mandated. I do not know of any retributions. There is always recourse. I will do what is best for our students, faculty, and staff. It is about success and your success comes from seeing students do well.

Will the Chancellor make a decision for all six campus together or individually?

Armstrong – I do not know, but I wanted to move fast to have a discussion with the Chancellor on where we are and what we are doing. It is important that we build our case and that we are doing that from the perspective for our students, faculty and staff. Not saying, “We are Cal Poly, we have always been on quarter and will stay on quarters.” You, as a group, need to provide advice; the task force has provided advice as well. The sooner you can provide feedback the better. From what I understand, you are on good time line.

There are a lot of points that were brought up, how are we going to proceed in pursuing some of the ideas?

Armstrong – When I meet with the task force, we will make a recommendation regardless. A piece of learn by doing is constantly doing better. Out of all public universities, we are number 12 on return on investment for the entire country.

Enz Finken – Regardless of what we do, we have to fix problems and things we struggle with.

Armstrong – Our faculty are willing to ask the questions. We are working on things. We are looking at moving to a quicker graduation rate but not lowering the bar. Students can need extra help but we do not lower the standards. That is what we want to do. They want to see graduation rate increase, more first-generation students but maintaining standards.

When it is time to vote, will that vote be for what is best for each campus or the entire CSU?

Armstrong – I hope that there is no vote. Votes only come from Board of Trustees. I hope that we will have a discussion and then the Chancellor and I can move forward. Like in politics, sometimes reasonable people disagree.

Enz Finken – One issue that came up is workload. Regardless of what happens here, the campus needs to have conversations on that. Now that it has settled down, we need to pay attention to what happened last fall and what issues are critical. There is variation from college to college but the campus needs to study the issue over the next year or two because if we lose the opportunity we have not really gained anything.

Armstrong – I agree with the Provost. Also, the teacher-scholar model is another factor that the task force addressed. I have been thinking about the impact and I think is critical as we go forward with our donors because they care greatly for our students. They know that funding for new and existing faculty is important so that faculty can have more contact with students outside the classroom. Is critical that our donors view it simply as students and faculty having more one-on-one quality time.

Is it possible that we may decide to convert but not yet? Is it being considered?

Armstrong – I considered a number of possibilities on my own. I have said, my desire is to answer the question; I don’t want to deal with this for a long time. I want to spend my energy on other things. We are not done because we have a few more weeks of discussion before we have all data on the table. Uncertainty is not a good thing. For some people this is way too quick. Perfection is our enemy in this situation. I want to get this done. I do not want this to be politicized. I do not want a political person to create a bill for this.

Enz Finken – Even if they say we should do it but deferred it, the leadership changes are so often and dramatic that in any week the priorities can change and it disappears.
In some disciplines if you do not have a master degree you are unemployable. Having engineering at 180 units may lead to a degree that is considered pre-engineering. This is something we have to worry about especially for first generation students.

Armstrong – Let’s get some data and discuss it. Our competitors are approaching good students and offering them the possibility of finishing in 4 years or go to Cal Poly and finishing in 6. We need you to ask the tough questions. CSU is proposing that we ask how we are getting to 180. We are not saying today that everything has be at 180 units.

Enz Finken – Given our budget, we will have to do things differently. We will not be able to afford the things we are doing. We need to make choices. If we want to grow as an institution, we will have to do something that is transformational. We have to get passed “this is what we have always done and is good.”

Armstrong – Finances will force us to do things differently. We have people who are ready to make big gifts and are looking at what we are doing. Some are asking if we will embrace digital technology. We need to look and evaluate the curriculum. We are just asking that you ask the tough questions. I hear your point about the quality of what we are doing; it is a balance.

If the CSU wants us to go to semesters who is paying?

Armstrong – I do not think there is any scenario where the entire cost will be paid for. I don’t have a problem with that. There are components that will be better in 10 years. But we have to ask what happens in the interim. I think it would be completely off the wall that we would be forced to do the conversion without any support.

Rein – Armstrong said that no one will force us, but we will have to cover some of the costs.

Is there some way to revisit some of these issues in a different content?

Armstrong – Yes. There is a way to revisit those issues and use them in a quarter system. We should always try to get better.

Enz Finken – The differences are more significant by disciplines than university wide. There are advantages and disadvantages for each college. We have now revealed them and, if we are smart, we will address them.

People talk about student success when they really want to say graduation rate.

Armstrong – I believe student success is complicated. Our graduation rates are not sustainable for an institution of our caliber. Our 4 year is extremely low and our 6 year should be higher. We should work to increase it. I believe that for a lot of reasons, one being political. Some of our stakeholders are at our heels. I am going to keep talking about graduation. Student success is more than graduation rate.

Armstrong – I will not be giving the report to the board in its entirety unless directed by the Chancellor. You can send anybody anything you want to and I am not making a subtle hint about that.