

CSU Voluntary System of Accountability
Presentation at QI Symposium: Navigate to Excellence
Wednesday, February 27, 2008
Paradise Point Spa & Resort, San Diego
10:00 – 11:15

President Karen S. Haynes

Good morning! Thank you for inviting me to speak today—and for showing me how many of you are committed to improving the California State University.

It is highly appropriate to include accountability in your meeting agenda. Accountability is often viewed as a competing mandate with the work we are doing that needs an accountability report! But the best intentions of accountability and measurement are to improve the ways we do our work. Accountability measurements should not have to compete with what we do in public higher education—it should always be a part of what we do.

I have been asked to give you an overview of the changing environment for higher education, the CSU's leadership in this area, and our "case study" of the Voluntary System of Accountability at Cal State San Marcos.

Accountability and measurement of outcomes in government are not new. At the federal level, the 1993 Government Performance Results Act shifted the focus away from measuring the activities of federal agencies to a focus on the

results of those activities. In 1993, this was a radical change in the way government measured itself.

In the early 2000's, President Bush introduced the President's Management Agenda requiring greater accountability in federal agencies, and the No Child Left Behind initiative for K-12 schools. For many years, we were comfortably and happily left out of these discussions. Historically, higher education has enjoyed an attitude of unquestioned good will from the general public and the elected officials who represent them.

But no longer: the public has begun to take note of the rising costs of tax-funded four-year institutions. They have begun to recognize that it's taking a lot longer than four years for many of our students to graduate from those four year institutions.

And our publics are seeing the decline in degrees awarded in the US compared to other countries. We've lost our exemption from the call for accountability – at the national, state, and even the local level.

According to data from a survey of the general public published in January's Chronicle for Higher Education, 58 percent of the respondents said that colleges could take in more students without affecting quality or raising tuition, and 56 percent said that colleges can spend less money and still maintain quality.

What do those numbers tell us? We've not done a good job of telling our story, demonstrating our impact or providing examples of how we improve student learning. Without necessarily using its language, the public has begun to demand that we hold ourselves accountable to them. And we are responding.

As public institutions we need to make decisions based on data. As publicly funded institutions of higher education, we need to make the data available and transparent. To do otherwise would be to hold ourselves apart from those we serve and those who fund our work.

In the 1990s, the CSU made a commitment to accountability in Cornerstones. Since its adoption, the indicators and measures have evolved, interest in assessing outcomes of student learning has grown, and the data has driven improvements in both our academic programs and administrative functions.

The CSU did a review of Cornerstones to prepare for our new strategic planning process, Access to Excellence. All major degree programs in the CSU have defined outcomes and assessments. Access to Excellence will build upon that progress and promote ways to assess the baccalaureate as a whole and provide indicators of success to the public.

But it is easy to forget the purpose behind accountability and assessment. And we can point to many failed accountability initiatives as a result. We scramble to prepare the report for the Department of Finance, the legislature—and even the Chancellor’s Office!—and we claim success when we meet the deadline for submission—or we wait it out and hope they’ll stop asking or hope it will go away after the next election.

Instead, we have to embrace these calls for accountability and measuring our outcomes, and recognize their value to us. Accountability should not be viewed in isolation from things we are already doing or as an extra burden, but rather integrated and aligned with our planning, decision making, and assessment activities.

It’s another one of those radical shifts in thinking, this time from mere “compliance” to meaningful engagement. We must become builders of evidence, and we use that evidence to make improvements, to make decisions and to be accountable to those we serve.

When I arrived at Cal State San Marcos in 2004, I received a lot of excellent advice from my Transition Team and from those who responded to their survey. One message was clear to me: the importance of providing essential data to the entire campus community to maximize decision-making opportunities within our purview, while also helping make our needs known to external individuals and groups.

The Transition Team’s survey came up with accountability as a major theme. It was my mandate to change the campus culture. We moved forward by examining our infrastructure—from facilities to data gathering—to assure that we would have the necessary underpinnings to support the important work of the years ahead.

Our data gathering was not specific to measuring what we do in the classroom or how successful we are at what we do. Even in the fiscal crisis that was taking its toll on the CSU in 2004, it was clear that we needed to make decisions based on data. Our Council for University Strategic Planning—with representation from

each campus unit—established working principles and adopted a data portfolio that supported our strategic priorities and objectives.

As I told the campus the following year at my Convocation: you could finally access online historical demographic data on our students, faculty, and staff. You could see how we were performing in areas like outreach and recruitment, retention, graduation, student engagement, student-faculty ratios, average class size, and many other indicators.

We shared our data so that our academic and service departments know what our students are saying and determine where to make improvements and focus resources.

The entire campus is continuously encouraged to browse through the data and information, engage in dialogue, and provide their interpretations, observations and recommendations for addressing our challenges and leveraging our opportunities.

All this gave us the capacity to begin to make informed, strategic decisions in a timely manner, to use our data to measure our progress in our priorities and become a learning organization. We did it because it was the right thing to do—hold ourselves and our decision-making accountable, giving our faculty, staff, and students access to the results of our efforts—maybe even before they came to Cal State San Marcos.

And as we moved forward in this data-rich, decision-making environment, WASC responded in their accreditation report by saying, “There is a clear commitment to using evidence-based reviews and analysis at multiple levels and across multiple arenas, and to link analyses with improvements.”

What has happened since we put data into our institutional planning and analysis is—accountability has become hot.

Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings turned up the heat with the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, issuing a call in late 2006 for all colleges and universities to measure and report meaningful student learning outcomes and to become more transparent about cost, price and quality.

The CSU decided to lead rather than to follow the national call for meaningful and measurable learning outcomes. When the Spellings’ Commission Report was

released, the CSU was already at the forefront and stepped up to play a role in a national system of accountability for institutions of higher education. The Spelling's Report highlighted as exemplars the CSU Early Assessment Program and instruments many of our campuses were already using such as the National Survey for Student Engagement or the Collegiate Learning Assessment.

Other higher education organizations in the United States also began looking at the issue of student learning. Two of the larger associations, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC)—with considerable input from the CSU—developed an instrument to provide easily accessible information about students that would be useful to parents, future students, students, legislators and the public.

The result is the Voluntary System of Accountability. The VSA is not a mandate or a federal directive. It is higher education's voluntary commitment to transparency and provides the public with data concerning learning outcomes, how students are engaged in their college experience and how smoothly they progress toward their degree. The VSA identified three key areas of importance:

1. Student and family information such as graduation rates, retention rates, cost of attendance and financial aid, undergraduate admissions and areas of study.
2. Student experiences with and perceptions of collaborative learning opportunities, diversity, institutional commitment to student learning and success and student interaction with faculty and staff, along with their satisfaction with administrative and academic support services, and,
3. Evidence of student learning in critical and analytical thinking, and written communication.

Instead of being told how we'll be measured, we've taken a lead in defining it for ourselves. These indicators are, or should be, part of the information we use every day to plan, assess and improve.

The CSU formed the Presidents' Council on Accountability, of which I am a member, to guide our participation in the VSA. We provided feedback to our colleagues who served on the national task forces and identified how the VSA will be rolled out in the CSU.

We committed to providing three types of public information as part of our participation. First, campuses will submit data on enrollment and graduation to

the national Student Clearinghouse by Fall 2008 for the period Fall 2001 to the present.

Second, each campus will participate in one of several instruments to assess student engagement: the National Survey of Student Engagement, the College Student Experiences Questionnaire, the College Senior Survey or the University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey. The results will be reported by Fall 2009.

And the third piece, to assess student learning, is the Collegiate Learning Assessment, or CLA. Campuses are administering the CLA instrument to freshmen and seniors for a two year pilot beginning this year. Six campuses are experimenting with administering the CLA to transfer students.

As a means for presenting our data to the public, the VSA College Portrait has been adopted. It is a web-based template that includes data on student characteristics, degrees and areas of study, financial aid and costs, student learning outcomes and student experiences. Campuses can also provide information on campus safety, student services and learning outcomes. The CSU has adopted additional indicators that demonstrate the CSU's commitment to the public good – including the number of lower-income students enrolled and graduating, and the net tuition paid by students.

Cal State San Marcos was one of 17 universities nationally—and one of only four CSUs—who volunteered to pilot test this “College Portrait” beta template and post our results. If you go online to www.voluntarysystem.org, you will see the portraits of the 17 pilot universities.

VSA is just one piece of a culture of evidence for an accessible, high-quality education. But students will be able to review this data in a consistent format, and use it in choosing the universities they want to apply to.

Assessment and accountability are important cornerstones of our mission, along with access and affordability.

We will continuously assess, monitor, revise, and improve our processes, outcomes, curriculum and pedagogy—not because it's given to us as a mandate from WASC, the CSU, or even in response to the US Department of Education—but because it's part of our “best practices”. It is not perfect, and we will continue to review it and make modifications. It is my hope that the Voluntary

System of Accountability will become a model that leverages processes and tools that are in place already and have proven effective—accreditation, assessment of learning outcomes, the National Survey for Student Engagement and the Collegiate Learning Assessment.

It will demonstrate that the CSU is committed to transparency and provide proof that we prepare our students to be exceptional, that we contribute substantially to their development of critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and written communication skills, that we provide an environment in which to learn, to collaborate and grow.

How do you focus on accountability during times of budget cuts? Using data is even more important during budget reductions. Measuring our outcomes keeps us focused on strategies that have proven successful in providing the courses and support necessary to achieve our learning goals, graduating students in a timely manner, and retaining enrolled students through graduation.

It will help identify how we address the gap between our resources and our resource needs, focusing on what we can control, such as:

- How do we better utilize the resources we already have?
- What are the opportunities for increased efficiency?
- How can we improve student learning with current resources?

We can respond to the challenges of slower growth with innovation and creativity, and we must embrace the calls for transparency. We will demonstrate to our multiple constituencies that there is a high return on their investment in the CSU.

We won't change our goals. We'll remain focused on our priorities of access and quality. And we will do it using our data to learn about ourselves, identify improvement opportunities, and make the best-informed decisions we possibly can, continuing to answer the call for increased accountability and clarity in everything we do.

This is a challenging time for higher education in California. But it is also a time of great opportunity – an opportunity to raise the level of educational attainment and reflect the diversity of the state; an opportunity to demonstrate CSU's impact on economic, social and cultural development; and an opportunity to transform the CSU into a 21st century institution of higher learning. We will be innovative with technology and how we deliver instruction. We will adapt to the digital age learner, and we will focus on those programs that are relevant to addressing the needs of the state.

We will collaborate to identify and model the best practices in our administrative processes, and we will continuously assess and monitor our students' needs and priorities.

Thank you for your commitment to quality, to transparency and to continuous assessment and improvement.