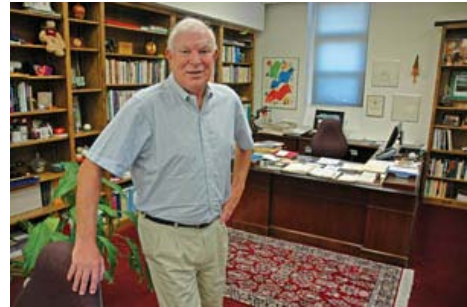


The root of the problem

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By Robert Speer



It's simple, Paul Zingg says: much less money, far more students.

These are not easy times for Chico State University President Paul Zingg, and Tuesday, Aug. 11, when he was interviewed for this story, was an especially difficult day.

There's the dramatic, unprecedented decline in funding for the California State University system, and all the trouble that causes. Then there's the fact that, in trying to deal with it in the way that's best for Chico State, he's sometimes clashed with the CSU Chancellor's Office, which has its own ideas about the matter.

But what had him really upset that day was something else altogether. It was the first thing he mentioned after we sat down at a table in his campus office.

He'd lost his convocation speech.

Zingg gives such a speech to the university's faculty and staff at the beginning of each school year, but he knew this year's talk—to be delivered this afternoon (Thursday, Aug. 20) at 3:30 in the Harlen Adams Theatre—would be one of the most important he'd make. “My remarks were more crucial than ever, given the situation we face,” he said.

He'd been working on the speech off and on for about a month. The day before he'd been on a roll, he said, and worked five hours straight. Then he did something wrong—“punched the wrong button or something”—and suddenly the speech was gone, evaporated into cyberspace. The best computer technicians on campus weren't able to recover it. He had to start over.

With luck it would come more easily the second time around. Perhaps it would be even better than the original. But Zingg clearly was depressed at the prospect of rewriting it, and that no doubt colored his remarks about the larger issues of the budget and his dealings with the Chancellor's Office. It's fair to say he was feeling out of sorts, even a little angry.

The fundamental problem in the CSU system can be explained in a sentence, Zingg said. It's that in the past 10 years state financial support has decreased by \$600 million, or 29 percent, while enrollment has risen by 100,000, or 28 percent.

“Any way you look at it, it’s been a horrific decline in funding at the same time that enrollment has gone up nearly 30 percent. That’s the root of the problem we face.”

As a result, the CSU is an institution in conflict with itself, Zingg said. Its strategies for responding to the fiscal crisis are forcing it to ignore or even go up against some of its three cherished “overarching goals and values.”

Those goals, he said, are “to serve students as best we can; to preserve jobs as best we can; and to preserve the financial integrity of the system.”

In contrast, the three strategies for dealing with the budget cutbacks are: one, reduce enrollments; two, raise student fees; and, three, reduce payroll through the use of furloughs. System-wide enrollment will drop by 40,000, or 10 percent, in the next two years; fees already have gone up by 20 percent, following a 10 percent hike in May; and teachers and staff will be required to take two furlough days per month, which results in a pay reduction of around 10 percent.

On top of that, campuses must cut an additional \$183 million from their operating expenses. At Chico State, that amounts to \$6 million that Zingg will try to save by cutting corners on everything from travel allowances to buying wastebaskets and basketballs.

This response may be the best the system can do, Zingg said, but it certainly isn’t good for students or employees. Nor is it good for California.

Higher education historically has been the engine driving prosperity in California, he explained, especially since creation of the Master Plan for Higher Education in 1960, a visionary document that sought to make college available to anyone who wanted it and led to the creation of educational systems that were the envy of the world.

“The Master Plan found that higher education was the way for California to invent and reinvent itself,” Zingg said. “The farther and farther we move away from it, the more our chances for recovery and prosperity are jeopardized.”

To Zingg, this reduction in the state’s investment in higher education, which began even before the current recession, is “frustrating and disheartening and leaves a lot of bad feelings.”

It pains him that California spends as much each year—more than \$10 billion—housing 170,000 prisoners as it does on higher education, which serves more than 3 million full- and part-time students, including 440,000 in the CSU alone.

Sooner or later, he continued, “we have got to accomplish, in Sacramento and among a broad spectrum of movers and shakers, a re-imagination and re-aspiration of the Master Plan to make it work again.”

In the meantime, Zingg has submitted his budget plan to the Chancellor’s Office for review. He thinks it’s a viable approach, but headquarters has “questions and concerns,” and that’s frustrating to him.

No two campuses are alike, he explained. “Managing our enrollment situation is different than the challenges Monterey Bay or San Diego faces. ... Our argument [to the Chancellor’s Office] is: Give us the goal, the number [to reach], and let us figure out the steps to take locally in order to carry out the strategy.”

He cited, as example, the chancellor’s decision to tell the campuses not to admit any community-college transfers in the spring 2010 semester. The mandate ignored the formal transfer agreements many campuses have with community colleges in their service areas, as well as long-standing informal partnerships.

Fortunately, he and other CSU presidents made strong arguments to that effect, and the Chancellor’s Office backed down, “but it was an argument we shouldn’t have had to make.”

The balance between “central control and campus authority is a tender balance,” he said, one requiring sensitivity and trust on both sides.

It’s ironic that, in the midst of this budget crisis, Chico State recently received a full 10-year accreditation from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, the highest level it gives. “It doesn’t get any better than that,” Zingg said.

Keeping up morale has become a major part of his job. “How do we keep from despair and still face the depressing reality that we face?” he asked.

Answering his own question, he said, “Part of it here is pride. It’s a strong community and we rally. We get the job done.” There’s a fierce desire to do the right thing for students, he added, as well as belief in Chico State’s values and accomplishments—its high level of civic engagement, its leadership in sustainability, its many award-winning student organizations, as well as the Guggenheim and Fulbright fellowships teachers have received.

“We fight well together. The WASC really affirmed that. And we’re not going to let it fall apart. I really do have confidence in our sense of community. ... We won’t allow our frustrations to get in the way of our teaching.”