

June 27, 1996

Manuel Esteban
President
California State University, Chico
1st and Normal Streets
Chico, CA 95929-0110

Dear President Esteban:

At its June 18-20, 1996 meeting, the Commission considered the report of the evaluation team which visited the campus on March 25-28, 1996. The Commission also had the self study prepared by the University for this visit. It appreciated the opportunity to discuss with you the special arrangements made for this visit and the impact of the self study and the team report. Your comments were very helpful.

The Commission first wished to commend the institution and the evaluation team for entering into this modified self study and visit format so successfully. The self-study process involved a remarkable number of faculty and others throughout the institution, and led to two important volumes. The Commission found Volume 1 to be a very useful, and readable, summary and a model for other self studies. The evaluation team also invested significantly in an effort to make the visit process focus on strategic issues that would be of value to the improvement and further development of the University. The expanded preliminary visit in early February appears to have been highly effective in focusing issues for the visit, organizing the team into subgroups, and providing a useful orientation to the University for the nucleus of the evaluation team. Furthermore, the Commission found the report of the evaluation team to be excellent in its thoroughness, insights, and presentation. The Commission believes the report, coupled with the self-study process, provides the University with many important issues to address.

In responding to this modified format, the evaluation team determined first that there was adequate basis to determine that the University had addressed satisfactorily the basic standards of accreditation. The Commission concurs with this judgment, and notes that Volume 2 of the self study comprehensively addressed the Commission standards, and yielded a considerable number of recommendations for improvement. The Commission hopes that these recommendations will not be lost in the subsequent shift in focus taken by the evaluation team to move beyond minimum expectations, and that they will be pursued as appropriate.

It is a fundamental expectation of accreditation, and of the community of institutions comprising American higher education, that institutions not just meet minimum standards, but move toward ever higher levels of quality and performance, through self-reflection and systematic efforts to improve. The Commission supports the approach

taken by the University and the evaluation team to focus on those issues that are most central to CSU Chico improving its level of quality and performance. This challenge is magnified in an era of constrained financial resources, making strategic vision and priorities, and the alignment of actions with strategic plans, all the more essential. The strategic plan developed by the University provides just such a foundation for charting the future course of the University, and serves as an effective benchmark against which to measure progress. Since both the self-study and the evaluation team process were able to align with the strategic plan, the accrediting process provided a strong basis for reflecting on the University's current status and future direction.

As stated by the evaluation team:

The site visit provided the team with many reasons to be optimistic about CSU, Chico's ability to realize the goals that have been identified. The team was impressed with administrative leadership, the dedication of the faculty and staff, and the sense of hope and possibility frequently expressed during the visit.

The University has developed strong undergraduate programs, established successful distance learning programs, and created a remarkably supportive environment for students. For these and many other reasons cited in the self study and team report, there is a strong and deep base upon which to build the future of the University.

Key to the University's success in realizing the goals of its strategic vision, however, will be the capacity of the campus to "take hold of its own destiny," rather than rely on external forces to determine the University's future. The University's vision statement and the strategic plan define future directions, but successful implementation will be determined by only campus constituencies working together with the conviction that the University can and must construct its own future.

The goals set forth by the University are challenging, and to be accomplished will require considerable effort, shifting of priorities and long-term commitment. The Commission views these goals as not only appropriate but fundamentally important for CSU Chico and other similar institutions attempting to respond to the needs of the future. Thus, the Commission encourages and supports the University's efforts to move forward in the directions it has established. It also endorses and supports the comments and recommendations set forth in the evaluation team report. They are not intended to serve as mandates, but as important recommendations and ideas arising from peer review.

Without attempting to repeat the team report, the Commission highlighted several areas deserving of additional comment. The first and foremost goal of the University is to become learning-centered. This goal is vitally important, and will require deep rethinking of many basic assumptions that have long been in place at the University. As pointed out by the team, policies and infrastructures have long been established to support teaching; there is a major difference to shift the emphasis to learning. The creation of "strategic budgeting" principles is an important element to fund the transition to a learning-centered environment. The faculty will need to be far more clear on what are its intended learning

goals and outcomes, not at the course level, but for programs and the University as a whole. Further, there is need to be more clear about what kinds of indicators and data -- qualitative and quantitative -- should inform discussions about learning, moving the campus to a culture of inquiry and evidence about learning. Given the long-standing traditions of all institutions, this goal is challenging, but important enough to warrant full institutional commitment. To do so at a time of declining enrollments and budgets will require focus and integration. As the team points out:

And, perhaps most importantly of all, faculty and administrators must confront the reality that to move ahead on a new agenda in times of declining budgets will require eliminating some current activities in order to provide needed resources for the new.

The Commission also supports the commitment of the University to use technology as a distinctive element of a CSU Chico education. This has implications for not only off-campus students served through distance learning methods, but especially for on-campus students. There are significant demands to be met to accomplish this goal, as addressed extensively by the evaluation team. Faculty and staff will need to be learners and innovators, and technology costs are substantial. The Commission shares the concern of the evaluation team that technology itself not be the primary goal but, consistent with the first strategic goal of the University, that improvement of learning be the organizing basis for the technology distinction. Thus, it will be important to address how information literacy becomes a part of the learning experience, as well as technological literacy, and the connection of technology to the learning goals of the University.

On the issue of residentiality, the voices of students were eloquent about the character of the "Chico experience." The University should be justifiably proud of the recognition students give to faculty and staff for their care and support, and of the beauty of the campus to support student learning and an overall positive experience. As reflected in the University's own analysis and in the team's focus groups, the "Chico experience" is not as positive for all groups of students. As the University plans for the future, it will need to determine how best to build its enrollments for all segments of California's student population, and to sustain a supportive learning and co-curricular environment for students drawn from underrepresented groups. While the University cannot control the conduct of citizens in the Chico community, there is evidence that the community is not as welcoming to minority students as to majority. The University is to be commended for its commitment to prepare all of its students adequately for citizenship and work in a multi-cultural society. The Commission encouraged the University to continue its efforts to build a multi-racial and multi-cultural community on campus to fulfill its educational objectives, and to work with community representatives to create a more supportive Chico experience for all students.

The Commission took note of the comments made by the evaluation team in its Afterward, and encourages all members of the University community to focus on the important tasks that lie ahead in building the University. As the University goes through the processes necessary to implement these objectives, there will be many differences on how to implement these objectives, as well as periodic concern whether these objectives

should be continued at all. Shifts in priorities, development of new indicators, and changing the campus infrastructures involve giving up some things as well as gaining others. There is no single clear path to accomplishing these objectives. As the University goes through the important period of attempting to implement these goals, it will be important to maintain civility and the meaning of academic debate. The Commission hopes that leadership for maintaining this process of discussion and change will come from all constituencies, especially the faculty.

As a separate matter, the Commission noted that the University is planning to initiate new distance learning programs, including one in Japan, and has recently initiated others. It is the responsibility of the University to assure that any need for prior approval through the substantive change process is addressed. At this meeting the Commission also acted on the need for telecommunications-assisted programs to be reviewed through the substantive change process. The University should review current and new programs in light of these substantive change policies.

The Commission took the following action:

1. Reaffirm the accreditation of California State University, Chico.
2. Schedule the next comprehensive evaluation of the University in the spring of 2004. The draft self study will be due in this office by October 2003.
3. Request nine (9) copies of a fourth-year report by March 3, 2000, following the outline described in the enclosed memorandum. The fourth-year report will be reviewed by the Interim Report Committee.

Please let me know if you have any comments or questions about this action.

Sincerely,

Ralph A. Wolff
Executive Director

RW:dma

Enclosure

cc: David K. Winter
Sara Armstrong
Members of the Team

Revised February 21, 1996

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Date of Visit: March 25-28, 1996

Type of Visit: Reaffirmation

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