

Winds of change

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Gayle Hutchinson



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When Gayle Hutchinson took over as president of Chico State on July 1, she embarked on a “100-day listening tour” to engage with the campus and community.

But her first semester wasn’t purely an academic exercise: Hutchinson barely had warmed the chair in her temporary office before moving to replace a vilified vice president and launch nationwide searches for that job and the provost.

The departed administrator, VP of business and finance Lori Hoffman, had been listed on the vote of no confidence issued by the Chico State Academic Senate against Hutchinson’s predecessor, Paul Zingg, who retired in June. (The faculty also condemned Interim Provost Susan Elrod, who left well before Hutchinson arrived.) The turnover validated expectations that Hutchinson would reinvigorate the college’s climate, and the president was embraced—often literally—by students, faculty, staff and alumni.

Just last week, the university announced that Debra Larson, who most recently served as the dean of the College of Engineering at Cal

Poly—San Luis Obispo, had accepted the provost post.

That’s one of the major decisions during Hutchinson’s more than 100 days at the helm. Today, she’s occupying her permanent office—more modern and open than the bookcase-adorned configuration from Zingg’s era—and fully in charge.

How's the honeymoon going?

"The honeymoon's going really well," Hutchinson replied. "Folks have been warm, receptive, enthusiastic; that, coupled with the 100-day listening tour, has been really positive."

Whether what she called "a very good fall" proves the new norm or just a grace period could hinge on developments in the coming year: a new budget cycle and Hutchinson's new executives, to name a few.

The search committee for finance VP has identified the semifinalists, she said, with a hire targeted for late February or early March—which would coincide with Larson's start date as provost, March 1.

Both these high-profile administrators will play major roles in shaping how the campus functions, as evidenced by the scope of the no-confidence declaration.

Interestingly, when the CN&R suggested that the finance VP "makes some of the hard decisions that potentially can make people bristle," Hutchinson interjected: "I get to make all those hard decisions."

Asked if that means she's a "buck stops here" president, she responded that each division head has his/her authority and she expects their decisions will align with her values for Chico State, such as transparency and shared governance. "That said," she continued, "they will be accountable ... and at the end of the day, the buck stops here; at the end of the day, I am the one who is held most accountable."

Another potential source of divisiveness is the budget, every president's bugaboo. Assessments of the state's financial health vary, mostly along partisan lines, but Hutchinson's quarter-century working in higher education—most at Chico State, also at CSU Channel Islands—taught her to prepare for the "ebb and flow of resources" annually.

"Over the last five years we've seen an incremental increase [in CSU system funding]," she said. "Going into this year, I know the Board of Trustees asked for additional funding ... but I am bracing for a year that's flat..."

"I think we're realists here on campus," she added. She said she hopes her push for transparency and collaboration, which extends to budgeting, will forestall disputes over financials. "Having people understand that process, know what the thinking is going forward and be able to provide input into that, is really essential."

—Evan Tuchinsky