

A Follow-Up Report and Visit

Cuesta College
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A Confidential Report Prepared for the Accrediting Commission
For Community and Junior Colleges
This report represents the findings of the evaluation team that visited

Cuesta College
On
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Introduction and Overview

On November 5, 2010, a team representing the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) visited Cuesta College in San Luis Obispo, California. The team visit was a follow up to the October 2009 visit which culminated in the college's placement on probation in January 2010. The team consisted of Dr. Andreea Serban, team chair and James Barr, team member.

During the visit, the team met with the College Interim Superintendent/President, the Vice President of Administrative Services, the Vice President of Student Services, the Vice President of Academic Affairs, the Director of Institutional Research and Assessment, the Academic Senate President, the SLO Coordinators, the Director of Computer Services, the President of Board of Trustees (phone conference), and the CCCUE President.

The team held interviews and examined documents and evidence which were available on the college website, a thumb drive sent by the college and hard copy in the team room.

The team acknowledges that progress has been made by the college since the October 2009 follow-up visit in addressing the Commission's concerns with the six recommendations. The most significant improvement that the team observed relates to an emerging willingness of faculty, administration, staff and the Board of Trustees to work together to find a common ground for dialog and solutions. The team also recognized that overall, college constituents have now embraced the serious nature of ACCJC's sanction and recommendations, and have actually worked towards resolving them. The team acknowledges the positive change that is emerging at Cuesta College that it is hoped will provide the college with the capacity to address the recommendations. The team also found evidence of improvements with leadership and governance issues. However, the team still has concerns about the implementation and functionality of an integrated evaluation, planning, and resource allocation cycle. Though much work has gone into developing the means to achieve integration across these college processes, at the present time, it is largely a detailed plan to do more planning. The newly developed Strategic Plan is primarily a plan to plan rather than an actual guiding document with goals and objectives that would give direction to the college. Most plans and components listed in the Strategic Plan are yet to be developed or are in early design stage. The Commission's concern in January 2010 that Cuesta College has not yet completed a planning process and a strategic plan to which program review, planning, funding processes, technology planning, or financial planning can be linked, still remains not fully addressed. While the college has developed the framework on which this planning, integration and linking can occur, it will require additional time to fully develop, implement, and evaluate.

The Commission identified six recommendations in its January 2010 letter to the college. The following represents the visiting team's findings for each of the recommendations.

Recommendation 2: Planning and Assessment

To meet standards, the team recommends that the college complete the strategic plan, institute an ongoing systematic evaluation process that communicates and clarifies the

assessment tools used to measure the effectiveness of ongoing planning, program review, resource allocation processes and student learning outcomes. (Standard 1.B, 1.B.3, 1.B.4, 1.B.6, 1.B.7).

In September 2010, the Board of Trustees voted to accept the 2010-2013 Strategic Plan developed with broad representation from the college and a consulting firm under the guidance of the Interim Superintendent/President. Though the development and adoption of the Strategic plan does address a major component of Recommendation 2, the team found that the Strategic Plan is primarily a blueprint of intentions to develop an Educational Master Plan, a Facilities Master Plan, a Long Term Fiscal Plan, a Technology Master Plan, an Equal Employment Opportunity Plan, an Enrollment Management Plan, and a Resource Development Plan. The framework of the Strategic Plan for developing and integrating the planning processes appears to be well designed with roles and responsibilities, time schedules for completion, and flowcharts for how evaluation, planning, and resource allocations components will be integrated. The team found that the most functional and operational aspect of the Integration of Institutional Planning flowchart proposed in the Strategic Plan is the Institutional Program Planning & Review Templates and Process. These institutional assessment strategies have been integrated in both unit and program review practices along with sections for student learning outcome (SLOs). A team meeting with the two new SLO Coordinators indicated that the college was shifting from a general resistance towards SLOs to discovering and embracing the potential of SLOs assessments for exploring the pedagogy and practices across instruction and planning improvements. This is a positive step for the college.

A major concern of the team at this point is the development of all other components needed to integrate planning process such as the Educational Master Plan and the other six plans which are not scheduled be completed until well into 2011-2012. The college also recognized that the current Strategic Plan is not sustainable in its current design as it is essentially a plan to develop an integrated planning process and the college recognizes that it will need to be redesigned once the Educational Master Plan and the other six operational plans have been developed and implemented.

Though progress has been made to address the integration of the college's evaluation, planning and budgetary processes, the 2010-13 Strategic Plan is largely a plan to develop future plans. Perhaps the evidence that this plan could be carried out to completion is the positive change in attitude the college demonstrated for addressing the concerns of the Commission during the visit. The college has begun the process of addressing the recommendation with the development of the 2010-13 Strategic Plan, and a more defined assessment practice, yet lacks clear goals and objectives to give actual direction to the college and the overall integration between existing planning processes and resource allocation needed to fully meet the standard at the present time.

This recommendation has not been fully met.

Recommendation 6: Technology Resources

To meet standards, the team recommends that the college establish a process for regular and systematic planning, acquisition, maintenance and replacement of its technology infrastructure, existing and newly acquired technology and equipment to meet institutional needs; and that the process is integrated with other college planning, assessment, and resource allocation. (Standard III.C.1.c., III.C.1.d.)

The 2010-2013 Strategic Plan specifies that the college will develop a Technology Master Plan integrated with the college's other evaluation, planning and budget processes. The timeline for completion will be in late 2011, and like all other operational plans, must be developed in concert with the centrally positioned, yet to be developed, Educational Master Plan. The team found evidence that the college has laid the groundwork for the design of this plan in a comprehensive and candid examination of the current challenges for technology allocation, support, and renewal in a March 2010 report. From the team's perspective, the willingness of the college to describe with honesty the current challenges and shortcomings associated with technology resources is further evidence of the college's collective shift to a willingness to address the seriousness of the Commission's recommendations.

The team was concerned with the quality and ease of data availability for institutional research needs as a result of the recent implementation of the Banner Enterprise Resource Planning System in 2007-2008. The current economics associated with technology resources has not been able to provide the necessary support for the full conversion of college data from the older Santa Rosa System, and as a result, institutional research is largely dependent on using State MIS data at the present time to create trend lines. As with Recommendation 2, the college will need additional time to develop and implement an integrated Technology Master Plan. In addition, there is still no dedicated and ongoing allocation of funds for technology in the college's budget. This recommendation has not been fully met.

Recommendation 7: Financial Planning and Stability

To meet standards, the team recommends that the college review and assess its long range financial and capital planning strategies to ensure sufficient funding levels for ongoing operations. The team also recommends that the college and the college foundation review and communicate the fiscal status of investments and implement appropriate protections to secure fiscal solvency. (Standard III.D.1.c., III.D.2.a., III.D.2.e., III. D. 3).

Financial planning, like many of the other planning processes at Cuesta College, has operated much as a silo with informal and inconsistent links to ongoing assessment and planning practices. The team found that Cuesta College has continued to encumber a sizeable debt load as noted by the October 2009 team, indicating that the fiscal challenges for the college are still a very serious concern.

The college projects a \$1.5 million deficit in its 2010-11 budget. Due to the statewide workload reduction imposed in 2009-10 as a result of state budget cuts, Cuesta College will regress to below 10,000 full-time equivalent students (FTES) in 2010-11 losing in 2011-12 the additional

\$1.1 million gained as a result of exceeding for 10,000 FTES for the first time in 2009-10. While the college will still receive the \$1.1 million in 2010-11 as stability funding, the college has not developed a plan as to how will address the reduction in ongoing state funding starting 2011-12. While there is recognition that the college should develop a fiscal plan short- and long-term, to date there is no evidence that actual fiscal planning has occurred that includes steps and actions to be taken to deal in a sustained way with the reduced ongoing state funding and the large service debt that the college is carrying. The college relies on short- and long-term borrowing to deal with cash flow shortages and significant construction projects some under way and some planned. Although a new theatre will be completed this summer, the college does not have the resources to staff and support it.

The 2010-2013 Strategic Plan specifies that the college will develop a Long-term Fiscal Master Plan that is to be completed in June 2012, and at the time of the visit, like the other proposed Master Plans, work on this project is in the very early stages of conceptualization. The college will require additional time to develop the integrated financial planning framework which in turn could generate the appropriate evidence required to meet this standard. The team observed that at the college level and with the President of the Board of Trustees, a heightened sense of awareness of the necessity and importance of pursuing ideas and solutions that would generate financial stability for the college. As with the other standards, the team observed a new engagement and willingness at the college to accomplish the objectives in the 2010-2013 Strategic Plan related to financial planning and stability. At the time of the visit, this momentum has not yet translated into a sufficient level of development, implementation and improvement to demonstrate that the college has resolved this recommendation.

Recommendation 8: Board of Trustees Evaluation and Policies

To meet standards, the team recommends that the Board of Trustees conduct its annual self-evaluation no later than June 2009 and yearly thereafter. Also, the team recommends that a process and timeline be established for regular review of current board policies and development of new policies as needed. (Standard IV.A.1., IV.B.1.b., IV.B.1.e., IV.B.1.g., IV.B.1.j., IV.B.2.a)

The team observed that the Board of Trustees has conducted two self-evaluations since the October 2009 follow-up visit in addition to the review and updating of eight Board Policies. Under the guidance of the Interim Superintendent/President, the Board of Trustees developed an improved self-evaluation format, which was implemented for the first time in June 2010, and is now scheduled as an annual evaluation. The college also adopted the formatting and numbering system provided by the Community College League of California (CCLC) along with the service which will provide twice-yearly updates on exiting policies and procedures. The CCLC template has been adopted as the model to guide these discussions, and the Interim Superintendent/President and the Board of Trustees have committed to develop the timelines needed for a regular cycle of Board Policy Review. The college has implemented the recommendation and resolved the deficiency.

Recommendation 9: Leadership and Governance

To meet standards, the team recommends that the Board of Trustees delegate full responsibility and authority to the Superintendent/President to implement and administer board policies and the effective operation of the institution. To improve college decision making and institutional effectiveness, the team recommends that the college review and establish ongoing assessment of its college governance structures, processes, roles and responsibilities. (Standard IV.A.1., IV.A.2., IV.A.2.a., IV. A.3., IV.A.5., IV.B.1., IV.B.2.a., IV.B.2.b., IV.B.2.c)

Since the October 2009 visit, the college has taken the recommendation to examine the roles and responsibilities of its college governance structures seriously. The team found evidence that the Board of Trustees delegation of full responsibility and authority to the Superintendent/President made in October 7, 2009 (Board Policy 2430) has started to function in recent months as intended to clarify the role and responsibilities of this position. Three subsequent Board Policy updates in April 2010 and July 2010 now state that the Superintendent/President has full authority to implement policies as designated by the Board of Trustees. The most prominent evidence for the implementation and effectiveness of this delegation of authority was the recent completion of the 2010-2013 Strategic Plan that the Interim Superintendent/President led. The team was also able to identify a number of other changes with summer session offerings, classified staffing, incentive plans for faculty, along with collaborative approaches to project management guided by the Interim Superintendent/President that were supported by the college and the Board. Most telling has been the positive shift by faculty and the Board of Trustees to support the Interim Superintendent/President's intentions of addressing the seriousness of all the recommendations made by the Commission.

A second a major shift by the college in exploring roles and responsibilities has been the transition from the problematic Shared Governance Council to the more focused and functional College Council implemented in August 2010 for the 2010-2011 academic year. This change resulted from recommendations that emerged during a Technical Assistance II visit conducted by Scott Lay, President and CEO of the Community College League of California, and Mark Wade Lieu, then President of the State Academic Senate President. Subsequent discussions by the task force charged with identifying the role and responsibilities of a new governance council have more clearly defined the makeup and functionality of the College Council. Due to the newness of this new governance group, the team could not evaluate whether it is indeed effective. More time is needed before an evaluation of the effectiveness of this new structure can be conducted.

As a result of these processes, the college also recognized the need to examine and identify roles and responsibilities across all primary institutional planning committees, and has specified this with Goal 1.B in the 2010-2013 Strategic Plan along with additional objectives (Goal 1.A) to review and develop improved review and assessment strategies for its participatory governance processes. This work is currently being coordinated by the Interim Superintendent/President and the President of the Academic Senate, and as observed with the work on the other recommendations, the team observed a new willingness to address the recommendation seriously. The college has implemented the recommendation and resolved the deficiency.

Eligibility Requirement 5: Administrative Capacity

The Commission notes that Cuesta College does not have sufficient staff, with appropriate preparation and experience, to provide stable administrative services necessary to support its mission and purpose. The College needs to move expeditiously to fill vacancies and interim/acting positions.

The April 2008 Interim Progress team report found that the college had made progress in complying with Eligibility Requirement 5 and was moving in a positive direction to resolve the Commission's concern for sufficient administrative capacity at the college. But this momentum did not continue, and administrative capacity reemerged as a point of concern again when the Commission acted to place the college on Probation following the October 2009 Follow-Up Report and Visit. The Board of Trustees moved quickly following the resignation of the former Superintendent/President in November 2009, by hiring Dr. Gill Stork, as an Interim Superintendent/President in December 2009, and recently voted to extend Dr. Stork's contract through November 2011. The team observed that Dr. Stork, who has been at the college in a number of roles associated with instruction and student services over the past 40 years, appears to have quickly generated an atmosphere of respect and support across the college and with the Board of Trustees. Dr. Stork's appointment seems to have awakened the potential of the college and Board to work in a collaborative and meaningful manner to address the college's challenges and the Commission's recommendations. Emerging from the stability and confidence in leadership has been a stronger resolve by the Board of Trustees and the college to fill current interim administrative positions as soon as possible to support the ongoing college efforts associated with the other recommendations. The college still faces the immediate challenge of filling several important existing interim positions. The positive changes in the overall college climate the team observed will go a long way in ensuring this process will be successfully completed in the near future. The college has not fully met the recommendation.