

GFP Report to the Faculty Assessing the State of the University

From John W. Powell, jwp2

First, a summary of basics of what I do as General Faculty President is in my last letter, posted in April, and those basics remain the same. Some people did not get word of that one, perhaps because it was not forwarded from their departments. It is at <http://www.humboldt.edu/~jwp2/genfacpresreport.pdf>.

I serve on a lot of committees, and that service has led to my being put on more committees. I get one course release time each semester. That previous report spells out which committees and includes reports and commentary on a great many issues which are still relevant, to our regret, today. Quite a lot has happened, though, and quite a lot is happening now. WASC reaccreditation, for one. Responses to the Keeling Report and the Maddox Report on budget processes are ongoing. An ad hoc committee to design an integrated curriculum supervision structure (prompted by a WASC suggestion) is beginning to report out drafts. The program prioritization process is about to come home to roost where decisions are required. The President's conversations with the senate regarding shared governance are ending. And the state economy and budget, as well as the national economy, are crashing around our ears.

This report prints as eight pages. There are sections on assessing the following: WASC, prioritization, consultants (seventeen syllables, oops, eighteen), assessment, administration, faculty (with a recommendation regarding release time), curriculum oversight, GE. You can skip to boldface headings. If you read this and have reactions, please share them with me by sending an e-mail to jwp2. I had planned to take up several more topics, including assessing budgeting from my perch in the newly reconstituted University Budget Committee, but stopped, surprised by length. I would appreciate suggestions for my next report. On several topics there is an issue about the degree to which other faculty share my views—I'd especially like to hear from you about that.

Assessing WASC

WASC has not done a good job by HSU. The main recommendations vary from innocuous to awful, as do the unstated but required changes to accommodate their agenda. Putting together procedures to better map our priorities onto allocations of budget would be a good idea, perhaps, if we could achieve more wisdom regarding what our priorities are and get acquiescence from those guarding the vault—but the CSU central administration and our own central administration seem impatient with the vision that we in fact share, of a campus unified around ambitious values and expertise: fanatical excellence in teaching, educating for activism in a wide variety of liberal arts and sciences with half a dozen nationally ranked programs, preparing students for a diverse world facing grim environmental and social issues. What's so hard about that vision? Well, it's expensive, it's TOO ambitious, it does not lend itself to a “culture of evidence,” where that means fetishizing measurement using free yardsticks from Sears. WASC could have endorsed an HSU attempt to be a flagship campus to the system by gearing its recommendations to a proposal to that end. But moves toward proposing any such goals were capsized by our study of what WASC does and what it tends to want, with the result that only dim language of social and environmental justice remains in our overall objectives—indeed, it is no longer clear that those objectives are still our own objectives rather than WASC's. The most substantive piece of WASC's recommendations regarding those ambitious goals has to do with improving

student writing, an old issue of increasing urgency; it's still a little early to tell, but it looks as if we are preparing, on second down, to punt (that's a judgment about us, not about WASC).

Someone probably ought to say what WASC should have said: HSU has excellent teaching in a good mix of disciplines but is under siege to stop being excellent and instead fade into the pack, to crank out more vanilla graduates with fewer resources, graduates happy to fit into the system rather than ambitious to change it. The administration should be accumulating arguments for the excellence of programs and befriending powerful spokespersons and lobbying for changes in the funding formulas, and is instead pacing and wringing its hands. (I can hear the arguments about being realistic, about there no longer being any chance to change funding formulas, about not being able to find volunteers to commit suppuku on the steps of the Chancellor's office.)

And someone should say the following: We are being required to face a great many time-consuming and difficult problems--WASC, the Keeling Report's recommendations, program prioritization (more on which anon), difficulties in relations between faculty and administration, decisions driven by decreasing budgets, a demand we rethink curriculum supervision while signing on to an assumption that centralization will help, the still-unfinished issues regarding that long-ago Bill of Particulars, waiting for the mud to clear--but not being able to wait--regarding shifts in RTP criteria, severe losses of numbers (and quality that comes with age and experience) of faculty positions. All these take away time and attention from classroom instruction--perhaps we should feel gratitude for those faculty who put on their blinders before they get out of their cars to walk to campus. They are, after all, doing the work.

Assessing Prioritization

It's early to assess Prioritization because hardly any of the punch line results are in. After talking to some of the report scoring team members, though, I have grave concerns. Some of those concerns go back a while. The structure for the departmental reports and the announced criteria which generated that structure were alike incomplete and timid. The program itself was not timid in its conception, which makes timidity in execution surprising and alarming. One conspicuous example you've heard from me before: programs are not being evaluated at all on teaching quality. Is this crazy or what? What faculty quality measures there are have been cribbed from research I institutions, which is false to our mission. When I said this before, early and often, it was clear it had been discussed and backed away from because measuring classroom teaching quality is difficult. The word that kept being used was "subjective." This is a hoax. The word that should have been used is "difficult." There are reasons this is difficult, all of them old news. There are many kinds of good teaching, from demanding and rigid insistence on high standards of work to mothering to powerful rhetoricians to gifted explaining to uniquely informed to thinking up novel insights right before our very eyes, and others. We have preferences among those kinds of good teaching, and don't trust others to pay attention to the kinds we prefer. There are similar variations in bad teaching. Besides the complexity of what is being evaluated, there are problems with methods. Students have limits as evaluators of teaching. Peer classroom reports are better provided they are impartial, but they are seldom impartial. It's hard.

Well, suck it up, people. "Difficult" means we are the ones for the job. There are tools at our disposal--student evaluations finally allow for broader comparisons, even though critical thinking as we read them is still, regrettably, required; detailed peer reports can tell a lot, and if

they are fluff that can tell a lot as well; some faculty even tell the truth about their own teaching. We evaluate teaching all the time for RTP. There are experts and researchers, studies of breathtakingly poor quality and then sober studies of studies. (See the first few pages of Terry Doyle's unambitious but revealing summary for Ferris State's Center for Teaching and Learning - take your critical faculties along.) It really is difficult, but we could do a better job than most, given our history of fanaticism in demanding good teaching. Besides thoughtful use of students' evaluations and faculty self evaluations, we could institute a program of regular visits by chairs to classes in other colleges, or appoint retired faculty as evaluators, or train cheaper alumni. It can be done. For an institution that allegedly places teaching oops students oops learning (the history of those terms, turning them into meaningless faddish jargon aimed at dethroning teachers and handing power to data wonks--well, another time) at the center of our work, prioritizing programs without using assessments of the quality of classroom experience is mad.

Assessing Consultants

Keeling and Hirsch came;
They heard and saw and conquered,
then billed for all we said.

Assessing Assessment

It's hard to know where to start, assessing assessment. Assessment is education's current fad, driven not by research but by the same management theories which have been being imposed on universities since Veblen started documenting them in 1918 in *The Higher Learning in America*. What slight research there is is infected by circularity; that research confirms that outcomes assessment leads to assessment of outcomes. Does it lead to better-educated graduates? well, if better-educated means there's evidence they have been required to undergo outcomes assessment, then, you betcha. Does it pull attention away from teaching? yes. Does it add to workload? Is it based on misconceptions and ill-will? Is its putative audience oblivious and uninterested? Is it counterproductive? (visualize Molly Bloom) Yes. Oh, yes.

I have put up a draft of an essay, entitled "Conceptual Problems with Outcomes Assessment," on my website at

<http://www.humboldt.edu/~jwp2/outcomessmentcwp.htm> (please note; this is only a draft-- suggestions, feedback, and rants will be welcomed).

Assessing the Administration

The administration is a terribly mixed bag. They cannot be graded on one measure. There is enormous talent and quite a lot of good will. There are people working at all hours of the day and night at the very edges of their competence. There are some who know the University--its history, its navigation manuals, and its sages. There are some who reflexively think of big-picture issues and others who have amazing technical competence and are good at explaining. We have some good writers among those who tell the University's story to the world.

I've been worrying lately whether leading a university is flatly impossible. (Veblen asks whether professional managers are necessary.) In twenty-five years, counting some last activist grad school years, under six presidents, I've seen one who was excellent--eloquent, quotable,

brave, insightful, smart, funny, a powerful voice for the university (including the goddamned faculty) and for higher education at its best. It's hard to get those characteristics to stick in the job posting. I'm not sure such a leader could get through current screening processes, which apparently sort for leaders who will play underlings to the system's CEOs. Since we are not to be allowed to become a charter campus, and there is no Rockefeller to buy us out, some kind of reassessment for how we choose university presidents is overdue.

I have to confess to having mellowed in judgments regarding the administration. Part of this is because of sitting through innumerable and interminable meetings in which people work hard and intelligently at a wide variety of formidable tasks which would make me curl into fetal position and report to each other on what they are doing. There's always a lot going on. The President is continually working with various off-campus and system groups and administrators, running interference for initiatives or for cooperative agreements with other institutions or organizations from Abu Dhabi to groups doing coastal research, soliciting advice regarding, e.g., computer security policies, emergency planning, setting up a liaison group with CR, laying groundwork for possible shared research centers, and so on and on and on. Information regarding much of this work is of interest to too few people to justify broadcasting it widely, though I think it could be communicated more effectively and more often than it is. Information about current issues facing the University and administrative work addressing those issues could be on one central website, but it is at least usually available with only a little digging. For example, the University Executive Committee includes deans and vice presidents, and several others, including the Senate Chair (for whom I've been serving as proxy during fall because of Saeed's teaching schedule), and the Chief Technology Officer. It, the UEC, has its agendas and notes (meetings are sometimes canceled because of CSU meetings or other travel) on the web linked from the University President's web page, from the Policies link; here's the url:

<http://www.humboldt.edu/~hsupres/uecmn.html> . On these notes pages, one could sometimes find what the truth is among rumors--for instance, students asking about whether HSU was going to close off applications and reduce enrollment numbers could have found out that the provisions taken elsewhere for campuses who are substantially over their enrollment targets will have little effect on us. (Since I wrote that the local truth squad has issued press releases.) --That's supposing truth is preferable to rumors. The President's Council meets less frequently but is still a main place where information about major initiatives and achievements are first made widely public. Notes from these are not posted on the web, but I expect they would be if there were demand. This is a fairly large group, any of which can be called on for reports to departments.

Still, there are grave problems with HSU's administration. One way into these would be by thinking of the phrase, "a university-wide perspective." This phrase was used in setting up the task force to guide program prioritization, to stipulate that the faculty on that group not be defending their own turfs (so, not a department, not a college, not a family of disciplines), and it has been used repeatedly since, for example in discussing membership on the Cabinet for Institutional Change recommended by Keeling and Hirsch and for membership on the redesign of curriculum planning and supervision group (on which I serve). There is a tendency among administrators to think that other administrators automatically come with a university-wide perspective. Some do have such a perspective. But in the University Executive Committee and other gatherings of administrators several often focus on budget and outcomes assessment and planning issues and their own particular divisions and forget what is going on in classrooms. This is a university-wide perspective that has large, central blind spots. What's needed is not trust but therapy for macular degeneration. The talk about re-establishing trust is assumed by

administrators to be a problem about faculty not trusting administrators, even though recent history suggests that administrators by habit do not consider faculty voices to be relevant to planning, budget, or assessment, and would like to streamline and centralize supervision of curriculum in particular ways whether faculty agree or not. I have a severe view of this issue about trust--if your job is critical thinking, that is, clarifying issues, articulating relevant arguments, arraying them into discourses and using them in making decisions--then trust falls out as irrelevant. Indeed, critical thinking in part means we find ways not to trust our own views, and we re-examine those views with the help of friends and enemies who disagree. Administrators do not need more trust from faculty--what they need is skills at listening and skills in insightful analysis of what they hear. The faculty, of course, need these things too, and neither side's been great. But there are faculty and administrators who are good at clarification and at analysis and summarizing. I am not, though, saying that we need to get out of their way--instead, all of us need to keep explaining and arguing and demanding arguments, the very best we can marshal. And we need to stop using the phrase, "university-wide perspective" and calls to build trust as covers for forbidding dissent or maligning those who disagree.

Assessing the Faculty

Faculty positions are dying off like flies. The Analytic Studies Reports show that in spring 2001 there were 426 FTEF, a number which had been flat or rising slightly for five years. The number then begins to vary more, mostly sliding downhill. In AY 04/05 it is 374. In fall of 07 it is 356. We have lost about a seventh of our faculty in FTEF. (Note the fine print: gathering meaningful data requires looking at more than one report, and there are discrepancies between the Analytic Studies data and the data out of the payroll numbers. This is FTEF, not total appointments, which when you count each part time person separately, is 697 appointments in 02/03 and in 07/08 is 612, or 85 people among the faculty gone missing. In fall of 07 that 356 FTEF noted above includes the work of 600 appointed faculty. Also note that about a dozen and a half coaches moved off state general funds to Instructionally Related Fee support after that fee was instituted. To verify these numbers, use the Analytic Studies Report Finder with "faculty" as the filter in the left hand list.) And, okay, that's not like flies or we'd all have been gone long ago and would have been swept up and put in the dustbin; that was hyperbole.

Further, as many of us know, the slide in number of faculty comes in part because baby boomers are retiring now, and we are behind in replacing them. Further, those retirees include a disproportionate number of wise, respected, activist, and knowledgeable pains in the ass. One result of their leaving is a distressing deterioration in morale and in ability to face other changes. New faculty leaders are emerging, but we who have been recruiting faculty for committee and Senate service find too many people saying no. Part of this is due to increasing emphasis on research without a decrease in teaching load or increase in travel or other faculty development or increase in the terrible budget for library purchases, and part of it seems to be a feeling that the issues we face require more wisdom than volunteers think they can offer. Some of this will be remedied by time, perhaps, and by renewed and wider efforts, featuring more guilt trips, to recruit nominees.

On the bright side, some faculty have not retired. Among those who have been willing to take on heavier service roles are some very promising, thoughtful, independent professors. Upon understanding real needs, many faculty still show a heartening willingness and ability to step up.

Release Time On a campus where standard teaching loads are heavy, release time for taking on heavy service is an appropriate method for increasing our ability to teach well and to serve well. Roughly 50 FTEF are in assigned time, almost half of that to chairs. The use of assigned time for committee work has gone down in the last few years from about 9 FTEF to 3.36. That number is too small. There are apparently assigned time appointments for professors developing new courses, but I suspect these may not be made equitably. Assigned time for Senate and other committee leadership involves an annual consultation between the Senate Executive Committee and the Provost. Rumbblings about "fixing" assigned time issues have cropped up every couple or three years, and in spring 08 the Provost took away the one course of assigned time given to the members of the UCC, partly based on the claim that the college curriculum committees do more work, which may be true in some cases, without any assigned time. (This appeal to equity, as I said at the time, could just as easily justify increasing assigned time to the college committee members.) Recommendation: the faculty, probably through the senate, should take on a re-examination of collateral duties guidelines, including an inventory of where faculty are taking on more than the standard duties, and recommend policy regarding appropriate and equitable use of release time. This should be a faculty-initiated and faculty-run effort, with the result taking the form of a Senate resolution advising the President

. **Assessing the Curriculum**

(See my section on curriculum in the document, "What the President Should Have Said and Could Have Said Regarding Shared Governance," at <http://www.humboldt.edu/~jwp2/pressshouldhavesaid.pdf> .)

WASC recommended reworking faculty supervision of curriculum to make it less fragmented and more clear. A group has been assembled and is working toward this end. We have as of this writing drafted a model for an Integrated Curriculum Committee with strengthened ties to the Academic Senate. The new ICC would eliminate the college curriculum committees, would work with three sub- or satellite committees each of which would have overlapping membership with the Senate and with each other. A standard agenda format and common e-mail list would acquaint the ICC with new proposals facing each of the satellite committees, would provide for many routine tasks to be treated as consent items, and would allow for any member to shift an item from the consent calendar to new business. Small subcommittees would review routine tasks such as changes in catalog copy or C-classifications. Those task subcommittees would typically include an associate dean or a designee from the registrar to advise the faculty. Academic Senate members would receive reminders in the form of links to agendas and would still be asked to take up any resulting policy issues. A nifty flow diagram is available. The group working on this is currently formulating committee charge and membership suggestions. Current members of the UCC and the college committees will be recruited for inclusion in the first iteration of the new committee, pending Senate approval. Though the ICC as currently envisioned will include administrators, they will be a minority and all substantive issues are to be reviewed by the Academic Senate, preserving the crucial primary role of faculty in supervising the curriculum.

Assessing GE

HSU is in the same place regarding General Education as much of the rest of higher education

nationwide: discontented, with a fairly clear picture of what is problematic about the present system, wanting to fix it, but without budgetary means and without the needed strong will for insisting on change. Further, we've been here for quite a while. Eric Van Duzer wrote a recent history of attempts to reform GE, the lesson of which is that there are formidable hurdles because of departments invested in the current system who will resist any changes which threaten their enrollment numbers. Meaningful change will probably be accomplished only by top-down means or by finding ways to accommodate those departments in a new system. I have a recommendation below which might do that, but I fully expect to be long dead before it is acted on.

For a tour of the territory, see a report from the Center for the Study of Higher Education entitled GE in the 21st Century. It is online, in a sixty-page large-format .pdf, at <http://cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/docs/GEC-WEB.FINAL.pdf> and hard copies are available on campus.

The problems: students graduate with inadequate writing and analytical skills; our program requires breadth in the form of what is usually called a smorgasbord approach, single courses from several different tables, but does not provide depth in any discipline other than the major; graduates do not have a common core of knowledge shared with other educated people; our campus's addition to the CSU GE program, the Diversity and Common Ground courses, has been tightened but still is not cohesive preparation for dealing with issues of diversity; while there is opportunity to engage in civic service, it is easy for students to graduate ignorant regarding their roles as citizens.

My own perspective on this is different, so I'll repeat in other words. Students cannot analyze or write clearly about arguments and issues. They lack the rudiments of literacy in the cultural and intellectual history of the world. Because the only depth in their education comes through the current fad of making them take a major, many can and do graduate with provincial tunnel vision, citizens only of a narrow discipline which is unlikely even to remain their vocational home. DCG does not emphasize the profound live issues which were the heart of it as it was proposed. Citizenship has changed substantially but our preparation for citizenship has not.

I have a review of that report, with some recommendations, under consideration at the Journal of General Education, with a draft at <http://www.humboldt.edu/~jwp2/jgereview08.pdf>

Again, please send e-mail to jwp2.