

An Open Note to the Board of Trustees, the California State University

You do not know very well what you are doing to this campus, and if you knew you would look for ways to change it. This has been an exemplary campus and it is on its way to becoming mediocre. This pains especially those of us who have been here long enough to understand, and those of us who have taught on other campuses, but it pains all the faculty and staff. Among faculty now retiring or nearing retirement like me, the effect is a striking consensus of bitter cynicism and defeat. I cannot help but think that the depth of that bitterness, and its foundations in love and high ideals for this campus, would give you pause if you would only check.

Indicators of how this campus is exemplary and how it does in fact live up to the ideals of the CSU are easy to find. Among our graduates we have the highest rate of participation in the Peace Corps, the highest rate of successful completions in Ph.D. programs. Three of our largest majors are Biology, Fine Arts, and Psychology, but we also have several small programs not duplicated anywhere in the CSU, including the top rated undergraduate program in Environmental Engineering in the country and many other programs which are well-known and highly ranked. Our full-time students take on average one of the heaviest course loads in the CSU. We have higher proportions of small classes no matter what your definition, a higher proportion of expensive programs, the only undergraduate marine biology program with a research vessel in the country, prizewinning student teams in forestry, a smattering of masters' degrees programs carried with little support on the backs of overcommitted faculty, and a relationship with the surrounding community which has just enough friction to keep it from being too good to be true.

The story of how we came to be in trouble is also easy to know. We lost three enrollment management heads. The new one we have now looks so good I'm sure he's being approached by places with lots more money. We had a period with so many interim central administrators that a friend remarked back then that our administration had been reduced to sighting reports. The state budget was plundered by energy companies and an illegitimate war, and while recovering leaned hard on other priorities including prisons and small classrooms for small children, and you, the Board of Trustees and the CSU administration, proved yourselves less than powerful advocates with the public and the legislature. To be fair, we, the faculty, also did a piss poor job. This campus is a long way from any population centers and is not well known among the public, and its going under for the first and second times was easy to miss. And for the last six years we have missed enrollment targets, have missed clear opportunities for strengthening and expanding programs, have in constant dollars been taking budget cuts every year, have cut journal subscriptions and book purchases (I mean no books, nada, zero, zilch) for the library, have been struggling. And the CSU has given up on the Orange Book, given up on funding formulas which allow for strengthening particular programs without gutting others, has simplified out sources of particular funding strengths which supported campuses like ours, all in favor of ignorant calls for efficiency and all in favor of funding formulas driven only by enrollment, formulas which result in elimination of "outliers" whether those outliers are signs of excellence or not. This campus is being devastated.

The cure is less easily known. A start, though, would involve an inventory of effects. I'll prophesy what will show up in that inventory. Small classes prepare students to re-examine their own views and the views of others in such a way that the students are prepared, not just for fitting in to jobs and government roles and roles as teachers, but for having effects on those social structures. Small classes at every level help prepare graduates to take themselves seriously and to assume responsibility for debating and making changes wherever they go. The best programs are not the most cost-effective. The taxpayers would like their college students to be able not just to find a job but to make a difference. Flexibility in funding for excellent programs, and finding ways to fund a high proportion of small classes is exactly what is needed and is exactly what you are eliminating. The result is increases in artificial productivity and increases in real mediocrity.

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