

A Report on a Ten Year Old Public University

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Abstract

California State University Channel Islands (CI) was founded in 2001 (in Camarillo, CA) and admitted its first students in 2002. Over the ensuing decade, the campus has transitioned from a start-up institution to a regionally accredited comprehensive university offering 23 baccalaureate and 6 graduate degree programs. This transition has occurred during a period of frequent and substantial changes in the university's external and internal environments. This paper first describes the founding and early history of the university. Next, it presents "lessons learned" in several categories: establishing and following a Mission, creating an organizational culture, hiring and developing employees (faculty, staff administrators), and university building through the accreditation process. Finally, since the founding president and many of the founding faculty and founding administrators are still at the campus, the paper discusses the challenge of sustaining early successes as campus founders separate from the university.

Founding a Four-Year Public Comprehensive University

In fall 2002, California State University Channel Islands (CI) opened for 700 junior transfers, and in fall 2003, admitted its first freshman class. It had been a long journey to the opening. For more than 30 years, residents of Ventura County had petitioned the State for a public university. After many delays and false starts, things moved quickly in the new millennium: the State transferred the property and facilities of a closed state hospital to the California State University (CSU) system, a new President, Dr. Richard R. Rush, was hired, and he hired administrators and 13 Founding Faculty members to develop the new university. Within a year, additional faculty were hired, curriculum was created, policies and procedures were established, students were recruited and admitted, several building projects were begun and the university opened with great fanfare in August 2002 as the 23rd campus of the CSU.

By any reasonable standard, CI is highly successful: the campus has never missed its enrollment targets, the campus received initial regional accreditation at the earliest possible date and for the longest possible duration, the campus has been recognized by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* for four consecutive years (2009-2013) as a "Great College to Work For" and, most significantly, the campus has graduated several thousand students from its new programs who have gone on to successful careers and advanced study.

CI is justifiably proud of its successes, especially considering that these accomplishments were achieved during a decade of uncertainty, political change and economic adversity in the state of California. During the campus' brief history, California has had three governors - Democrat Gray Davis, Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Democrat Jerry Brown. Term limits have led to a substantial turnover in the legislature. The CSU Board of Trustees had significant membership changes (the Board consists of *ex officio* elected government officials and political appointees). In addition, during the last decade the economy has suffered the most serious downturn since the Great Depression. The "Great Recession" created funding challenges for the state that led to increased tuition, reduced budget allocations and enrollment target cuts across the CSU system. As a new campus, CI was shielded to some extent from budget reductions and enrollment target decreases. Nevertheless, the campus was adversely affected by the recession.

Although CI has operated in a changing political and economic environment since its opening, in some important ways it has been highly stable. First, while there has been significant turnover among the CSU Board of Trustees, the chief executive officer of the system, Chancellor Charles Reed, oversaw the CSU since 1998 through 2012—when Timothy White became Chancellor. Second, President Rush has been CI's sole president and 9 of CI's 13 Founding Faculty are still employed at CI, although some are now in administrative positions. Third, President Rush has been an active participant in the selection of all senior

level and many mid-level administrators, and, while there has been greater turnover among their ranks than among the faculty members, many “original” administrators are still at CI.

Stability in these key positions at the system and campus levels has helped CI to offset the effects of the political changes and the poor economy. These key campus employees, including the President, early faculty and administrators, were recruited on the basis of their affinity to CI’s Mission Statement, and the Mission is continually emphasized in planning efforts and daily operations. From its inception, all CI planning processes have been open to the entire campus, which has led to substantial buy-in across the campus community (Cordeiro and Muraoka, 2011).

The difficult times have begun to subside. State funding increased in the 2013-14 budget, several new buildings have been completed and hiring has resumed. Today, CI has 4,500 full-time equivalent students (FTES) in 23 undergraduate and 6 graduate programs. It plans an annual increase of 500 FTES, with a final target of 15,000 FTES.

Lessons Learned After Ten Years

Establishing and Following a Mission

A mission statement states why an organization exists and presents its key attributes and purpose (Parnell, 2014, p. 1). From the beginning, CI developed and widely promulgated a mission that focused on students and their successes. The CI Mission Statement is more than just a series of words/sentences. It is an accurate reflection of the beliefs and practices of most CI employees. When accreditors visited the campus in 2007, they noted that a great majority of the campus community knew the Mission Statement—most knew its content, and many could quote it verbatim:

Placing students at the center of the educational experience, California State Channel Islands provides undergraduate and graduate education that facilitates learning within and across disciplines through integrative approaches, emphasizes experiential and service learning, and graduates students with multicultural and international perspectives.

The development of the Mission Statement was among the first tasks undertaken by the new President, faculty members and administrators, and a consensus developed around the major elements of the Mission. As a start-up organization, it was easier than it would have been in more mature organizations to implement the major elements of a new Mission. With the President’s direct involvement in the hiring of key campus employees, he was confident that they would embrace and implement the Mission.

As the University developed during the past ten years - especially during the economic downturn - the Mission remained the primary driver of decisions made by the President and university employees. As an example: because the start-up organization was lightly staffed, in response to the economic downturn, the President chose a “no layoff” policy since layoffs would reduce the number of employees available to serve students. Financial offsets were taken by delaying hiring, delaying programs (e.g., athletics), and delaying construction projects. These steps maintained core services available for students.

There are several lessons that we have learned from this experience: (1) involve the campus community in the creation of a genuine mission that reflects the core values of the institution, (2) make ongoing efforts to assure that the campus community is aware of the mission, and (3) use the mission as a primary driver in decision making.

Creating an Organizational Culture

The importance of organizational culture has been widely supported by many authors (Kotter, 1992; Mercer, 1996; Schein, 2004). Robbins (1986) defines organizational culture as a relatively uniform perception held of the organization. Culture is especially important and influential in start-up organizations (Zhang, 2011). The development of an effective culture is essential to an academic environment where lines of authority are often less clear than in a for-profit organization (Yoeli, 2010).

Culture has several major elements that impact the performance of universities. Chatman and Cha (2003) list the following elements as influential in the development of a university's culture:

- History
- Strategy
- Size
- Location
- Management and Leadership
- Environment

Further, they suggest three vital tools available for leaders to use in developing and managing the culture:

- Recruiting and Selection
- Social Training
- Reward/Recognition Systems

With the importance of culture in mind, President Rush made conscious, transparent and public efforts in developing the CI culture. Several items reflected this deliberate development: The Mission Statement has been prominently touted and displayed in many venues, events, news releases and publications. In all public and private encounters and speeches, the President stressed the "student oriented" nature of CI and its Mission. Most significantly, the President's involvement in the hiring of faculty and key administrators has been instrumental in creating a mission-focused culture.

The lessons that we have learned from this experience are consistent with those found in the literature. They are: (1) arguably the most important activity of a start-up university is the establishment of culture, (2) the new culture should be intentional, (3) the new culture is fragile in the early years, (4) awareness of the importance of culture across the university will assist in developing and strengthening culture, and (5) cultural fit is a key element in the decision to hire new faculty, staff and administrators. This last item is especially important because of the small size of the organization.

Hiring and Developing Employees (Faculty and Staff, Administrators)

We have already noted the importance of President Rush's involvement in the hiring of CI's faculty and staff. To further elaborate on faculty and staff hiring, it's important to look at CI unique, mission-focused faculty recruitment process (Cordeiro, 2010). Unlike traditional faculty recruitment that occurs at the department level, CI's recruitment occurs at the university level. At CI, groups of finalists for faculty positions from different disciplines are brought together on campus where they interact with each other, with CI administrators and with faculty from many disciplines. Activities are planned throughout the campus visit to allow CI administrators and faculty to gauge the "fit" of candidates to the campus culture and mission. The process is a highly inclusive team effort.

Similarly, the hiring process for administrative positions has been highly inclusive with participation from students, faculty, administrators, staff, and community stakeholders (as appropriate). As with the faculty hiring process, there has been an emphasis in administrative hiring on culture and mission. Early successes with this practice led the university to develop a campus policy on administrative hiring to assure that these practices will continue.

The success of the faculty hiring process is evinced in part by a high level of retention and success in the tenure and promotion process of the early faculty. Start-up universities place great demands on the faculty in university building. These demands, which reduce the time available to faculty members to pursue their teaching and research agendas, could lead to a relatively low retention rate of early faculty hires. At CI, several new faculty hires left within a few years, but only a handful of faculty have taken this path. The vast majority of faculty members have been retained and have earned promotions and tenure. It is important to note here that the standards for retention, tenure and promotion of faculty should reflect the nature of the work that the faculty are asked to do in a start-up university, especially the effort needed in university building. In CI's early years, there have been no faculty who have lacked accomplishments in "university and community service." The challenge has been to provide faculty with the necessary resources to develop their agendas in teaching and in scholarly and creative activities. At CI, this was

accomplished in several ways. First, in the earliest years, faculty were provided re-assigned time from their usual teaching load to engage in university building. Second, faculty have been provided supported by campus-funded mini-grants and travel grants to support scholarly and creative activities. Finally, the definition of scholarship has been broadened to include the scholarship of university building. At CI, to achieve tenure and promotion, faculty have been required to document their achievements in the areas of teaching, scholarly and creative activities, and university and community service.

The faculty who have remained at CI have had an extraordinary opportunity to develop managerial and administrative expertise spanning the university. As a start-up university, there was a need to develop and implement policies across all aspects of the university. With relatively few university employees, it often fell upon the faculty to manage and staff activities that, at more established institutions, would often be staffed by employees other than faculty. This had the benefit of creating a faculty with a deep understanding of university activities both within and outside of those found in academic affairs. This, in turn, has led many faculty to move into administrative positions at CI and at other colleges and universities. While we would generally describe this as beneficial, it is also creating challenges for the university moving forward (see below).

Like the faculty, early university administrators and staff have experienced opportunities beyond those that one would typically be found in a mature university. As a start-up university, CI began with many "one person" offices. Individuals in these offices were charged with not only maintaining the day-to-day activities of these offices, but often with defining and developing the scope of the activities, and creating policies, practices and protocols for the office. This resulted in founding staff and administrators who possessed a deep understanding in their areas. As mentioned earlier, these individuals were also recruited with the university mission in mind and, as will be discussed below, participated in large numbers in the initial accreditation efforts.

The lessons learned in hiring and developing employees include the importance of: (1) developing a hiring process for faculty, staff and administrators that includes a fit to the mission and culture, and that identifies candidates who are more likely to be successful in a start-up environment, (2) awareness of the demands of "university building" on the early faculty and provide resources to support teaching and scholarly and creative activities, (3) recognizing university building in the faculty retention, tenure and promotion process, and (4) acknowledging that successful early faculty, staff and administrators will have a range of experiences and develop an array of skill and competencies and an understanding of the university that exceeds that of employees at mature universities.

University Building Through the Accreditation Process

As noted earlier, in a very real sense the founding of CI was 30 years in the making as for decades Ventura County had lobbied for its own CSU campus. The community had been served by satellite campuses from CSU Northridge and the University of California, Santa Barbara; however, the programs offered by these campuses were limited and were not selected to address the specific needs of the region. When President Rush was hired in summer 2001, he quickly became the most sought after speaker in the region. The Founding Faculty accompanied President Rush on many of his speaking engagements. It quickly became clear that managing the expectations of community would be an immediate and ongoing challenge in the campus' early years. The campus founders, including faculty, administrators and staff, had their own expectations about how the university would develop and which programs and activities would come first. As noted above, CI is envisioned as a comprehensive university serving 15,000 FTES at full capacity. It will eventually offer a full array of undergraduate and graduate degree programs, athletics, facilities and cultural activities. The challenge is ranking the priority of these many activities. This would be a challenge in the best of economic times, but it is even more challenging during an economic downturn.

In addition to addressing community needs, the university was built around the process of attaining initial accreditation. The accrediting body for CI and all senior universities in California is the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). In 2001, WASC made a major revision to its standards for accreditation that reflected a paradigm shift to include not only institutional capacity but also educational effectiveness as essential elements for accreditation. CI was the first public university to seek initial

accreditation under the new standards, and, therefore, did not have a template on which to base its initial accreditation efforts. To achieve initial accreditation, a university must provide evidence that it meets all accreditation standards and criteria for review (CFR). This process was arduous, and among other things, included 4 accreditation self-studies and site visits.

President Rush used the initial accreditation process in several important ways. First, he declared on an annual basis through his convocation address to the campus community that initial accreditation was a top, if not the top priority for the campus. Second, he invited every member of the campus community, including all students, all faculty, all administrators and staff, and representatives from community stakeholders, to participate in the initial accreditation process. Third, he declared that CI would use the WASC accreditation standards and CFR as “the blueprint for building the new university.”

This approach to initial accreditation was highly successful. The early campus strategic plans reinforced the notion that initial accreditation was a top priority by making achieving initial accreditation one of the handful of campus strategic initiatives included in the plans. As a campus priority and strategic initiative, large numbers of the campus community flocked to the accreditation process. Indeed, the number of members of the initial accreditation committee grew each year and in the final year reached 100 members. Every year, two-thirds of the tenure-track faculty volunteered to serve on the committee. This had the effect of familiarizing a large percentage of the faculty and staff with the accreditation standards and CFR.

The comprehensive nature of the standards and CFR also provided a basis for ranking the priority for campus activities. Stated simply, to achieve initial accreditation, the institution was required to demonstrate that it met each of the standards and CFR. As one might expect, CI met many of the standards and CFR easily, but others were more elusive. In ranking priorities, it was important to continue to focus on those areas where more progress was needed to achieve initial accreditation. As noted earlier, the initial accreditation process required a series of self-studies and site visits. Through these internal and external reviews, CI was able to assess progress and receive regular feedback on those areas that had met or exceeded the standards and CFR and on those areas that needed improvement. CI achieved initial accreditation at the earliest possible date (Spring 2007) and for the longest possible duration (7 years). The campus is justifiably proud of this accomplishment.

The lesson learned are: (1) make initial accreditation a high priority, (2) use accreditation standards as blueprint for the university, (3) use the accreditation review process as a way of ranking priorities in university building, and (4) open the initial accreditation activities to all members of the campus community.

Challenges Moving into the Second Decade

Through its first decade, CI was highly successful in retaining its founding faculty and staff. There are many reasons for this success. As noted earlier, creating a new university is the opportunity of a lifetime. The early years of university building are highly engaging and exciting, and the founding faculty and staff sought positions at the university in part because of the unique opportunities inherent in establishing a new campus. The immediate success of the campus - for example, making growing enrollment targets, attracting high quality applicants for faculty and staff positions, and hitting initial accreditation milestones - created many opportunities for staff to move from entry level positions to positions of increasing responsibility more rapidly than one would find in a mature university. Similarly, the early faculty engaged in a range of activities that spanned the university. Participation in these activities provided the faculty with a large array of experiences over a short period of time. The most active of these faculty members have provided leadership and managed many campus activities. For example, five of the first seven academic senate chairs have come from the ranks of the 30 tenure-track faculty on campus for the first day of instruction. In addition, three provosts, one associate provost, three associate vice-presidents, two deans and one senior associate dean emerged from these 30 faculty members – with administrative positions in CI or at other universities.

One of the challenges facing the university moving forward is sustaining the campus culture and maintaining positive momentum as the campus founders separate from the institution to accept new positions or to enter retirement. Indeed, sustaining culture and maintaining momentum would be a challenge even if all of the founders were retained as the campus is scheduled to grow rapidly over the next 10 years, but the challenge is compounded as the founders separate from the university. We believe that there are several key efforts that the campus can and should undertake moving forward. First, engage in cross-training and succession planning in all areas of the campus. Second, in the area of faculty and staff recruitment, continue to look for individuals who are not only highly skilled and experienced, but also are well matched to the mission and culture. In the next 10 years, fewer new programs and offices will be implemented, but many if not most university programs and offices will need to grow rapidly to meet the demands of a greater student population. Employees who are well-suited to a high growth environment will be ideal.

Second, review successful campus practices and develop policies that will ensure the continuation of these practices into the future. There is a first time for everything, and it is the nature of a start-up campus that it must address all of the activities required of a university for the first time. In addressing these activities, a new campus will create new approaches to these activities. Some will be successful and others will not. In those areas where a successful practice has been developed, it is worthwhile to consider whether that practice will work in the future, and, if so, to make a policy that will continue the policy. For example, as noted above, CI has developed a highly inclusive practice in the recruitment of administrators. Since the practice was very successful, it was adopted as a campus policy.

Conversely, there will be some practices that will need to be substantially altered or discontinued as the campus grows. One of the characteristics of a new campus is that it is small in many dimensions—there are few students, faculty, staff, programs, facilities, and the like. As the campus moves into a period of rapid growth, it will be necessary to “scale-up” many activities. Unfortunately, some highly successful processes of the early years will not be possible in future years. For example, in its early years, CI has used an advisement process that relies heavily on one-on-one meetings between advisors and students. This process has been highly successful, but will not be possible as the university grows. In summary, the goal is to learn and apply lessons from past successes and failures in continuing to build an excellent university for the 21 century.

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