

the next fifty years

What will Cal State Fullerton be like in the next 25 to 50 years?

In a free-flowing discussion in April 2007, a nine-person panel reached a consensus (with some disagreement, of course) on several issues involving the university's future.

The panel consisted of President Milton A. Gordon; Ephraim P. Smith, vice president for academic affairs, and Robert Palmer, vice president for student affairs; Dean Steve Murray; Professor Diana Guerin, chair of the Academic Senate; Professors Jane Hall and Raphael Sonenshein; President Heather Williams of Associated Students and President Kristin Crellin of the Fullerton Alumni Association.

Some highlights from that panel discussion include:

Where Will Students Come From?

This year marks the first time that a majority of Fullerton students – 52.2 percent – belongs to minority groups, and that trend will continue, President Gordon expects. Latinas and first-generation Asians will account for a lot of the increase, he thinks. Enrollment figures will depend in part on government decisions on immigration, especially whether immigrants here without papers are legalized. In any case, he expects enrollment to remain strong. "Our location is ideal," he noted.

"We'll see a growth in demand from individuals and industries for short-term, intensive courses that update skills, as the economy becomes more international and language becomes more important," said economics professor Jane Hall.

"We'll also have military people returning from long tours of duty who look to education as a way to refocus their lives," said political science Professor Raphael Sonenshein.

"There may be a surge in baby boomer retirees who may want to take enrichment courses," suggested Steve Murray, dean of the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics. "But the bread-and-butter enrollment will come from traditional-age students."

How Will Students Afford It?

Now that the official state role is to "assist" public universities rather than "support" them as in the past, panelists worried that higher fees would further separate the "haves" from the "have-nots" who wish to attend college. As Associated Students President Heather Wilson pointed out, the portion of the state budget funding higher education has dipped from 17 to 11 percent while prison funding rises.

"The fees question depends on political choices," said Professor Sonenshein. "After World War II, society made a clear statement about the value of education that lasted about 20 years. Now we're on our own. We need to become central to the public agenda so that it's a no-brainer to allocate funds."

"The question of haves and have-nots is especially significant in this region," said Dean Murray. "We have many students for whom the smallest perturbation in their own lives can ruin a semester."

What Role Will Online Courses Play?

Although some onlookers believe that the traditional college education will be transformed by the mass implementation of online courses, panel members generally disagreed with that view. Online courses are "no more than a niche market," said Ephraim Smith, vice president of academic affairs. "Dropout rates from students in those courses are as strong as in regular courses. They call for more dedicated, self-motivated students. We now offer three degree programs online. Probably we could add 10 or 15 more. But I don't see online courses taking over."

"Something happens in the classroom that can't be duplicated online," said Associated Students President Williams. "Online courses are a good option, but we need to come here to learn how to interact with people face to face, not only through cell phones and computers."

Several panelists warned against limiting the idea of a university education to course work, whether in a classroom or online. Students attend universities to grow psychologically and spiritually as well as intellectually, Robert Palmer, vice president for student affairs, pointed out.

The importance of face-to-face interaction and its role in building a university community became a thread throughout the discussion. "One challenge is to decide how to use technology to create a sense of community and overcome the isolation we have now," said Academic Senate Chair Diana Guerin.

Who Benefits from a College Education?

President Gordon pointed out that in the past, people saw a college degree as benefiting society as a whole. That was the philosophy behind California's Master Plan of 1960, which provided higher education to any state residents capable of doing the work. He and other panelists thought that in the past 15 to 20 years, that idea has shifted so that a degree primarily benefits the person who has one.

"With the costs students take on to attend college, people look at it as a personal investment," Professor Guerin said.

"It doesn't have to be either-or," Vice President Palmer said. "Investment in education is good both for the person and for the society."

"I watch the data on success in American life," President Gordon noted. "In the last three years I've seen devastating data about students without a minimal college degree. The results are mixed for students with some college. Their potential for future success in our society is greatly diminished. A college degree now is similar to a high school degree some years ago. They may not be able to get a career in the field they want, but they will be able to build a more successful life."

"We need to keep the importance of higher education in front of the community and let them know what its value is," said Alumni Association President Crellin. "So we already have a buy-in when problems like funding arise."

*An excerpt from "CSUF in the Next 50 Years," Titan Magazine, Fall 2007
See also www.TITANmag.com*