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
November 10, 2011

Dr. Andreea Serban, Team Chair
Interim Vice Chancellor Educational Services
Coast Community College District

Dr. Lisa Conyers, Member
Vice President of Academic Affairs
Moreno Valley College
Introduction and Overview

On November 10, 2011, a team representing the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) visited Cuesta College in San Luis Obispo, California. This is the third follow up team visit to Cuesta College since the October 2008 comprehensive accreditation visit. After the November 2010 follow up team visit, ACCJC decided to continue Cuesta College on probation and require Cuesta College to complete a follow-up report by October 15, 2011 in conjunction with the College’s midterm report. The report was to be followed by a visit of Commission representatives. The focus of the November 2011 team visit was on Recommendation 2 - Planning and Assessment, Recommendation 6 – Technology Resources and Recommendation 7 – Financial Planning and Stability and Eligibility Requirement 5 – Administrative Capacity. The team consisted of Dr. Andreea Serban, team chair and Dr. Lisa Conyers, team member.

During the visit, the team met with the college Superintendent/President, the Vice President of Administrative Services, the Director of Institutional Research and Assessment, the Vice President of Student Services, the Vice President of Academic Affairs, the Academic Senate President, the Director of Computer Services, the Student Learning Outcomes (SLOA) Coordinators, the President of Board of Trustees (phone conference), and the CCCUE (Classified Staff Union) Vice President. The team held interviews and examined documents and evidence which were available on the college website and in hard copy in the team room.

The team acknowledges that Cuesta College has made progress since the November 2010 follow-up visit in addressing the Commission’s concerns with recommendations 2, 6, 7 and eligibility requirement 5. The college has continued to build on the positive momentum observed during the November 2010 visit regarding the willingness of faculty, administration, staff and the Board of Trustees to work together to find a common ground for dialog and solutions. All college constituents recognize the serious nature of ACCJC’s sanction and recommendations.

At the time of the November 2011 visit, Dr. Gil Stork, who served as Interim Superintendent/President since January 2010, had been selected and started his appointment as the permanent Superintendent/President. As noted during the November 2010 visit, Dr. Stork appears to engender confidence in moving the institution forward, as stated by various individuals interviewed by the visiting team. The college has continued its work on developing the means to achieve integration across the evaluation, planning, and resource allocation cycle with the input of all constituency groups.

The Commission identified three recommendations and one eligibility requirement in its January 2011 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,

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 then Interim Superintendent/President. The development and adoption of the 2010-2013 Strategic Plan addressed a major component of Recommendation 2. However, at the time of the November 2010 visit, the team found that the 2010-2013 Strategic Plan was 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 2010-2013 Strategic Plan was primarily a plan to plan rather than an actual guiding document with goals and objectives that would give direction to the college.

Since November 2010, Cuesta College developed and adopted the 2011-2016 Educational Master Plan (EMP), which the college now considers its central planning document from which all other plans take direction. The EMP includes ten core principles, which are broad statements such as “Identify and Provide Resources to Foster Student Success.” There is a brief overview for each core principle and a set of supporting data. One or more broad strategic goals are associated with each core principle. The core principles, as the strategic goals, are broad aspirational statements. The EMP also includes, for each college program and service, a program description, program projections, as well as projected needs particularly with respect to staffing, technology, and facilities. This information was drawn primarily from the college’s Institutional Program Planning and Review Process for each department as well as an analysis of empirical evidence compiled from several internal and external sources.

The program projections and needs expressed in the EMP are expected to inform some of the specific content of operational plans in their support of the core principles. The EMP sets the expectation for the development, adoption and implementation of the following operational plans:

- Facilities Plan  (Split from Educational Master Plan)
- Technology Plan
- Long-Term Fiscal Plan
- Equal Employment Opportunity Plan
- Enrollment Management Plan
- Resource Development Plan

The EMP includes statements such as “Cuesta College will endeavor to provide consistent and appropriate course scheduling to meet it current and future students’ needs while committing to living with in its fiscal needs.” This emphasis on fiscal realities is also noted on page 74 of the EMP: “Administrative services ensures financial accountability and solvency as evidenced by a successfully implemented balanced budget and continuous cash flow.” An example is noted within this context: the future of the bookstore is reported “bleak at best,” and a plan of action is recommended (EMP, pg 74-75).
However, when reading the detail of the EMP for each of the departments included in the document, the EMP has the appearance of a plan for growth that does not seem aligned with the fiscal realities that the college is facing. While this is a long-term plan, most of the departmental requests included in the EMP ask for more resources and talk about growth and expansion. These seem to be disconnected from the discussions in the draft Fiscal Plan and the assumptions in the EMP which recognize that for the next several years the college would continue to shrink as a result of the state budget reductions and reduced funding for enrollments. There is a disconnect between the content of the EMP at the unit level and Core Principles 1 and 9 which address the college’s fiscal realities, one in maintaining the integrity of academic programs already in place, and another looking toward a sustainable fiscal future (EMP, pg 16, 23). The departmental plans in the EMP are also not consistent with the college’s effort of planning and implementing both the annual and longer-term enrollment targets and program schedules within a reduction or flat line framework (EMP pg 27, Mid-Term Report pg 5).

The 2010-2013 Strategic Plan was originally developed to be a guiding document with goals and objectives that would give specific and clear direction to the college. As of November 2011, most plans and components listed in the 2010-2013 Strategic Plan are still in development and draft stage. The change between 2010 and 2011, however, has been the formation of the EMP as the new college’s central planning document. The Strategic Plan is now expected to be informed by the EMP. At the time of the November 2011 visit, that step was still to be accomplished. Neither the EMP nor the 2010-2013 Strategic Plan include overall institutional objectives that are time-bound, measurable, realistic and specific. The college expects to have such objectives developed and included in the 2012-2013 update of the Strategic Plan.

The Commission’s concern from 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 has not been fully addressed.

At the time of the November 2011 visit, Cuesta College had drafts of a Technology Plan and of a Fiscal Plan which required additional work and consultation. The college expected to have these drafts finalized and approved in December 2011 or in early spring. As of November 10, 2011, the college had not developed the other operational plans cited in the 2010-2013 Strategic Plan and later in the EMP.

A team meeting with the two SLOA Coordinators and the Vice President of Academic Affairs indicated that the college had shifted from a general resistance towards SLOs to embracing the potential of SLO assessments for exploring the pedagogy and practices across instruction for planning improvements, and memorializing those objectives in electronically accessible course and programmatic assessment documents. This is a positive step for the college.

The college has demonstrated a positive change in the actions taken in addressing this Recommendation, resulting in the development and adoption of the EMP and the drafts of the Technology and Fiscal plans. While the College has made very good progress, as of the time of the November 2011 visit, the College has not fully met this recommendation.
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 specified that the college will develop a Technology Master Plan integrated with the college’s other evaluation, planning and budget processes. The timeline for completion was late 2011, and was to be developed in concert with the centrally positioned Educational Master Plan. The November 2011 team found that the college developed a draft of the Technology Plan. The draft needed additional work in order to be fully finalized, approved and implemented. The college will need additional time to implement fully an integrated Technology Master Plan. The college is committed to distributing 45% of the Medi-Cal administrative activities funds as a dedicated revenue source, allocated to support technology at the college on an annual basis. It is unclear the level of funding that this allocation will provide.

While the college has made good progress, at the time of the November 2011 visit, 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 November 2011 team, as teams in prior years, found that Cuesta College continues to hold a sizeable debt load, indicating that the fiscal challenges for the college are still a very serious concern.

The college projects a $1.3 million deficit in its 2011-12 budget. Due to the workload reductions imposed in 2009-10 as a result of state budget cuts, Cuesta College regressed to below 10,000 full-time equivalent students (FTES) in 2010-11, placing into contingency the additional $1.1 million gained as a result of exceeding for the first time 10,000 FTES. The college plans to reach the adjusted threshold for a mid-sized college in 2011-2012 thereby recovering $1.1 million in stabilization funding in each of the following three years. Should that plan not materialize, the college will further add to its already very large debt obligation.

As in previous visits, there is recognition that the college should develop a longer-term fiscal plan. An attempt to develop a long-term fiscal plan and debt management strategy is described
on pages 20 and 21. However as of the time of the November 2011 visit, there is no evidence that 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 underway and some planned. The college is contemplating running for a bond measure which, if passed, would significantly help the college. In 2006, the college had relied on the assumption of passing a bond measure and committed itself to significant debt in advance of passing the bond. When the bond failed, the college ended up with significant financial obligations and no additional resources to pay for them. Hopefully, such an approach would not be repeated.

The 2010-2013 Strategic Plan specified that the college would develop a Long-term Fiscal Master Plan that is to be completed in June 2012. At the time of the November 2011 visit, work on this project was under development, and a first draft was sent to the Planning and Budget Committee on September 13, 2011. The college will require additional time to develop the integrated financial planning framework needed to meet this standard. The team observed that at the college level and with the President of the Board of Trustees there is an informed awareness of the necessity and importance of pursuing solutions that would generate financial stability for the college.

The college also made progress to identify inflationary and structural deficits that are distinct and separate from the budget reductions from the state. Continuing to take steps to resolve these deficits is a good direction for the fiscal planning at the college.

Although the college has made some progress, this recommendation has not been fully met.

**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.

All interim administrative appointments in place in November 2010, including that of the Superintendent/President, have been filled.

The college has resolved this deficiency.