1. Context

From the time of its foundation in 1949, California State University, Long Beach has struggled to keep up with student demand. Constrained both by limited operating budgets and by a state planning process that delayed the authorization of new buildings until after the enrollment they were designed to serve was already present, the University has traditionally focused more on managing the sheer volume of applicants than on improving the quality of education it provides.

The situation came to a head in the early 1990s when a dramatic downturn in the California economy resulted in three consecutive budget years marked by drastic reductions in state support, with the cuts in two of those years exceeding 10 percent. At the time of the last decennial WASC visit, in February 1992, system and campus enrollments were in free-fall, a direct consequence of the budget reductions. The University simply could not pay for the faculty needed to teach the courses students wanted to take. New applications, especially from first-time freshmen, plummeted. Ironically, several new buildings that had been authorized by the state during the late 1980s—a time of significant enrollment growth—were finally constructed during the years of rapid enrollment decline. As a result, the University suddenly enjoyed a surplus of classrooms for the only time in its history.

Perhaps because the traumatic downsizing of the University’s budget, enrollment, faculty, and staff had the effect of forcing the campus community to think more clearly about its long-term future, the 1991 WASC self-study was written along thematic lines. Significantly, entire chapters were devoted to the need to integrate institutional planning and assessment with financial allocations; the development of public-private partnerships; the provision of an integrated undergraduate experience; the quality of student life; and faculty retention and recruitment. The integrative chapter focused directly on the budget reductions and their consequences. The overarching theme was an enhanced focus on quality as a strategy for rebuilding the University.

The visiting team praised the self-study, despite the fact that the different chapters were somewhat uneven in quality, and agreed that the exercise had helped the campus focus its attention on the major challenges it faced. The team agreed that the University was developing an effective approach to dealing with the budget cuts and especially for obtaining buy-in from all campus constituencies. It singled out student services, development, and the library for special praise, while noting that the campus lacked a rationale of its own for its general education program; that the faculty had many disagreements about the appropriate balance between teaching, scholarship, and service and how effectiveness should be measured; and that long-term financial planning had to permit the identification of areas of future growth as well as reductions.

The Fourth-Year Report of 1995 focused on the concerns expressed by the site team’s report. It included sections on information technology, the continuing challenge of a severely constrained budget, general education, student diversity, faculty expectations, faculty diversity, and assessment. In each of these sections the self-study briefly described the problem, reviewed the steps that had already been taken to deal with it, and identified issues that still remained to be addressed. WASC Senior Commission Executive Director Steven S. Weiner reported back
to new President Robert C. Maxson, “I found the University report to be the best of its kind that I have reviewed in my eight years of service with the Commission.” He especially praised its “refreshing degree of candor” and asked for permission to distribute it “to other interested institutions as an exemplar well worth emulating.”

Thus California State University, Long Beach and its Self-Study Steering Committee—which retains substantially the same membership as in 1991 and 1995—has a wealth of prior experience in using thematically focused self-studies to focus campus discussion on the major challenges facing the University.

Ironically, the committee will face a dramatically different challenge in 2001, for the entire context in which it will work has fundamentally changed. First, and most obviously, the California economy has not only pulled out of the deep recession of the early 1990s but has soared to a level of prosperity unimaginable in 1995. Meanwhile, President Maxson has brought to Long Beach the genius for recruiting students that marked his tenure as President of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He has raised private funds to establish an endowment for the President’s Scholars Program. This program provides a package of merit-based financial incentives to National Merit Finalists and California high school valedictorians comparable to those previously available only to star athletes. As a result, CSULB has already enrolled more than 300 President’s Scholars. Their presence in turn has validated Long Beach as the campus of choice for a growing number of high school seniors. Accordingly, the number of first-time freshmen enrolling each fall has increased from a low of 1,793 in 1992 to 3,482 in 1999 and is projected to increase to 3,778 in 2000. Moreover, the state now possesses the wherewithal to fund the resulting surge in overall enrollment. So, instead of having a surplus of facilities and too little enrollment, the campus once again faces the imminent prospect of enrollment exceeding the capacity of its physical plant.

The overwhelming success of the President’s Scholars Program has not only accelerated the flow of applications to the campus; members of the faculty frequently remark that it has raised the level of classroom discourse and imparted a cachet of quality to the campus. These are effects everyone on campus wants to protect. Unfortunately, protecting quality means slowing and then stopping enrollment growth so that, unlike the 1980s, the number of students the campus serves does not exceed the capacity of its classrooms, laboratories, and studios. The consequences that will inevitably follow constitute the essential context of the next self-study.

1. The University will have to limit admissions, especially of first-time freshmen.

2. Since the increase in campus resources has been tied directly to the growth in enrollment in recent years, the University will have to adjust to a steady-state budget.

3. Freed from the constant pressure to serve ever more students, the University will be able focus its energies on achieving the maximum level of student success, by completing the reform of its general education program, better integrating services to students, recruiting and retaining the strongest possible faculty, and other similar steps.