

**STANFORD UNIVERSITY**  
**SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**

**CASE: 2006-1**  
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**THE COMMISSION ON UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION  
AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY<sup>1</sup>**

In his State of the University address, April 29, 1993, Stanford University President Gerard Casper called for a comprehensive study of undergraduate education “to address fundamental issues pertaining to the undergraduate curriculum and related programs and services at Stanford.” (Sheehan, 1994, p. 56). This call resulted in the Commission on Undergraduate Education—a nineteen member body comprised of Stanford faculty, administrators, staff, students, and alumni. This commission investigated a wide range of issues critical to the academic vitality of the undergraduate program over the course of the 1993-94 academic year. These investigations culminated in the Report of the Commission on Undergraduate Education, published in the fall of 1994. The commission’s proposals led to significant organizational and curricular changes at Stanford, and it also drew the attention of several other elite research universities as they evaluated their own undergraduate programs (Delgado, 2006).

**Background**

In 1993, Gerard Casper succeeded Donald Kennedy as president of Stanford University. It is possible that Casper was eager to set a new tone for the university given the environment of financial scandal that had led to Kennedy’s resignation. In his inaugural address, Casper emphasized a need for change at Stanford. “The true university, however old, must draw together and reinvent itself every day,” he said. “The days of a university are always *first* days. The work of the university is work that cannot

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be done unless it is continuously reconsidered and supported afresh and jointly by faculty, students, staff, and last but not least, by alumni and friends," (Stanford University, 1992, p. 2). Those words foreshadow Casper's announcement, just six months later, that he would establish a commission to conduct an in depth study of undergraduate education at Stanford.

Casper's interest in improving undergraduate education fit within the charter of Stanford's Founding Grant (Stanford University, 1987). That charter included the establishment of "a university of high degree" (p. 3) and granted the president "powers as will enable him to control the educational part of the University to such an extent that he may justly be held responsible for the course of study therein," (p. 6). To this end, Casper explicitly charged the commission:

- "To articulate the educational goals of Stanford's undergraduate program.
- "To consider whether the present curriculum, including the range of undergraduate degrees, majors and distribution requirements, adequately and effectively meets the needs of our students.
- "To consider whether it is possible and desirable to give more students the opportunity to graduate in less than four years.
- "To consider the special educational requirements of students in the engineering and science disciplines.
- "To consider whether various modalities of teaching are used effectively, including individual tutorials, seminars and research projects, and to consider new ways of instruction made possible by computers, video equipment and other forms of new technology," and,
- "To review the purposes and quality of ancillary services such as the undergraduate advising system and the residential education program," (Sheehan, p. 56).

Broadly speaking, Casper said the overriding goal of the commission "is to clarify the goals of a Stanford undergraduate education and to recommend ways to ensure that our programs are appropriate and effective in support of those goals," (Sheehan, p. 56).

Faculty, students, and alumni reacted positively to Casper's call to improve undergraduate education (Commission on Undergraduate Education Issues Final Report, 1994). After all, Stanford had not thoroughly studied its undergraduate program since conducting the Study of Education at Stanford in 1968. The announcement also came at a time when financial pressures caused the university to operate at a "substantial deficit" while trying to meet the increasingly diverse expectations of students and their families (Retreat for the Commission on Undergraduate Education, 1993). There was uncertainty about the breadth requirements of the undergraduate curriculum, undergraduate teaching too often fell short of expectations (Sheehan, 1994), and undergraduate advising overwhelmingly received poor feedback from students, (Katchadourian & Boli, 1994).

Two weeks after Casper announced the commission, a proposal for its financial support was written (Proposal for Support of the Commission on Undergraduate Education, 1993). In response, Dennis Collins, the president of the Irvine Foundation at the time, authorized a \$400,000 grant to fund the year-long study.

## **Forming the Commission**

To chair the commission, Casper chose James Sheehan, an influential history professor who had served on the Presidential Search Committee that had chosen Casper. Sheehan was therefore one of the few faculty that Casper knew prior to his arrival at Stanford. Once Sheehan agreed to chair the commission, Casper selected 18 other commission members in consultation with Sheehan (personal communication, October 31, 2006). In selecting committee members, Casper emphasized the need for adequate representation. Members included 12 faculty representing a variety of disciplines from each of Stanford's schools, 1 lecturer, 2 alumni, 1 graduate student, 1 undergraduate student, and the vice provost for institutional planning and financial affairs. The services of 2 staff members were also allocated to the commission (Sheehan, 1994).

The size of the committee was an important consideration for both Casper and Sheehan. Having a large committee would ensure the practicality of the commission's proposals. "Committees of 19 do not make revolutions," Sheehan said in a recent interview. He did not feel that a revolution was what Stanford needed. As far as he was concerned, Stanford's undergraduate offerings were good, and the commission would seek ways to incrementally improve upon them. "What I mainly wanted to do was to make the problem of undergraduates something that people would talk about and think about at least for a year and if possible longer," Sheehan said (personal communication, October 31, 2006).

## **The Commission at Work**

The commission began with an off-campus retreat, Saturday, October 16, 1993. President Casper and Provost Condoleezza Rice attended the retreat and briefly rearticulated the needs and challenges that the commission would address. Members of the commission then introduced themselves to one another by sharing meaningful experiences from their own undergraduate backgrounds (Retreat, 1993). Sheehan later said that he insisted on being as inclusive as possible while leading the committee, and so he took time to help the committee become cohesive (personal communication, October 31, 2006).

After introductions, the committee brainstormed a list of twenty-four issues that committee members felt were important to the undergraduate enterprise. These issues ranged from philosophic ("What is a major and what is its function?") to pragmatic ("What is Stanford's unique value, and to whom are we comparing ourselves?"), from logistic (graduating in 3 years versus 4 years, using semesters versus quarters), to very specific ("Size of classes") (Retreat, 1993).

Indeed, given the broad charge "to clarify the goals of a Stanford undergraduate education," (Sheehan, 1994, p. 56), one of the biggest challenges facing the commission was finding a way to prioritize undergraduate issues and narrow the study's scope accordingly. Sheehan said that deciding to limit the study to undergraduate academics helped to place reasonable bounds around the project. When asked about the commission decision making process, Sheehan said, "It was going to be a consensus process. There was no way out of that," (personal communication, October 31, 2006).

This concensus process would continue for several weeks as the commission refined and consolidated its agenda. They met each week for two hours as a whole group, and even though Sheehan led the commission, anyone was welcome to bring an issue

before the group. They did not usually consult data or research in their discussions. Most of their discussions were autobiographical in nature. Questions and problems were usually discussed until a concensus could be reached, and Sheehan said that most of the time there was concensus. He described the culture of the commission as pragmatic rather than ideolgocial.

There were a few issues, however, that defied consensus, and Sheehan recognized the need to balance consensus with the importance of maintaining momentum. The “Cultures, Ideas, and Values” course requirements was one such issue (personal communication, October 31, 2006), as was the fate of the gender studies requirement (Commission, 1994, p. 6). In cases such as these, Sheehan would typically table the discussion, usually indefinitely. He said the commission accepted such actions because they knew they would be able to have their way with other decisions.

The commission spent most of the 1993 Fall Quarter refining the agenda and dividing the work into manageable sub-topics. In the end, they organized these sub-topics into nine subcommittees:

1. Writing and Critical Thinking
2. The Language Requirement
3. Breadth Requirements
4. Majors
5. Academic Environment
6. Academic Calendar
7. Techniques and Technology in Teaching and Learning
8. Innovation
9. Student Advisory Group on Undergraudate Education (SAGUE) Steering Committee

These subcommittees were each chaired by a member of the commission, and many commission members participated in several subcommittees. Subcommittees also included members from outside of the commission. Sixty-five people in all participated in the subcommittees. Each subcommittee had a specific, written charge to fulfill, and they did so autonomously to a large extent.

While some of these subcommittees formed in the process of discussion, others, such as the subcommittee on the language requirement, were formed and given specific charges before even the commission itself had fully formed. To chair the subcommittee on the language requirement, a special assistant to Casper approached Guadalupe Valdés, a professor of Spanish, Portuguese, and Education. Valdés had just moved to Stanford from UC Berkeley, and she readily accepted the position. In speaking with Valdés, it is clear her work within the language subcommittee eclipsed whatever other involvement she had with the broader commission. She did feel a part of the commission as a whole (“We did lots of things and had lots of tea parties,” she said recently in a personal communication, November 30, 2006), but her overriding sense of purpose was to establish a universal undergraduate language requirement and to have the requirement passed by the Senate. Her purpose was to affect language curriculum. To Valdés, the commission’s final report was of secondary importance (personal communication, November 30, 2006).

The commission only met infrequently during the 1994 Winter Quarter. That quarter was dedicated primarily to subcommittee research activities. Subcommittee research methods were generally qualitative. They conducted various focus groups, performed interviews, sent out surveys to 750 alumni, and compiled data from extant student surveys. Some methods were very informal, such as holding dinner discussion groups in the dorms (Sheehan, 1994). In the case of the subcommittee on the language requirement, they decided upon their recommendation before conducting research of any kind. Valdés had wanted a two year language requirement, the subcommittee decided on a one year requirement, and research only served to forecast the impact of that requirement on finances, schedules, faculty hiring, etc (personal communication, November 30, 2006).

In the Spring Quarter, the commission resumed its frequent, whole-group meetings. Subcommittees presented their findings to the group, and the group created a draft report over the course of the term. Sheehan met weekly with reporters from the Stanford Daily, he attended town meetings, and he spoke several times at the Faculty Senate in order to make sure that the commission's processes and findings were as transparent as possible. "I'm a believer in process," he said. "I'm a believer that how you do something is usually at least as important as what you do," (personal communication, October 31, 2006). Sheehan spent the Summer Term writing the 64 page final Report of the Commission on Undergraduate Education. The report was published the following October, roughly one year after the commission's initial retreat.

## **The Report and Its Effects**

The commission's recommendations for undergraduate education were divided into two categories: proposals and processes. Proposals included:

- New core science requirements for non-scientists
- A redefinition of the breadth requirements that allowed for more student choice
- Clarifying and cohering ihm requirements
- The extension of writing requirements to include major-specific intensive writing
- The creation of courses in oral communication
- A foreign language requirement of 1 year (or a passing score on a proficiency exam)
- The creation of a language center
- Definitions of criteria for major programs and establishing regular reviews of those programs
- Introduction of an optional minor to make better use of electives
- Limiting credit/no credit options and clarifying what academic credit and units mean

Processes included:

- A task force to encourage effective use of technology in teaching and learning
- Establishing an independent group to study the grading system

- Clarifying the role of general advisors, a more effective use of the Undergraduate Advising Center, and the expansion of opportunities for first and second year students to work closely with faculty
- Improvements in the evaluation of teaching in all forms, including more effective methods for measuring student opinions and the introduction of peer evaluations.
- Introduction of new ways to assess all aspects of Stanford's education program including the effectiveness of writing and language instruction and a regular review of university and major requirements
- A more rigorous evaluation of teaching and advising and greater emphasis on these activities in considering faculty appointments and compensation
- The appointment of a vice provost for undergraduate education to represent the needs and interests of undergraduates at the center of university governance (Sheehan, 2006)

Both President Casper and Provost Rice accepted the recommendations of the commission enthusiastically. Rice committed to acting on the recommendations even if that meant reallocating the university's budget in order to do so (Commission, 1994).

Rice, Casper, and subsequent administrators faithfully fulfilled their pledges to adhere to the recommendations of the commission. Their actions included the formation of Stanford Introductory Studies which includes the Freshman Seminars Program, the Sophomore College, and Sophomore Seminars and Dialogues which emphasize faculty-student interaction. The Undergraduate Research Opportunities office also extends from the commission's recommendations. This office now distributes \$4.2 million annually in grants for undergraduate research projects (Delgado, 2006). The office of Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education was created, and it oversees the Center for Teaching and Learning, iHum, the New Student Orientation, Undergraduate Advising Programs, and Undergraduate Research Programs. This vice provost position, incidentally, had been suggested in the 1968 Study on Stanford Education, but did not come to fruition at that time. The recommendation to create this office was also one of the most difficult for the commission to agree upon (personal communication, October 31, 2006).

Most recently, the commission's report influenced Stanford's current President, John Hennesy, to launch the Campaign for Undergraduate Education. This campaign, announced at Hennesy's October 2000 inauguration address, sought to raise \$1 billion in support of the office of Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education and other critical undergraduate programs. It was the first major fundraising campaign since 1992, and it was conceived specifically "to make permanent reforms based on the 1994 report of the Commission on Undergraduate Education," (Delgado, 2006, p. 1). The campaign closed in December of 2005, having raised over \$1.1 billion.

## **Significance**

Sheehan says the commission's work and end result turned out as he expected. "The process and the product were essentially determined by the size of the commission and the condition Stanford found itself in," he said (personal communication, October 31, 2006). Even so, there were a few surprises. For instance, Sheehan thought that the proposal to transition to a semester system would become an extended issue. As it turned out, debate on the topic lasted a half hour and the commission determined that no change

would be made. As for regrets, Sheehan wishes that the commission had been more creative in finding ways to assess student learning. For all its discussion about the importance of teaching, the commission failed to concretely articulate the “value-add” of a four year college education. On the other hand, Sheehan is most proud of the emphasis the commission placed on involving undergraduates in the research process early in their careers. He believes that emphasis in the report has led to many productive initiatives to support undergraduate research (personal communication, October 31, 2006).

It would be difficult to overstate the significance of the Commission on Undergraduate Education. On top of being independently successful as an investigative body, the Commission on Undergraduate Education led to lasting organizational and curricular reforms at Stanford. The commission’s impact, however, is not limited to Stanford. The commission’s report likely spurred the investigations into undergraduate education that Harvard, Princeton, and Yale conducted subsequent to the publication of the commission’s report (Delgado, 2006). Given the collective agenda-setting power of those institutions, Stanford’s efforts to improve undergraduate education possibly catalyzed undergraduate reforms at very many universities across the country.

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