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Riding the Bow Wave

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In Praise of Dolphins, Scholars, and Short Newsletters

As a neophyte, newly arrived at CSUCI from the high desert country of Idaho, I could not resist enjoying my first motorcycle ride to see a sunset at Point Mugu. On campus I had encountered dolphin images everywhere: T-shirts, flags, posters, letterhead, a fountain, web pages, and then I got treated unexpectedly (What would I know?) to a view of the real thing--a sunset with dolphins. Two thoughts struck simultaneously: (1) This is outrageously wonderful! I live where I can do this any evening I want. (2) I'm living on a campus that has a mascot of which I know precious little. I did what any academic does who faces curiosity with abysmal ignorance; I started reading about dolphins.

In my first week, I discovered what a fine mascot a dolphin is for a university. While seeking to learn how to build a web page at CSUCI that is "street-legal," I learned from the CSUCI Graphic Standards Manual that our mascot affiliation resulted from both student initiative and the request of the local Chumash tribe:

The dolphin is an important symbol in the folklore of the Chumash, including the rainbow bridge legend which tells of their migration from Santa Cruz Island to the mainland. The Chumash elders requested that the dolphin be selected as the University's first mascot, a request that was simultaneously made in petition by student leadership.

Like scholars, dolphins are truly smart, probably the smartest creatures in the ocean. Like scholars, they have a long history of not doing things the same way the majority do. Many creatures took the evolutionary path from sea dwelling to land dwelling. Dolphins made that into a round trip—there and back home again to the ocean. Like university folk, dolphins are social creatures, but not herd animals. In fact, they herd other creatures. Their social unit is the "pod" rather than a "school." In the pod, they do much to take care of one another, including herding schools of fish into small areas where the fish become the dolphins' banquet. The most important function of the pod is to take care of the young dolphins, which sounds a bit like our own Mission statement. Further, in everyday life, dolphins surely look like they have a lot of fun! In attending my first parties at CSUCI, I could not help but think of all of us as very dolphin-like.

Dolphins are quick to seize opportunity. For a creature that lives in the ocean but breathes in the air, seizing opportunity at all scales probably is intuitive. Dolphins are well known for wave riding, which is an act of exploiting opportunity. Riding waves helps you to get to where you want to go faster and with less effort. For dolphins, it's natural, and they favor wakes of large whales. One resource consulted recounted their chasing other species away from the prime riding spots on wakes of whales. Today, bow waves of boats are prime for riding candidates. The records for bursts of speed set by dolphins dashing are about 35 mph, with the fastest records made in bow waves of boats.

One-page newsletters on topics of teaching and learning for scholars are like nice bow waves for dolphins. Someone else exerts the energy to produce them, and smart creatures can use them opportunistically to get where they want to go with less effort than it takes to get there alone. Dolphins like to save time and energy; so do busy faculty. Thus a bow wave seems a good analogy for a one-page newsletter for professors. In coming months, you will see ideas and opportunities in this newsletter that consume only seconds of reading to generate a benefit. If one wave doesn't look like a good fit, no problem; others from which you can choose will follow.

The benefits of one page newsletters have proven themselves through 15 years' production of "Nutshell Notes," which I started in 1990 and produced at other schools. A number of universities made web links to the archives of the "Nutshells." As your newly hired faculty developer, I have collected all into a single Nutshells Archive PDF file that you can download to your computers. Also, as you tap into the local Faculty Development Office web pages, expect to see "under construction" notes on the major links for a while. I needed to remove outdated information that got in the way of your finding me, but I will be working with your colleagues on the Faculty Development Advisory Committee to polish these pages to their satisfaction and to add many useful new resources for you. In the meantime, happy wave riding, as we start this new newsletter tailored to this new and wonderful university.

Ed Nuhfer, August, 2007