Accrediting agency under federal pressure to be tougher on community colleges

December 2nd, 2012
By Louis Freedberg

The commission that accredits California's community colleges, and has ordered City College of San Francisco to prepare for possible closure, has come under pressure from the federal government to make sure that the colleges under its jurisdiction comply in a timely way with the deficiencies it identifies.

If it does not, the commission risks losing its federal "recognition" as a legitimate accrediting agency – which it almost did five years ago when it reapplied for a renewal of its status from the U.S. Department of Education.

The pressures from Washington are being felt in local communities across California, where colleges are seeking renewal of their accreditation. They highlight an ongoing debate over whether the nation's traditional self-policing system of accreditation – essentially by commissions established by colleges themselves – is the best way to ensure higher education quality and accountability.

Based in Novato, just north of San Francisco, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges – or the ACCJC as it is known by its unwieldy acronym – is responsible for accrediting California's 112 community colleges. It currently has imposed a range of sanctions on 28 of them, the highest number in at least four years.

Assisted by a full-time staff, the commission consists of 19 members, most with close ties to the community colleges. Its current chair, Sherrill Amador, a former president of the Palomar Community College District near San Diego, has deep roots in the community college system. Barbara Beno, its longtime president, is a former president of Vista College in Berkeley (now called Berkeley City College). Several commission members are faculty members or administrators at colleges such as Sacramento City College, East Los Angeles City College and West Hills Community College District in the Central Valley.

The federal government's increasing interest in the effectiveness of regional accrediting agencies like the ACCJC has been driven at least in part by concerns that students who receive federal financial aid receive a quality education – and don't default on their loans. Colleges must be accredited in order to offer federal financial aid to their students.

Among the most severe sanctions the commission can impose is to order a college to "show cause" as to why it should not lose its accreditation, an action that would result in almost certain closure. That is a fate that the three California community colleges ordered to show cause – City College of San Francisco, the College of the Redwoods in Eureka and Cuesta College in San Luis Obispo – are now working hard to avoid.

But in 2007, the commission was itself found to be “non-compliant” by the U.S. Department of Education for failing to enforce the so-called “two year rule” enacted as a result of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 1998. The rule requires colleges to come into compliance with concerns raised by their accrediting agencies within two years of being alerted to them, unless, as the commission has stated, “there are some rare and extenuating circumstances.”

As a condition of retaining its federal recognition, the ACCJC agreed to toughen the requirements it imposes on community colleges, as spelled out in a letter Beno sent to all colleges under its jurisdiction. These included setting “a specific date” within the two-year timeline by which deficiencies would have to be addressed. It also told the colleges it would “not extend beyond two years the accreditation of an institution that is deficient in accreditation standards that significantly affect educational quality or institutional integrity.”

“At risk is the commission’s recognition,” the ACCJC’s Barbara Beno told EdSource Today.

Arbiters of quality?

“This is a continuation of a 40- or 50-year effort to create a good balance between making sure taxpayer dollars are spent well and consumers are protected, and also providing higher education the space to be flexible and independent,” said Robert Shireman, director of California Competes, a nonprofit public policy organization in San Francisco. Shireman is the former deputy undersecretary of education in the Obama administration in charge of higher education.

The issue has come to a head in recent years as both Congress and the federal government have grappled with whether there is a better way to determine which colleges should be eligible to receive some of the $175 billion in federal student aid spent annually in the nation’s for-profit and nonprofit colleges and universities.

Other accrediting agencies across the United States are experiencing similar pressures. “We are very concerned about institutions not providing high-quality education,” said David Bergeron, the U.S. Department of Education’s acting assistant secretary for postsecondary education. “Since we rely on the accrediting agencies as the arbiter of quality, we pay attention to what they do.”

The review process when accrediting agencies apply for renewal for recognition by the federal government – which they must do every five years – has “gotten a lot more rigorous,” Bergeron said.

Federal regulators have been even tougher on the nearly 60 so-called “programmatic” accrediting agencies that accredit specific programs, such as those that offer degrees in subjects ranging from acupuncture to veterinary medicine.

In fact, over the past year alone, out of 34 programmatic accrediting agencies that applied for renewal of their recognition, one was denied recognition altogether, and an additional 30 were found to be "out of compliance" on one or more of the criteria set by the Department of Education. The accreditors were provisionally allowed to retain their recognition, but were given a year to submit a compliance report to show that they have corrected the issues raised by the Department.

Numerous California programs fall under the umbrella of these "programmatic" accreditors, which includes the American Bar Association, which accredits all law schools in California, and the American Psychological Association, which accredits Ph.D. programs at UC Berkeley and other California universities.

Bush era legacy

The pressures on accreditors escalated during the administration of President George W. Bush. The much-publicized Spellings Commission – named after Margaret Spellings, who became Bush's Secretary of Education – excoriated the higher education community for, among many other alleged shortcomings, "a remarkable absence of accountability mechanisms to ensure that colleges succeed in educating students."

One of its major conclusions was that

> *Accreditation, the nation's large and complex public-private system of federal, state and private regulators, has significant shortcomings … The growing public demand for increased accountability, quality and transparency coupled with the changing structure and globalization of higher education requires a transformation of accreditation.*

The Spellings Commission wanted to impose significant new requirements on both colleges and accrediting agencies. But, said Shireman, "the response from the higher education community was strong enough that they backed away. But in the process most associations and accrediting agencies promised to do a better job to ensure that colleges are paying attention to whether students are learning."

The pressures on accrediting institutions have only increased under the Obama administration, which has also sought to crack down on for-profit colleges that rely on large amounts of federal financial aid, often with poor student outcomes and high student loan default rates.

A key part of the federal regulatory apparatus is the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity, which is charged with recommending to the U.S. Secretary of Education whether an accrediting commission should receive or retain its federal recognition.

This spring, the committee – generally referred to by the acronym NACIQI, and pronounced “nasicky” – recommended effectively giving regional accrediting agencies a reprieve by recommending that the current system of accreditation be retained.

But it also stated that the accrediting commissions be more rigorous in their evaluations. “I think the accreditors are getting the message loud and clear,” said Jamienne Studley, the chair of the commission, who is also executive director of Public Advocates, a leading California public interest law firm based in San Francisco. “They are hearing the message collectively and are recognizing that they have to do better. I sense they are rising to the challenge.”

If accrediting commissions don’t hold colleges more accountable for student outcomes, the federal government may look for other ways to determine a college’s eligibility for student financial aid, Studley said.

Also on the table is the accreditation process itself. Rather than looking at what she called traditional “inputs” such as student-faculty ratios, college curricula and board of trustees issues during the accreditation process, she said, “we are increasingly looking at student outcomes.” By that she meant how successful students are in completing their education programs in a timely fashion, if at all – and how they do in the workplace once they graduate.

“I think we are in a transition period in accreditation,” she said.

Shireman said that a challenge facing accrediting agencies like the ACCJC is that the only real enforcement capability they have when they identify problems at a college is to threaten it with closure if it doesn’t respond adequately – what he called “the nuclear option.”

“The only way to have an impact is to do what you said you were going to do,” he said, referring to the accrediting agencies. “At some point you have to let the hatchet fall.

California school districts face huge debt on risky bonds

About 200 districts have borrowed billions of dollars using so-called capital appreciation bonds. Districts may have to pay 10 to 20 times the amount borrowed.

By Dan Weikel, Los Angeles Times

5:45 PM PST, November 28, 2012

Two hundred school districts across California have borrowed billions of dollars using a costly and risky form of financing that has saddled them with staggering debt, according to a Times analysis.

Schools and community colleges have turned increasingly to so-called capital appreciation bonds in the economic downturn, which depressed property values and made it harder for districts to raise money for new classrooms, auditoriums and sports facilities.

Unlike conventional shorter-term bonds that require payments to begin immediately, this type of borrowing lets districts postpone the start of payments for decades. Some districts are gambling the economic picture will improve in the decades ahead, with local tax collections increasingly enough to repay the notes.

DATABASE: Bonds by district

CABs, as the bonds are known, allow schools to borrow large sums without violating state or locally imposed caps on property taxes, at least in the short term. But the lengthy delays in repayment increase interest expenses, in some cases to as much as 10 or 20 times the amount borrowed.

The practice is controversial and has been banned in at least one state. In California, prominent government officials charged with watching the public purse are warning school districts to avoid the transactions.

One sounding the alarm is California Treasurer Bill Lockyer, who compares CABs to the sort of creative Wall Street financing that contributed to the housing bubble, the subsequent debt crisis and the nation's lingering economic malaise.

"They are terrible deals," Lockyer said. "The school boards and staffs that approved of these bonds should be voted out of office and fired."

Most school bonds, like home mortgages, require roughly $2 to $3 to be paid back for every $1 borrowed. But CABs compound interest for much longer periods, meaning repayment costs are often many times that of traditional school bonds.

And property owners — not the school system — are likely to be on the hook for bigger tax bills if the agency's revenues can't cover future bond payments, Lockyer and other critics say.

Several financial consultants who advise school districts on CABs declined to comment, as did the chairman of their trade group. Education officials acknowledge some drawbacks with CABs, but argue that the bonds are funding vital educational projects.

The Newport Mesa Unified School District in Orange County issued $83 million in long-term notes in May 2011. Principal and interest will total about $548 million, but officials say they are confident they can pay off the debt.

The bonds "have allowed us to provide for facilities that are needed now," said the district's business manager, Paul Reed. "We could not afford to wait another 10 years."

Overall, 200 school systems, roughly a fifth of the districts statewide, have borrowed more than $2.8 billion since 2007 using CABs with maturities longer than 25 years. They will have to pay back about $16.3 billion in principal and interest, or an average of 5.8 times the amount they borrowed.

Nearly 70% of the money borrowed involves extended 30- to 40-year notes, which will cost district taxpayers $13.1 billion, or about 6.6 times the amount borrowed on average.

State and county treasurers say debt payments of no more than four times principal are considered reasonable, though some recommend a more conservative limit of three times.

"This is part of the 'new' Wall Street," Lockyer said. "It has done this kind of thing on the private investor side for years, then the housing market and now its public entities."

The Poway Unified School District, which serves middle-class communities in north San Diego County, is one of the school systems faced with massive CAB debt payments. In 2011, it issued $105 million in capital appreciation bonds to complete a school rebuilding program.

Because the recession had depressed property values and tax revenue, Poway district officials realized that using conventional bonds might jeopardize a promise to district voters to limit the tax rate.

So on the advice of an Irvine-based financial consulting firm, they turned to the long-term notes. Under the deal, the school board could keep construction moving, avoid reneging on its pledge to voters and stay within the legal limits. And it would not have to repay the bonds for decades.

By the maturity date of 2051, however, the $105 million in Poway notes will cost district taxpayers almost $1 billion in principal and interest — more than $9 for every $1 borrowed.

That deal, first reported by the Voice of San Diego news website, raised alarms. But some Poway officials defend it as necessary to complete much-needed projects.

"It was well worth it," said Jennifer Zaheer, president of the Palomar Council Parent Teachers Assn., which serves Poway Unified. "In my son's experience, there's a big difference between using a trailer and having a new classroom."

Poway Supt. John P. Collins said the bond deal was one of the only options the district had. Property taxes are limited by voter-approved state laws, which cap the amount districts can levy on landowners. In addition, the Legislature cannot raise taxes without a two-thirds majority and state education funding has been cut because of the economic downturn.

"How does the state expect school districts to fund facilities given all the restraints today?" Collins said. "Capital appreciation bonds are a necessary tool right now."

While expensive, Collins said Poway's long-term notes should be viewed in the context of all the bonds issued for its construction program. Because the district also issued conventional notes, he said, the overall debt repayment ratio for $377 million in bonds is about 4.2 times principal, close to San Diego County treasurer guidelines.

However, Lockyer and some county treasurers say the guidelines apply to individual bond sales, not broader repayment cost averages. They note that the principal and interest of Poway's CABs represent more than half the district's total debt obligations of almost $1.6 billion.

Poway is not the only school district to sign on for large CAB repayments, according to the Times analysis that examined statewide records for hundreds of bonds issued by school and community colleges. Some of the more extreme cases include:

• The Fairfax Elementary School District in Bakersfield issued $1.02 million in capital appreciation bonds in 2011. By the final maturity date in 2048, the district will have to pay back $15.6 million — $15.25 for every $1 borrowed.

• The Santee School District in San Diego County issued $3.53 million in capital appreciation bonds in 2011. By the final maturity date in 2051, it will have to pay back $58.6 million — $16.57 for every $1 borrowed.

• What appears to be the most expensive deal in the state was made by the Rim of the World Unified School District in Lake Arrowhead. It issued $283,612 in bonds in 2010. By the final maturity date in 2039, the district will have to pay $6.65 million in principal and interest — $23.45 for every $1 borrowed.

In Los Angeles County, 29 districts have issued $556 million in long-term CABs with repayment obligations totaling $2.3 billion. Pay-back ratios range from $2.40 for every dollar borrowed in the El Camino Community College District near Torrance to $9.20 per dollar borrowed in the Westside Union School District in the Antelope Valley.

"These things are all over the place right now and should be of massive concern to taxpayers," said David Wolfe, the legislative director for the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Assn. Capital appreciation bonds "kick interest and principal payments 40 years down the line. Property owners who never voted for these bonds will have to pay for them."

School officials cite economic forecasts predicting that the bonds can be repaid without increasing tax rates. That's partly based on the assumption that California's historically high property values will rise over the next 20 to 40 years along with district populations and tax revenues.

Some county treasurers are concerned that those calculations may be overly optimistic or designed to make the CAB deals work.

"The projections can be unrealistic, especially for assessed valuations," said San Bernardino County Treasurer-Tax Collector Larry Walker, noting that the Fontana school system issued CABs at the bottom of the Great Recession.

"They said we'd be back to normal in three years," Walker said. "Property values were down then and it's clear they are not going to come back in any short time period."

Lockyer and county treasurers also say the high debt payments could threaten a school district's ability to borrow for future construction projects or pay for instructional improvements.

"There could be financial and political ramifications that tie the hands of districts," said Jordan Kaufman, a Kern County assistant treasurer who has studied the use of such bonds statewide. "In most cases, taxpayers don't know what has gone on, and in some cases board members do not know what they were doing."

No California school bond can be issued without voter approval, but details of how the money is borrowed is left to district officials.

Problems with CABs prompted Michigan to outlaw them in 1994. One of the first warnings in California came in May 2011 when Los Angeles County Treasurer-Tax Collector Mark Saladino cautioned financial firms that advise school districts to avoid borrowing agreements with pay-back schedules longer than 25 years.

Last month, the California Assn. of County Treasurers and Tax Collectors suggested that legislation be drafted that would limit bonds to 25 years, bar balloon payments, allow future CABs to be refinanced for better terms and increase oversight of such transactions by outside government agencies.

"We want to keep it simple," said Glenn Byers, an assistant treasurer for L.A. County. "If we can limit the term of the debt and level the annual debt payments, we will eliminate the problem."

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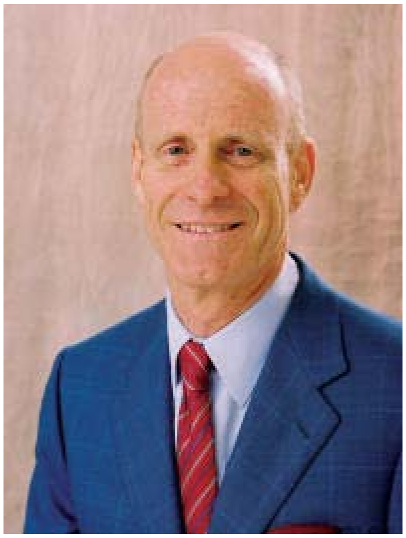
El Camino College President Thomas Fallo to retire

By Rob Kuznia The Daily Breeze
Posted: 12/06/2012



Thomas Fallo

Thomas Fallo, president of El Camino College since 1995, has quietly and unofficially announced his intention to retire after this school year.

Fallo, who is on vacation and couldn't be reached for comment, made the statement at the Torrance-area college's most recent board meeting in mid-November, taking some trustees by surprise. But the decision won't be final until the board officially accepts his resignation, which could happen at the next meeting on Dec. 17.

Fallo, 66, is known for leading with a confident and steady hand and is widely credited for his prowess as a financial steward.

"He's done many wonderful things for the school," said Trustee Maureen O'Donnell, who has occasionally butted heads with Fallo over the years. "Financially, he has been very astute - he has kept the school in prime shape."

With a salary of $277,000, Fallo earns more than most leaders in California's community college system. However, supporters point out that he rejected a $36,000 salary hike in 2009 on the grounds that the controversy surrounding the recession-era proposal by the board was drawing attention away from more pressing matters.

El Camino board President Bill Beverly said he wasn't overly surprised by the announcement.

"He's probably maxed out on whatever retirement system he's on," he said. "Guys like that are essentially working for free."

Because the announcement isn't official or final, there is a chance the board could ask him to stay.

"Could he be persuaded to modify his plans somewhat, in the interest of stability?" Beverly said. "That's an open question. These are things that haven't been discussed."

During Fallo's tenure, voters across the South Bay have approved two large construction bond measures for El Camino - the second of them this past November - generating a combined $744 million for campus upgrades.

For students, the local tax hike has served up a steady din of jackhammers and plenty of campus detours, but also an impressive array of new buildings. Soon to come will be a new football stadium. Eventually to come will be an additional slew of new facilities from the November bond.

Factoring heavily into his legacy will surely be El Camino's controversial decision in 2006 to take temporary administrative control over Compton Community College, thereby saving the Compton campus from outright closure by the state due to rampant fraud. Now, the the campus to the northeast is known as the El Camino Compton Center.

Over the years, Fallo has had his clashes with the faculty union. Last year produced a particularly contentious round of talks. The board, acting on Fallo's recommendation, took the extraordinary measure of imposing a contract on the faculty, effectively putting a unilateral end to the negotiations.

Since then, the union has elected a new president, Sean Donnell, who generally gets along better with the Fallo administration than the immediate past union president, Elizabeth Shadish.

Donnell - who also led the union for a stint from 2007 to 2009 - had kind words for Fallo.

"There have been two times where we have faced significant budgetary crises," he said. "In both instances, we never had to face layoffs. I think that speaks volumes for his fiscal leadership."

Fallo's announcement isn't the first time he's expressed an intention to leave. In 2004, he was courted by the Ventura County Community College District. The El Camino board responded by giving him a 14 percent raise, as well as a 5 percent annual hike.

In 2009, Fallo was a finalist for the chancellor's post in the Riverside Community College District, but later withdrew his candidacy. It was around that time that El Camino's board offered the $36,000 raise that he rejected.

Beverly, who has long been a strong supporter of Fallo, lauded the work of the top administrator, with whom he occasionally plays paddle tennis.

"My dad used to say, `Leave the campground better than you found it,'" he said. "Clearly, this is a case of leaving the place better than he found it, in many ways."

As for Fallo's current pay, Beverly said the district is getting the better end of the deal.

"On the market, I believe he's worth more than we're paying him," he said. "The amount we pay him is more fair to us than it is to him."

Beverly also praised Fallo's immediate underlings, Vice Presidents Francisco Arce, Jo Ann Higdon, Jeanie Nishime and the recently hired Linda Beam. Of them, Arce and Higdon have the most longevity at El Camino.

"I think we have a solid crop that has been with us for a reasonable period of time," Beverly said. "I would want to make more inquiries to find out if they are ready."

Survey finds high superintendent turnover in large California districts

Ed Source

December 7th, 2012

By Susan Frey

During a period of eroding financial stability, many of the state's largest districts also faced leadership instability.

Between 2006 and 2009, 71 percent of superintendents in California's largest districts and 45 percent of all superintendents left their jobs, according to a survey of 215 districts randomly selected from the state's approximately 1,000 districts. The survey covers well more than half of the state's largest districts – those with more than 29,000 students in 2005–06.

The survey data speak only to turnover during a three-year period, not longevity, and do not include interim superintendents who were leading districts during that time.

The results are "pretty stark," and the high turnover rate of the biggest districts was a surprise, said Jason A. Grissom, an assistant professor of public policy and education at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College and co-author of "Why Superintendents Turn Over," published this week in the December issue of the American Educational Research Journal. Stephanie Andersen, a senior research assistant at Washington University in St. Louis, also was co-author.

However, some of those who have held the job in large districts were not so surprised and cited a range of reasons for the high turnover: conflicts with school boards about implementing reforms, culture clashes within the district, a surge of retirement by baby boomers, and an opportunity for more money and prestige by taking a position in a bigger district. All agree that it takes time on the job – some say at least five years – to implement lasting change in a large urban district.

"Superintendents are hired to be fired," said Santiago Wood, who served as a superintendent in four California districts during 32 years as an educator and administrator, which began in 1973 as a teacher in Oakland. Two of those districts – West Contra Costa Unified and Fresno Unified – had more than 29,000 students.

The "honeymoon" with the school board lasts between 12 and 18 months, he said, before "political interests and dysfunction show up." A board may have hired a superintendent to institute reforms, but when interest groups such as unions or community organizations complain, the elected board gets uncomfortable, Wood said.

Becca Bracy Knight, executive director of the Broad Center for the Management of School Systems in Los Angeles, which trains superintendents, said turnover happens when superintendents and boards “don’t have alignment from the outset to weather what happens when there is change.”

“Even if you agree on the results,” Bracy Knight said, “change is painful. It is so critical that superintendents have the backing of the governing board when they go down that road.” The board and superintendents must agree not only on what changes they want to see, but also how quickly and what sacrifices they are prepared to make to get there, she said.

Board members also want to micromanage, Wood said. He recalls when a board member asked him to hire a friend. “Every smart superintendent makes sure he has a strong and confident labor relations attorney who makes sure the contract gives the superintendent the right to recommend hiring and termination of employees so the board doesn’t become a personnel director,” he said.

David Plank, executive director of Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), based at Stanford University and UC Berkeley, said he looked at turnover of superintendents in Michigan in 2002 when he was an assistant professor at Michigan State University, where he founded the Education Policy Center. He found that the average tenure was about 2 ½ to 3 years.

“It’s partly that superintendents are responsive to boards and that the metrics for success are subject to change almost at a moment’s notice,” he said. “Few boards have long-term strategic plans – they want change right now.”

Elected school board members tend to think in terms of four years, when they will be up for re-election or want a record of success when they run for the local city council seat. On the other hand, said Carl Cohn, a former superintendent of large districts who’s currently a member of the State Board of Education, an overly assertive superintendent, hired to bring in reforms, can make school boards uncomfortable because of the “collateral damage” – unions and parents complaining.

Jill Wynns, who is starting her sixth four-year term on San Francisco Unified’s school board, said in her district some school board members have gotten elected because they were advocates for political groups, making it difficult for them to compromise.

“People’s political interests have made it hard on the superintendent,” she said. The advocates “have a hard time understanding that they are now part of the system.”

In addition, “the system is structured in such a way that there is a very high likelihood for conflicts,” said Wynns, who is the immediate past president of the California School Boards Association (CSBA). “Who works for whom is not clear.” School boards hire superintendents, but board members are typically volunteers who have no independent staff and are therefore reliant on the information provided by the superintendent when they make decisions.

Some districts have small boards of only five members. That is particularly worrisome for superintendents, Wynns said, because sometimes a change of one newly elected board member can reverse earlier decisions.

The researchers found that high functioning school boards – as measured by board members' evaluation of their own board – generally held on to their superintendents longer. Those board members tended to give higher marks for the superintendent's performance as well. Objective measures of a superintendent's performance, such as higher student test scores, did not appear to be a factor in turnover, the researchers said.

In addition, superintendents who were promoted from within the district "were more likely to stay – a lot more," Grissom said. About 35 percent of 106 superintendents who responded to that question in the study were hired from within.

Cohn, who led Long Beach Unified, the third largest district in the state, for 10 years from 1992 to 2002, said being promoted from within and having support from his board had a lot to do with his success. The district won the 2003 Broad Prize for Urban Education.

"I was born and raised in Long Beach; I came up in that district," he said. "There was a groundswell of support for me, both at the board of education and community level. Four out of five of the school board members who hired me stayed all 10 years."

When he later became superintendent of San Diego Unified in 2005, his tenure was a lot shorter: 2 ¼ years.

He said he saw San Diego as "another Navy town," but soon found the local context was very different from Long Beach. That included a newspaper that was hostile to unions, a robust charter school movement and a network of elite private schools, Cohn said. Perhaps more importantly, the board had vetted his record, but not his style, he said.

"I think I was losing support with board members because they didn't see a hard-charging, top-down, we-got-to-get-this-done superintendent," Cohn said. "My approach is to engage the stakeholders and win them over and build relationships that will end up being successful over the long haul. They wanted things done much quicker, much faster, and much more top down." Cohn is currently co-director of the Urban Leadership Program at Claremont Graduate University and a member of EdSource's board of directors.

Change versus stability

David Gordon, currently superintendent of the Sacramento County Office of Education, was the superintendent of Elk Grove Unified from 1995 to 2004. The district has had only five superintendents since 1959.

“The culture of the place is one of stability,” Gordon said. “Board members don’t necessarily stay for 20 or 30 years. But the culture is such that they are replaced by like-minded people.” Elk Grove board members “tend not to be political wannabes,” he said, who are using the board as a stepping stone to other political offices. “They are able to focus on the business of the schools, the substance of the work.”

Career ambition is another reason why superintendents often stay only a short time. Wood, currently executive director of the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE), said he averaged about four years in a district. “I liked the challenge of a bigger and more complex district,” he said.

In general, prestige is based on the size of the district and the salary. Superintendents in rural districts often use those districts as pipelines to leadership positions in suburban or urban districts, the researchers found.

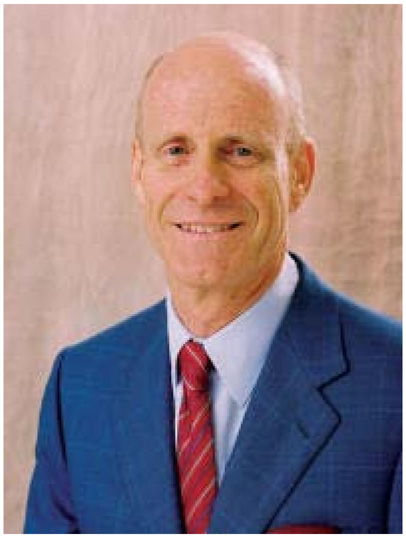
Many of these larger districts are in high-poverty areas, but that didn’t dissuade superintendents from moving there, the study found. However, the turnover rates were higher in higher-poverty districts, where arguably the need for stability is greater.

Grissom noted that there is not much research on the impact of high superintendent turnover on a large district, but he does refer to a study that suggests reforms need five years or more to take hold. Gordon believes that superintendents should stay five to seven years in the job if they want to implement change.

“If you’re not there five to seven years, you’re unlikely to make much of an impact,” he said. “These organizations are so large and complicated.” In addition, he said, “a change in leadership is unsettling to the staff.”

El Camino College President Thomas Fallo to retire

By Rob Kuznia The Daily Breeze
Posted: 12/06/2012



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Factoring heavily into his legacy will surely be El Camino's controversial decision in 2006 to take temporary administrative control over Compton Community College, thereby saving the Compton campus from outright closure by the state due to rampant fraud. Now, the the campus to the northeast is known as the El Camino Compton Center.

Over the years, Fallo has had his clashes with the faculty union. Last year produced a particularly contentious round of talks. The board, acting on Fallo's recommendation, took the extraordinary measure of imposing a contract on the faculty, effectively putting a unilateral end to the negotiations.

Since then, the union has elected a new president, Sean Donnell, who generally gets along better with the Fallo administration than the immediate past union president, Elizabeth Shadish.

Donnell - who also led the union for a stint from 2007 to 2009 - had kind words for Fallo.

"There have been two times where we have faced significant budgetary crises," he said. "In both instances, we never had to face layoffs. I think that speaks volumes for his fiscal leadership."

Fallo's announcement isn't the first time he's expressed an intention to leave. In 2004, he was courted by the Ventura County Community College District. The El Camino board responded by giving him a 14 percent raise, as well as a 5 percent annual hike.

In 2009, Fallo was a finalist for the chancellor's post in the Riverside Community College District, but later withdrew his candidacy. It was around that time that El Camino's board offered the $36,000 raise that he rejected.

Beverly, who has long been a strong supporter of Fallo, lauded the work of the top administrator, with whom he occasionally plays paddle tennis.

"My dad used to say, `Leave the campground better than you found it,'" he said. "Clearly, this is a case of leaving the place better than he found it, in many ways."

As for Fallo's current pay, Beverly said the district is getting the better end of the deal.

"On the market, I believe he's worth more than we're paying him," he said. "The amount we pay him is more fair to us than it is to him."

Beverly also praised Fallo's immediate underlings, Vice Presidents Francisco Arce, Jo Ann Higdon, Jeanie Nishime and the recently hired Linda Beam. Of them, Arce and Higdon have the most longevity at El Camino.

"I think we have a solid crop that has been with us for a reasonable period of time," Beverly said. "I would want to make more inquiries to find out if they are ready."

Civic Group Challenges Shared Governance at Calif. Community Colleges

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By Alina Mogilyanskaya

The Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges should amend regulations that permit faculty senates to exercise excessive power in decision making at the state's community colleges, argues a legal challenge submitted to the board on Wednesday by the nonprofit group California Competes.

In recent years, the state's community colleges have experienced numerous turnovers in leadership and deep budget cuts. Now 27 of the system's 112 colleges also face sanctions or warnings from the regional accreditation body, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.

"California's community colleges have become notorious for their inability to handle their affairs, and a major contributing factor is the byzantine and confusing management and decision-making process," argues the petition submitted by California Competes. The organization, a bipartisan council of business and civic leaders who make recommendations about higher-education needs for the state's economy, is led by Robert M. Shireman, a former U.S. Education Department official. Any interested party may challenge community-college regulations under state law.

The legal challenge urges the state board to amend sections of Title 5 of the California Code of Regulations that were added in 1990 and that, the petition maintains, are inconsistent with previous legislation that outlines procedures for governance and oversight at the state's community colleges. The sections require district boards to "consult collegially" with faculty senates on specific matters, and describe two methods of consultation whereby the boards may "rely primarily" on faculty senates or reach "mutual agreement" with them.

The petition argues that the sections are inconsistent with previous legislation and unlawfully delegate decision-making authority to local faculty senates. It also contends the regulations disempower students, staff, and faculty members who don't participate in senates; fail to meet standards of consistency and clarity in governance; and lead to dysfunction and waste.

A Recipe for Failure?

The challenge was brought with the goal of "clarifying responsibility," Mr. Shireman said. "We have seen many examples in California of dysfunctional community colleges that seem to have a difficulty making things happen, fixing problems, with the current poster child being City College of San Francisco," he added.

After years of financial difficulties and changing leadership, that college is now straining to keep its accreditation in place and its doors open. Citing just one example of the institution's troubles, the challenge argues that a 2010 power struggle between City College faculty and members of the board of trustees about how to bridge achievement gaps led to a usurpation of power by the faculty, wasted time, and yielded no solution to the problem at hand.

Not surprisingly, some faculty leaders don't see a problem with the shared-governance system. "I am not aware of any instance where our Title 5 regulations are interfering with local decision making," said Michelle L. Pilati, president of the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, a statewide group that supports local faculty senates. "Boards are not required to accept the recommendations of the academic senate, and in many instances they do not."

Four other colleges are identified in the petition as having problems stemming from the regulations in question, including Diablo Valley College, Lassen Community College, Pasadena City College, and the College of the Redwoods. The last institution, which has experienced considerable turnover of presidents and senior administrators, is cited as an example of how "the complex and ambiguous governance regulations have made it more difficult to recruit and retain leadership" for the state's community colleges.

Potential leaders, especially those outside the state, "run away," said Mr. Shireman, because trying to steer a college in California's complex regulatory environment is "a recipe for failure."

But Ms. Pilati said she doesn't see any connection between the regulations and local decision-making and leadership challenges.

"The primary challenge that we have is the unpredictable nature of our funding at a time when our communities need us the most," she said. "The faculty are just one voice on the campus."

What will happen next with the legal challenge is not totally clear, Mr. Shireman said, but the system's chancellor is required to respond within 45 days.