

THE ROAD TO ACCREDITATION—El Camino College Compton Center continues push despite setback

THE COMPTON BULLETIN June 20th, 2012

Note: This is the third and final article in a series on El Camino Compton Center's accreditation effort.

COMPTON—It has been six years since the Accreditation Commission for Community and Junior Colleges revoked Compton Community College's accreditation. At the time it was estimated that it would take six to 10 years to earn it back.

There are fallacies in that estimation that shed new light on the timeframe and the procedure necessary for the only college located in the city of Compton to become accredited as a separate learning institution again.

Understanding the past

When the college had its accreditation revoked because of financial mismanagement by the Compton Community College District Board of Trustees it was \$200,000 short of its payroll and it was on the brink of closure. The only thing that kept the campus open was an agreement entered into by the Compton district and the El Camino Community College District. The details were defined in Assembly Bill 318, which was passed for the specific purpose of providing a way to keep an accredited college open to serve students in the Compton district.

In addition to the granting of a loan from the state, the bill specified that the college would be an adjunct facility of El Camino Community College. As such, El Camino was charged with the responsibility of earning accreditation from the ACCJC.

The Compton Community College District continues to operate, focusing on the district's financial status and conducting its business. However, the board members are not empowered to vote on issues facing the district. That responsibility has gone to a special trustee appointed by the state chancellor of education. Thomas Henry currently holds that position.

But Compton Community College no longer exists. It is now El Camino Community College Compton Center.

Herein lies the basis for misunderstandings that have plagued the accreditation effort from the beginning.

Rumors of highjacking

Members of the Compton community were astounded and outraged to find their college being run by another district. Rumors of a takeover were rampant. Those within the education community were concerned that the Compton district was charged with running its business, yet had no vote at board meetings. Board members were not even allowed seats on the dais.

There were suspicions that El Camino was in the process of appropriating the college, that commercial interests were plotting to close it down and develop the land, either as a residential development, a shopping center — or even a prison.

Members of the Compton Board of Trustees were hostile toward the special trustee and the administration of El Camino Community College.

At the same time, the ACCJC demanded that all of the signage of the college be changed to reflect its new status as part of El Camino College. To members of the Concerned Citizens of Compton and the community-at-large, this was further proof that their suspicions were correct and that Compton's college was systematically being taken away from the community.

The controversial appointment of Special Trustee Dr. Genethia Hudley-Hayes added fuel to the fire. A pull-no-punches personality, she repeatedly offended members of the Concerned Citizens with blistering statements about the Compton Board of Trustees and the district in general .

When Hudley-Hayes fired Dr. Lawrence Cox, the popular and trusted president and CEO of the college, an outraged community of supporters of the college wrote to Chancellor Jack Scott and Gov. Jerry Brown, expressing their belief that the special trustee was destroying the college and the board and demanding action.

The matter was resolved unexpectedly when Hudley-Hayes submitted a consultant laden budget that El Camino College President Dr. Thomas Fallo refused to approve. AB318 specified that El Camino could pull out of the partnership with Compton if he could not approve the district's budget.

“This was the most critical situation we had been in since the accreditation was revoked,” Special Trustee Thomas Henry told The Bulletin in an exclusive interview. “Once again we were on the verge of closing the college down. Contrary to what a lot of people believed, there was no other college willing to replace El Camino in the partnership. If El Camino had pulled out of the partnership it would have continued to serve the students, but from its campus in Torrance. Our primary concern, as it had been in 2006 when accreditation was revoked, was to keep the college open in the community. It still remains my primary focus.”

A new direction

Henry replaced Hudley-Hayes. A veteran of accreditation efforts in community colleges throughout the state, Henry was adept at handling situations involved with the process, but he had limitations.

“To my knowledge, no other community college in the nation had ever had its accreditation revoked,” Henry said. “This was strange territory. We didn’t have a template or precedent to follow. We had to figure it out as we went along. For the first three years, we were getting our sea legs. Mistakes were made, but never for underhanded purposes. It’s true that the Compton board was in a difficult position, being told that their participation was critical to the accreditation process yet they were prevented from official action.”

Both Fallo and Henry agreed on a basic premise: That the first order of business was to build an administration team that could work together, not only to take each step in the process, but to figure out a method for doing so.

“I think we now have what we need, with the appointment of Dr. Keith Curry as interim CEO of the Compton Center,” said Fallo, also in an exclusive interview with The Bulletin.

“Mr. Henry is a team builder and his skills in navigating delicate situations is well known in the education community. Dr. Curry has been an enthusiastic communicator and has reached out to every group in the city to keep them abreast of the status of the accreditation effort. The Compton Board of Trustees has responded well to Mr. Henry’s approach to managing the district. The bottom line is that the strife we saw at the beginning seems to have gone and there is a new spirit of cooperation among everyone involved in the effort.”

The cooperation of the Compton board is especially critical to accreditation. “One of the requirements is that the board demonstrate the ability to achieve financial solvency and sustain it over a period of time,” Henry said. “The Fiscal Crisis Management and Assistance Team is following the board’s actions closely. While it’s true that the board does not make the crucial decisions, it is extremely important for it to show professional and capable conduct and to demonstrate a spirit of cooperation with the El Camino administration. In order to show sustainability, the board needs to submit its financial reports on time and they must stand up to audits by FCMAT.”

The effort goes off track

Hudley-Hayes was the first to announce that the district had not satisfied that requirement because it had submitted its reports late and riddled with questionable figures, and that the accreditation effort was “back where it started.” Community members and college

supporters, already suspicious and disappointed with the extended time frame for accreditation, were discouraged to learn that, despite six years of concentrated effort, accreditation was still nearly 10 years away.

Two entities are involved with accreditation of the El Camino College Compton Center. The ACCJC requires that the college meet its own criteria in all areas of operation. Members of the panel tour the college regularly and submit reports whether those criteria are being met.

Once all criteria are being met on a continuing basis, El Camino College can apply for eligibility status, and once eligibility is granted, the next step is a provisional accreditation.

FCMAT is responsible for ensuring that the Compton Board of Trustees manages its business effectively and maintains financial solvency. The team relies on a lengthy report done in 2006 detailing shortcomings in each area of operation, assigning a numerical value to reflect progress in subsequent reports.

“Just the reports alone stretch the time frame,” said Henry. “We also have to create and submit reports, which also takes considerable time. Then there is time between reports for us to improve in areas as needed. So it is not a quick process by any means.”

There is one aspect of the ACCJC’s actions Henry is certain of. “The ACCJC is using the same set of standards it uses for all colleges seeking accreditation,” he said. “The circumstances under which Compton’s accreditation was revoked have no bearing on the process. Areas for improvement are defined on the basis of the current status in each report. ACCJC looks at educational operations — quality education, student learning, student services, whether students receive an education that will properly support their goals.”

FCMAT, however is a different story. “FCMAT’s responsibility is financial management,” Henry said. “Its reports center around the financial functions of the college and the board. The ACCJC gives great weight to the FCMAT reports.”

The path to success

While neither Henry nor Fallo is able to predict how long accreditation is likely to take — it could be anywhere from six more years to 10 — both agree that progress is now being made. They credit the cooperative spirit between the board of trustees, Henry, Fallo and Curry for ushering in a new day in the journey toward accreditation.

But a recent meeting of the board of trustees showed some cause for concern. At the meeting, held on May 16, Henry announced his choice for the new trustee area map, required by the state as part of the Voting Rights Act of 2001.

Some members of the board disagreed with the option chosen by Henry. The option they wanted would change the trustee areas least, despite the fact that the district is being sued for violation of the Voting Rights Act in its then-current trustee area map.

Not only was there adamant disagreement. Profanity was used, and one member resigned and walked out of the meeting.

Worse yet, FCMAT was there to witness it all. While Henry, Curry and Fallo have engaged in damage control, all are concerned that the actions at the meeting reflected a failure to perform professionally or in the best interest of the college.

“If we are going to earn accreditation, we have to show that we can function in a professional and cooperative manner,” said Fallo. “We’ll get nowhere if we don’t. The first years of the partnership have been a learning experience. There has never been a situation like this and there is no sample upon which we can base our plan of action. It isn’t that we achieved nothing during those years. We achieved a great deal. We put together a team of people who are all on the same page and who will work creatively and aggressively to get the job done. We also have learned our way around the accreditation process, and we know where we’re going now. That’s a lot of progress.”

As to the word on the street, things may be calming down. “I think most of the community realizes that the college is a remote campus of El Camino College,” said Henry. “I think they understand that this isn’t a simple matter of ‘earning back’ its accreditation. It’s not correct to say the college ‘lost’ its accreditation. It’s accreditation was revoked. That’s an important distinction. And it’s El Camino that has to get its remote campus accredited as a separate entity.”

“I hope that the community is beginning to understand this,” said Fallo. “Running the college and seeking accreditation must be done by us. And we are committed to the effort. But the financial solvency of the Compton Community College District directly affects the status of El Camino in the eyes of the ACCJC. It is important that we accomplish accreditation without jeopardizing our operation.”

But the question remains — How much longer? There is no clear cut answer. “It all depends on the length of time it takes to clear up all the deficiencies and get the reports done,” said Henry. “I’d say the longest period of time will be getting eligibility status. There are many areas along the way that could take longer or could end up taking less time than we estimate.”

The important thing is that the effort remains ongoing and that El Camino stays in the partnership. Beyond that, there is the daily function common to all colleges everywhere.

“My position remains the same,” said Henry. “I want to keep the doors open. And I want to provide the students in the Compton Community College District with the best

education and training we can give them. I truly believe everything else will fall into place if we continue down the path we are on now.”

City College accreditation in jeopardy, report says

SF Gate

Nanette Asimov

June 30, 2012

As California cut millions from community colleges in recent years, City College of San Francisco dipped deeply into reserve funds to keep itself afloat.

It opened sparkling new buildings, but left little money for computers. It spent an unusually high portion of its budget on faculty, but pared leadership to skeletal levels, unlike other schools that won't "chop from the top," as students often demand.

Now City College is in trouble.

An accreditation evaluation obtained by The Chronicle before its expected release next week offers a rare look at the inner workings of the vast college and why its all-important seal of approval is in jeopardy.

"The Accrediting Commission has issued an urgent call to action, which we take seriously," said City College spokesman Larry Kamer, a consultant hired to represent the school during a tumultuous period.

City College is the largest school in the state, yet employs just 39 administrators.

More than 90,000 students rely on it for a leg up into higher education, to learn a vocation, study English or just take an interesting class. Nearly 2,700 people work at one of its nine campuses or 100 to 200 "instructional sites" - no one is sure of the number - peppered throughout the city.

City College won praise from the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges for successes, such as its diverse faculty and high-quality, though insufficient, libraries and counseling.

But the accrediting team identified serious deficiencies, mainly the college's failure to realistically address its declining funds.

14 recommendations

The study makes 14 recommendations, from assessing whether every campus is needed, to improving the experience of its leaders. And it "makes clear that there are a number of very difficult choices that have to be made immediately," Kamer said.

In particular, administrators have done little to bring expenditures in line with available cash in the six years since the last evaluation.

City College "has been ineffective in developing and implementing a comprehensive budget planning system that addresses its lack of resources and declining budget," the study says.

The commission isn't expected to yank City College's accreditation when its report is made public. But the college may be placed "on sanction" - a watch list - for failing to satisfy all accreditation criteria, from financial planning to leadership.

Accreditation, while voluntary, ensures that students' credentials are legitimate. And schools can't offer financial aid without it. The federal government has also cracked down on accreditation agencies, requiring them to hold colleges accountable for showing that their vocational programs prepare students for employment.

Of the dozens of such programs at City College, only one, Culinary Arts, tracks job placements, the team found.

Money and leadership

But the most pressing problems involve money and leadership.

City College typically spends more than it has, this year by nearly \$6 million, the team found. It also relies on one-time cash for ongoing needs, has let unfunded retirement obligations balloon and keeps financial reserves "well below the prudent level."

Meanwhile, few are minding the store. Several administrators are interim appointees, some with too little experience for a school of its size, the study found.

"Positions remain vacant and sorely needed," said the team, which found administrators "overtaxed with additional duties."

The study found no shortage of faculty. City College spends 92 percent of its operating budget on salaries and benefits. By contrast, the San Mateo County Community College District spends 85 percent on employees, and the East Bay's Peralta District 83 percent.

Karen Saginor, president of the Academic Senate, shrugged off the employees' high budget share, saying San Francisco is an expensive city.

"The college has made a choice about which it would rather have: administrators or teachers," she said, noting that faculty and staff have accepted salary cuts.

Yet there's more to the story. City College gives full-time benefits to half-time employees, college officials said. Department heads also enjoy unusually strong budgetary power, influencing their own salaries.

Tough assignment

Although Saginor called the accrediting team's conclusions harsh, she said they must be addressed.

"They want us to downsize our mission, and that will be tough for us," she said. "We don't want to downsize our mission."

At the City College board meeting Thursday, downsizing was in evidence as the trustees canceled 700 classes for fall and spring and approved a \$187 million budget for 2012-13 that is \$8 million less than this year's.

Last month, the trustees voted to place a \$79 per parcel tax on the November ballot, hoping to raise nearly \$16 million a year for eight years. And, anticipating the accreditation sledgehammer, they also agreed to bring in the state's Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team for help in fixing their problems.

Trustee Chris Jackson, who opposed bringing in the crisis team, on Friday condemned the new study for its seeming indifference to the loss of millions in state funding suffered by the college.

\$3 million in reserve

Jackson said City College has been forced to dig into reserves - down to \$3 million instead of the recommended \$10 million - and should be applauded for finding one-time money to plug holes.

"I'd rather fund teachers than hoard money," Jackson said.

Yet interim Chancellor Pamila Fisher and board President John Rizzo said the college will address the accreditation requirements.

"The silver lining is that they're making recommendations that could help us survive the cuts that we assume will continue for several years," Rizzo said, noting that 10,000 students already were unable to get into classes this year because of budget cuts.

"Now it's going to be more," he said. "It's very sad that the state is doing this to education."

Public meeting

There will be a public meeting with the City College of San Francisco trustees at 5 p.m. July 10 at the Mission campus, 1125 Valencia St., San Francisco, to discuss the accreditation status and what the college can do to improve.

Equity and Community Colleges

The Chronicle of Higher Education

July 2, 2012

By Thomas R. Bailey

Access to high-quality education is unequal from earliest schooling, and over time, those inequalities build on themselves. Community colleges have contributed to this problem, but they are also essential to the solution.

Regardless of previous academic achievement, low-income students are much more likely than higher-income students to attend community colleges than four-year institutions. And students who start in community colleges do not, on average, progress as far as those starting in four-year institutions; they are certainly less likely to complete a B.A. Thus, by starting at a community college, they may fall further behind more-advantaged students.

Research suggests that many low-income students are "underplaced": They have the academic skills to gain admission to more-selective colleges than the ones they attend. Better counseling and financial-aid programs might improve equity by displacing some higher-income students from four-year colleges. But it is hard to believe that such efforts would make a perceptible dent in the current extent of inequality.

Eliminating community colleges, or encouraging every student to enroll in a four-year institution, won't work unless four-year institutions are willing to take the students who now attend community colleges. But selective institutions are not about to open their doors to all comers. For the most part, they have used the growing demand for higher education to become even more selective rather than to expand enrollment.

The availability of low-cost, local, open-access community colleges is therefore crucial. As tuition at four-year institutions rises, and college degrees become a prerequisite for jobs paying a living wage, community colleges fill an ever more crucial role in our economy. Accordingly, their enrollments have steadily grown.

But fewer than two-fifths of students who start in community colleges go on to complete a degree or certificate within six years. Community colleges must find a way to increase completion rates without restricting access.

Can that be done? There is reason for optimism. The past decade has seen a growing volume of research, and reform, devoted to that issue. Perhaps the most important conclusion is that reforms must be ambitious and concerned with the entire student experience at college, including opportunities to transfer to four-year colleges. Reforms that focus on only one stage, such as remediation or counseling for course selection, will have, at best, only modest effects.

Right now, millions of students are enrolled in community colleges. Improving community-college performance will have a direct, positive impact on their lives and future opportunities. With enough improvement, community colleges may even become an attractive alternative for upper-income students.

Give colleges more credit

Los Angeles Times

By Barry Glassner and Morton Schapiro

July 3, 2012

Higher education as we know it is about to come to an end. After all, there are no jobs for college graduates, certainly not for liberal arts students. Moreover, even were such students employable, they come out of school so burdened with debt that they will never dig their way out. The educational equivalent of eight-track tapes, traditional colleges and universities will vanish almost entirely, replaced by slimmer, more technologically advanced online and for-profit models.

As college presidents who hear such proclamations over and over again, we find ourselves suppressing the urge to yawn, and not because we lose sleep over them. Rather, we are reminded of Marcel Proust's splendid observation in "Remembrance of Things Past": "The one thing that does not change is that at any and every time it appears that there have been 'great changes.'"

We take comfort in the fact that for more than a century predictions about the impending demise of classic higher education have met the same fate: They have been utterly wrong. Around 1900, David Starr Jordan, the founding president of Stanford, forecast the end of the liberal arts college. Others foresaw financial ruin for higher education during the Depression, when public colleges suffered 40% reductions in funding and private institutions lost more than a quarter of their endowments and more than 70% of gifts from benefactors. Then came proclaimers of the end of educational excellence resulting from democratization associated with the GI Bill, followed by prophets of demographic devastation from the large baby boom generation, and conversely, from the baby bust.

In short, there has been no scarcity of doomsayers. We thought that economists were bad at predicting. Next to educational pundits, they have the vision of Nostradamus.

Present-day alarmists fare no better. Though college debt levels clearly are something to monitor, the vast majority of students graduate with relatively small debt burdens — about \$25,000 on average — and about one-third leave college with no debt at all. Meanwhile, the college premium — the ratio of college earnings to high school earnings — is at or near record levels and has been increasing decade after decade since the late 1970s. While for-profit colleges enroll an increasing percentage of all undergraduates, the demand for education at selective private and public universities and colleges continues to grow, as evidenced by dramatic declines in the percentage of applicants they admit. And worry that on-line education will replace the four-year undergraduate growth experience that takes place on a college campus seems as unfounded now as when first articulated 20 years ago.

Still, as the saying goes, even paranoids on occasion have people chasing them. The truth is that we don't always sleep well at night. But what keeps us up is surprisingly similar to what we suspect kept up chancellors at Oxford University half a millennium ago: How can we best provide students with a balance of the practical skills they'll need for the world that awaits them and the abstract wisdom that will help them adapt when that world, and they themselves, change? How do we assist our students in their almost-universal desire to make a positive impact on society, while they are in college and after they graduate and become leaders in their communities? What should be the role of our institutions in addressing society's most challenging issues?

And of course, our constant worry: Will we be awakened with word that a young person has done something reckless that harmed him or others, something we might have prevented? These are the issues that we wrestle with during our days and our nights.

One other thing worries us. There is a surefire way to make today's dire predictions come to pass — if educational leaders feel compelled to listen to scaremongers who are all too anxious to force us to adopt a new model that eliminates outstanding professors and their passion for teaching, research budgets and the pursuit of new knowledge, the residential college experience and the core commitment to excellence that have made American higher education the leader in the world. If that were to happen, we might end up with colleges and universities that aren't worth saving.

Good and bad ways to teach economics

By Thomas Sowell

Daily Breeze

July 3, 2012

Having taught economics at a number of colleges for a number of years, I especially welcomed a feature article in the June 22 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, on how economics courses with the same name can be very different.

The usefulness of the three approaches described in the article depends on what the introductory course is trying to accomplish.

One professor taught the subject through a steady diet of mathematical models. If the introductory economics course is aimed at those students who are going to major in economics, then that may make some sense. But most students in most introductory economics courses are not going to become economics majors, much less professional economists.

Among those students for whom a one-year introductory course is likely to be their only exposure to economics, mathematical models that they will probably never use in later life, as they try to understand economic activities and policies in the real world, may be of very limited value to them, if any value at all.

If the purpose of the introductory course is to serve as a recruiting source for economics majors, that serves the interest of the economics department, not the students. It may also serve the interests of the professor, because teaching in the fashion familiar in his own research and scholarship is a lot easier than trying to recast economics in terms more accessible to students who are studying the subject for the first time.

Having written two textbooks on introductory economics – one full of graphs and equations, and the other with neither – I know from experience that the second way is a lot harder to write, and is more time-consuming. The first book was written in a year; the second took a decade.

Both books taught the same principles, but obviously one approach did so more successfully than the other.

The opposite extreme from teaching economics with mathematical models was described by a professor who uses an approach she characterized as democratizing the classroom, “so that everybody is a co-teacher and co-learner.” This has sometimes been called “discovery learning,” where the students discover the underlying principles for themselves while groping their way through problems.

Unfortunately, discovery can take a very long time – much longer than a course lasts. It took the leading classical economists a hundred years of wrestling with different concepts of supply and demand – often misunderstanding each other – before finally arriving at mutually understood concepts that can now be taught to students in the first week of introductory economics.

The Chronicle of Higher Education reported that the discovery learning professor sometimes seemed to be the one doing most of the work in the class, “bringing the students’ sometimes fumbling answers back to economic principles.”

Discovery learning may not serve the interests of the students, but it may well serve the ego of its advocate.

By contrast, the third method of teaching introductory economics, in lectures by Professor Donald Boudreaux of George Mason University, tests the students with objective questions – which means that it is also producing a test of whether this traditional way of teaching actually works. Apparently it does.

The Chronicle of Higher Education also reported on the students. The feckless behavior of today’s students in all three courses makes me glad that I left the classroom long ago, and do my teaching today solely through my writings.

City College of San Francisco on brink of closure

SFGate

Nanette Asimov

July 4, 2012

The poorly run City College of San Francisco has eight months to prove it should stay in business, yet must "make preparations for closure," evaluators ordered Tuesday.

The stunning verdict by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges could result in the closure of California's largest college and a fixture of higher education in one of the nation's wealthiest cities. It has 90,000 students.

Only accredited colleges can receive public funding under state law. But City College's failure to fix serious, long-standing problems of leadership and fiscal planning means that the accrediting commission could vote as early as next June to yank the school's all-important certification, said Barbara Beno, commission president.

That perilous judgment was conveyed Tuesday in a letter to Pamila Fisher, interim chancellor of City College, as the commission released its comprehensive review of the school. The college now has the burden of proof to "show cause" for why it should retain accreditation.

"Since the loss of accreditation would likely cause City College of San Francisco to close, during the 'show cause' period the College must make preparations for closure according to the Commission's Policy on Closing an Institution," Beno wrote Fisher.

In addition to proving why it should stay in business, City College must submit a "Closure Report" by March 15.

Only one California college has shut down in recent years because it lost accreditation, Beno said. Compton College, near Los Angeles, closed in 2005. But City College was warned in 2006 that it had eight major problems that could place its status in jeopardy. Now there are 14, all of which must be addressed by March 15 for the college to remain accredited.

Summary of findings

In her letter, Beno summarized the findings of the 66-page report, citing "leadership weaknesses at all levels," "failure to react to ongoing reduced funding," and spending all but 8 percent of its budget on salaries and benefits. The Chronicle, which had obtained a copy of the report, wrote about the findings on Saturday.

Beno said Tuesday that the reduced funding at City College isn't the reason for its precarious position. Other colleges have also lost millions of dollars in state funding, she said. Yet only two of California's 112 community colleges - College of the Redwoods in Eureka and Cuesta College in San Luis Obispo - are, like City College, on the brink. "It's choices," Beno said. "Regardless of how much money they have, safeguards apparently weren't put in place. The situation is very grave."

Leadership lacking

It is unclear how small the vast City College would have to become to live within its reduced means. It has nine campuses and from 100 to 200 "instructional sites." More than 90,000 students are enrolled, intending to transfer to a four-year university, learn a vocation or just take an interesting course. Nearly 2,700 people work at City College, including just 39 administrators - a level considered far too low by the accrediting commission.

In her two-page response to the commission, Interim Chancellor Fisher did not promise to keep City College's doors open. Nor did she make such a promise in response to questions from The Chronicle, saying only: "City College is fully aware of the seriousness of the situation."

But Fisher acknowledged in her letter that "clear, difficult choices must be made, immediately, and at a number of levels."

"The ultimate responsibility rests with the trustees, administration, faculty and staff to reinvent City College so that it can continue to achieve its important mission, but in a more cost-effective and efficient way."

Fisher became chancellor May 1 when Chancellor Don Griffin resigned to undergo surgery for a brain tumor.

Since then, she said, the college has approved a \$187 million budget for 2012-13 that is \$8 million less than the previous budget. It includes savings from union givebacks, furloughs, a freeze on purchasing and the elimination of 700 classes for fall and spring.

\$79 parcel tax

The trustees also voted to place a \$79 per parcel tax on the November ballot to benefit the college, and will bring in the state's Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team to help create a multiyear financial plan.

Next week, Fisher said, she will appoint an accreditation response team to develop "an immediate plan of action" to address the 14 major problems the college must solve to stay in business.

Action plan deadline

The first deadline, Oct. 15, is when City College must submit its action plan to the accrediting commission. Commission representatives will then visit the school to monitor progress.

City College Trustee Steve Ngo said he was taken aback by the severity of the commission's action.

"City College must survive," he said. "We will work our way out of this."

At the same time, he urged everyone who loves City College to recognize the value of the institution that churns out thousands of educated students and licensed professionals each year.

"I think they're in danger of losing a treasured institution," he said. "The work we do has to do with the strength of the city."

English instructor Alisa Messer, president of the American Federation of Teachers local that represents the college's faculty, agreed.

"The last thing anyone wants is for the college to close," she said. "We'll all work very hard to make sure it doesn't. Closure would be unthinkable."

Compton Community College District and El Camino College Compton Center complete annual planning summit

THE COMPTON BULLETIN, July 11, 2012

COMPTON—Compton Community College District interim CEO Keith Curry and El Camino College Compton Center Vice President Barbara Perez recently hosted a planning summit to address the planning components for both the El Camino College Compton Center and the Compton Community College District.

Representatives from the collegial consultation groups participated in review and discussion of the following components of planning: developing strategic initiatives, planning via the Plan Builder software, the Facilities Master Plan and the Educational Master Plan. The Facilities and Educational master plans are both moving through the consultation processes prior to adoption by Special Trustee Thomas Henry for the Compton Community College District and the El Camino Community College District Board of Trustees, respectively. These components are important for both ECC Compton Center and the CCCD to move forward toward eventual independence from FCMAT and with the Accreditation Commission.

Planning summit participants (including students, faculty, staff and administrators) also received information on ECC Compton Center's current demographics and student success and retention reports. This information will be used in planning programs for the specific departments or areas to better serve students and to reach out to future students.

In-depth breakout sessions had participants discussing how institutional dialog currently takes place related to planning and budgeting, and ways to improve that dialog. They also discussed how plan and program review recommendations are communicated, how to get students more involved in the planning process, and how communication and processes can be improved. The final breakout session examined how the goals for ECC Compton Center and the Compton Community College District could be revised and updated.

ECC Compton Center is using the planning model developed by El Camino College for institutional effectiveness to ensure that the cycle is maintained in all programs. For planning purposes, ECC Compton Center is organized into programs, units, and areas.

The process begins with data collection and analysis, usually the result of recommendations arising from program review and updates, to form the basis of an annual program plan. Plans that do not require funding may be implemented at the program level. When additional funding or staffing is necessary, extensive dialogue occurs at the program level, with highest ranked items being forwarded to the unit level. Further dialogue at the unit level leads to prioritized requests which are then forwarded to the area vice president for institutional prioritization and possible funding.

At ECC Compton Center, once the area plans are completed, each area prioritizes its funding requests and identifies ongoing and one-time needs. The prioritized recommendations are presented to ECC Compton Center's Planning and Budgeting Committee for use in the development of the budget.

Report finds City College of San Francisco riddled with problems

By Lee Romney, Los Angeles Times

July 15, 2012, 9:08 p.m.

SAN FRANCISCO — The report this month from the accreditation commission was scathing.

It found that City College of San Francisco — at 90,000 students, the largest community college in the state and one of the largest in the nation — was riddled with problems, including paltry financial reserves, a dearth of leadership and a slow-moving style of democratic governance.

The 77-year-old school now must make a case for continuing to exist and craft a closure plan in case the onerous task of reform fails.

The commission's "show cause" order is the gravest step short of withdrawal of accreditation. Currently, two of California's 111 other community colleges — College of the Redwoods and Cuesta College — are similarly threatened. In the last decade, only Compton College saw its accreditation revoked, while three other schools emerged from "show cause" status to thrive again.

But rather than spur hopelessness, the news that landed like a bomb here has rallied passionate support to save what Bouchra Simmons, a Moroccan-born single mother working toward a business certificate, called "the school of possibilities in life."

City officials, labor leaders and hundreds of current and former students, faculty and staff insist that the nine-campus college must emerge from crisis without compromising its values of accessibility and affordability, rare commodities in an era of shrinking public funding.

"We are all craving education, to learn, to progress," said Simmons, the newly elected president of student government at the downtown campus. "This school has to be here for everybody who needs it."

Meanwhile, City College trustees and its interim chancellor have vowed to address the daunting concerns of the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges.

"We are taking responsibility for where we are," Chancellor Pamila Fisher told a special board meeting last week. "We have committed ourselves to doing whatever it takes."

Said Lawrence Wong, a trustee who graduated from the institution and whose 92-year-old mother matriculated two years ago: "There is no way that any of us who have been

helped and touched and in some ways ennobled by City College will allow it to close." But, he added, "we are going to have to take a hard look at matching our programs to our resources."

Made up largely of community college administrators, the commission reviews each school every six years.

Its report on City College noted that the school had maintained its mission to provide broad educational access through three years of deficit spending, causing its reserves to dwindle dangerously low. Meanwhile, 92% of its budget had been channeled to salaries and benefits — the state average is 85% — leaving little money to maintain facilities or improve services.

Over the years, the college had reduced its administrative staff positions to 39, relegating many decision-making powers to faculty and staff through a process called "shared governance." Though the process was seen as democratic, the accreditors said that "the lack of self-examination and failure to react [quickly] to ongoing reduced funding has caused the institution to reach a financial breaking point."

The commission noted that City College has also failed to set and measure achievement goals for its courses and other programs, a requirement of accreditation. School officials must complete their "show cause" and closure reports by March 15, but an early report showing "meaningful progress" is due within 100 days.

According to John Rizzo, president of the board of trustees, City College has lost \$40 million in state funding over the last four years. And because of shrinking offerings, students were turned away from classes they wanted more than 10,000 times in the 2011-12 academic year.

City College faculty and staff already have begun the reform effort, agreeing to salary cuts, benefit reductions and furlough days. Trustees have voted to increase the school's mandatory reserves and have changed its approach to capital projects, which for years have come in late and over budget.

In addition, the district has placed a proposed parcel tax on San Francisco's November ballot that, if approved, would bring in \$14 million annually.

In meetings this week, students and some faculty asserted that as the college changes, it should not compromise on its commitment to keep as many classes open as possible.

"The reason we're [facing loss of accreditation] is not because our mission to serve all students is too big," art student Carmen Melendez, 49, told trustees. "It's because our resources are not enough. I do not understand why we cannot express openly that accessibility and affordability are not negotiable."

Civic leaders also are pressing for the school to maintain its ideals.

A "terrible outcome" of the accreditation report, local Democratic Party activist Rafael Mandelman told a cheering crowd, would be "if they succeeded in convincing us that we should become less San Franciscan."

But, said Barbara Beno, president of the accreditation commission, "when you're running an organization, you have to be sensitive to how you can spend your money to achieve your mission."

Student success, she said, matters more than merely "getting in the door."

California Community Colleges Chancellor Jack Scott said the school would have to make hard choices, including potentially closing some of its sites.

He has offered to meet with the board and said that in addition to funding a state fiscal crisis team now working with City College, his office could soon appoint a "special trustee" with fiscal skills.

"It's a very serious situation," Scott said, adding that he "deplored" the state's cuts of 12% over the last three years to all community colleges.

"But if your income were reduced, you'd probably reduce your expenditures," Scott said. "It's a little bit like everything else — it's why I don't drive a Cadillac."

Dan Walters: State insolvent as bankrupt cities

By Dan Walters

Posted: 07/14/2012 08:51:07 PM PDT

So far this summer, three California cities have moved toward bankruptcy and several others are distressed enough that the b-word has left the lips of their elected and appointed officials - including those in the two largest, Los Angeles and San Diego.

With the exception of tiny Mammoth Lakes, which sought bankruptcy protection after losing a lawsuit, the conditions of California's financially distressed cities are remarkably similar.

Elected leaders and appointed managers succumbed to hubris and political pressure, particularly from their employee unions. They committed their cities to spending on employee salaries and fringe benefits, especially pensions and health care, and civic improvements that could not be sustained when the housing bubble burst and revenue declined.

As their gaps between income and outgo widened, officials covered them with questionable transfers, bookkeeping gimmicks, loans and lies - hoping against hope that the downturn would be brief and revenue would once again surge and bail them out.

"For the last 16 years, the budget prepared for the council showed the city was in the black. The mayor and the council were not given accurate information," San Bernardino City Attorney James Penman told his council members the other night before they voted to join Mammoth Lakes and Stockton in bankruptcy court.

San Bernardino thus becomes the second-largest city in American history to pursue bankruptcy - second only to Stockton.

Officials in Stockton, San Bernardino and other upside-down California cities should bear the onus of their irresponsible decision-making. Their first responsibility was to protect the financial integrity of their cities but they allowed other considerations, mostly political, to get the best of them.

That said, what's happened at the municipal level is no worse than what's happened to state government for similar reasons.

For years, governors and legislators have squandered brief revenue windfalls on permanent spending and tax cuts, passed budgets based on whimsy, ignored liabilities (especially pensions and retiree health care), and covered resulting deficits with ever-more-elaborate accounting tricks and borrowing.

Democrat Jerry Brown ran for governor on a promise to straighten out the state's tangled finances - just as Republican predecessor Arnold Schwarzenegger had pledged.

But Brown has signed two budgets based on fingers-crossed revenue assumptions and gimmicks. The first one failed totally and the second hinges on voter approval of new taxes that have no better than a 50-50 chance of being passed.

There's no provision in federal bankruptcy law for states, nor should there be.

But make no mistake - at this moment, California is every bit as insolvent as the cities that are trooping to bankruptcy court.

Tenure on the Line at Wayne State

Inside Higher Ed

July 23, 2012 - 3:00am

By

Scott Jaschik

The faculty union at Wayne State University says that proposals made by the administration last week would effectively eliminate tenure protections any time the university wanted to make budgetary shifts.

Under the proposal, "they can get rid of anyone. They admitted at the bargaining table that tenure confers no special status in terms of invoking the procedure for dismissal," said Charles Parrish, president of the faculty union, which is affiliated with the American Association of University Professors and the American Federation of Teachers.

Parrish said in an interview that negotiators were shocked that the proposal was made during contract negotiations, and were afraid that the faculty and academic staff members they represent might not appreciate that the university had actually proposed changing tenure protections. So the union sent the administration proposal (verbatim) to all of its members, and provided a copy to Inside Higher Ed. The proposal does in fact propose to eliminate the university's current tenure protections, which are fairly standard. Currently, tenured faculty members would only be dismissed for serious misconduct or if the university were in a dire financial crisis.

The administration's proposed new criteria for dismissing faculty members -- including those with tenure -- include traditional reasons, but also "the substantial curtailment or discontinuance of a program which removes any reasonable opportunity for using a faculty member's services" and "financially based reduction in force." The combination of these reasons, faculty leaders say, effectively eliminates the traditional protections of tenure, which don't allow colleges that are not facing financial disaster to disregard tenure status in eliminating positions.

The union has also distributed summaries of negotiations -- some of which have been posted online -- in which James Greene, the chief negotiator for the university, is quoted as answering a question about whether the proposal would eliminate tenure by saying "It would have that effect, yes."

Margaret Winters, associate provost for academic personnel at Wayne State and another member of the university's negotiating team, confirmed in an interview Sunday both the proposal and the quote, but she said that the former did not represent an attack on tenure and that the latter was taken out of context. "Our intent has never been to do away with tenure," said Winters. "I'm proud to be a faculty member with tenure."

At the same time, she said that the university needs "flexibility" if it is going to continue to "focus on students" in times of tight budgets. Wayne State, like other Michigan universities, has experienced repeated state budget cuts and also strong pressure to minimize tuition increases. Financial exigency is "a very high bar," she said. The idea that tenured faculty members (who are doing their jobs well) could be terminated only in cases of financial exigency is "a luxury of the past," she said.

At the same time, Winters said that whenever programs have been eliminated up until now, the administration has always worked hard to find appropriate spots for those whose jobs are eliminated. That philosophy wouldn't change, she said, even if the contract protection for tenured faculty members were to be eliminated.

The 'Financial Exigency' Standard

The idea that only "financial exigency" could justify layoffs of tenured faculty members (not for cause) comes from the AAUP, and has been widely respected until the economic downturn that started in the fall of 2008. The AAUP defines financial exigency as a state so dire that it "threatens the survival of the institution as a whole." In theory (and this has happened in the past) an institution's board would declare exigency. Then layoffs might include tenure faculty jobs that would be protected until exigency was declared.

In the current downturn, however, some institutions have moved to layoffs of tenured faculty members without declaring exigency while other institutions have moved to change layoff rules so that financial exigency need not be declared to eliminate tenured faculty jobs. The eight-campus University of Louisiana System did this last year, and this is essentially what Wayne State is trying to do now. Many public university leaders have said that it is hard to meet the "survival at risk" test of financial exigency because so many states seem willing to impose budget cuts that do terrible damage to institutional missions, while not actually putting them at risk of shutting down.

Many of the universities that have ignored the financial exigency standards are not unionized. A push to eliminate tenured faculty positions at a unionized campus illustrates the way provisions to protect tenured faculty members can make all the difference in who loses a job. An arbitrator blocked Florida State University in 2010 from eliminating the jobs of 21 tenured faculty members. The institution cited budget cuts but did not declare financial exigency and the Florida State union successfully argued that its contract prevented the layoffs of most of the tenured professors. (Notably, the arbitrator did not find fault with most of the layoffs at Florida State of non-tenured faculty members.)

While the Florida State dispute differs in some ways from the Wayne State dispute (in both cases more is in play than layoff provisions), the Wayne State administration's proposal -- in a contract there -- would not block layoffs like those proposed at Florida State. The current language likely would block such layoffs.

The university has also proposed other changes in tenure, including regular reviews that would be similar to what is called "post-tenure review" at other institutions. (Winters, the

associate provost, said the administration was not using that phrase due to the emotions it elicits.) Much of the anger from faculty members comes from the lowering of the bar for laying off tenured faculty members who are doing well, but in programs that the university doesn't want to keep. Union leaders say that they believe Wayne State -- if faculty members approved the proposal -- would be the first research university where protections against the layoffs of tenured faculty members were negotiated away. And union leaders said that they are determined not to do that.

'Frontal Attack on Tenure'

Michael McIntyre, a professor of law at Wayne State who is in the Academic Senate and who formerly was a chief negotiator for the faculty union, prepared an analysis of the administration's proposal, which he called "a frontal attack on tenure."

In his analysis, he noted that "the administration already has the power to fire faculty and academic staff in the face of an economic emergency. What it apparently wants is the authority to fire people if it chooses to spend money to advance some agenda that it considers more important than retaining faculty and academic staff, even if these people are performing their jobs at least adequately and perhaps very well or even brilliantly."

McIntyre went on to say that making it easy for administrators to eliminate departments and tenured faculty positions at will is an idea that challenges the values of higher education. "In fact, the administration's attack on tenure is an attack on the idea of a university, as that idea has been developed and nurtured over hundreds of years. The attack represents an attempt to convert the university from an institution in which the teachers and researchers are central to a university based on a corporate model where administrators run all aspects of the institution and the faculty are mere employees," he wrote. "This proposal will be viewed by the outside world as an assault on the traditional idea of a university, and the response from the academic community within and without the university will be commensurate with the gravity of that assault."

Tenure protections are strong, he wrote, but the university grants tenure only to those who go through multiple rounds of evaluations. "It might be noted, for example, that a tenured faculty member ... proved his or her worth as a scholar by going through a rigorous tenure process, getting a two-thirds vote of a series of sequential committees, culminating in the grant of tenure by the President and the Board of Governors."

If the administration's proposal is adopted, or even if word spreads that the administration wants this concept of tenure, McIntyre predicted, the most prominent faculty members would look for positions elsewhere, and top scholars would hesitate to take positions at the university. McIntyre wrote: "The administration, plain and simple, has made a proposal that would spell the end of the university's pretensions as a major research institution. The proposal itself will do significant harm to the university once its terms are well publicized. The academic community does not look kindly on universities that tear at the edges of the basic guarantee of tenure. A frontal attack on tenure, if successful, is a death sentence for any serious research university."

'The Good of the Students'

Winters, the associate provost, said that the concerns being raised by faculty members were part of the negotiating process, and that the degree of concern might be overstated. "The tone at the [bargaining] table is nowhere as shrill as the tone you get from reading the pieces sent out by the AAUP-AFT."

The university's proposals about faculty members (tenured or not) are based on the idea that "we want the good of the students" and "the students are not served by anything but uniformly high level of performance." In an era when "we are interested in accountability, we believe that tenure does not mean that you never get to be evaluated." And similarly, she said, that doesn't mean tenure creates "immunity" if programs need to be eliminated. These principles, she said, "all feed together for the quality of Wayne State."

Winters stressed that she thought the quality of education at Wayne State was very high, and that the quality of the faculty was very high. But she said that the reality is that with regard to sources of funds for Wayne State, "there is not happy light at the end of the tunnel," so reviews of programs need to continue if the university is going to offer the best range of options to students.

"This is about the ability to change things in response to the times," she said. "I'll give an example from a mythical department where they may have nine different degree programs, and one has been under-enrolled for a long time, and it has two faculty members," she said. "We want to be able to close a program, and find another place for them. But if necessary we want to close down a program that is no longer viable."

Three Strikes in California

Inside Higher Ed

July 19, 2012 - 3:00am

By

Paul Fain

City College of San Francisco isn't the only California community college facing a full-on accreditation crisis. College of the Redwoods and Cuesta College also must fix a list of problems identified by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges to keep their accreditation and avoid the nightmare scenario of being shut down.

The two smaller colleges are further along in the process, and will learn their fate next January, about six months before CCSF does. Closure probably isn't feasible at any of the colleges, although its mere mention as a possibility has made many students and faculty members nervous, for good reason.

More likely outcomes are that another community college would take over operations at the troubled institutions, or that a "special trustee" would step in to help run them. Of course, one or all of the community colleges could get a clean bill of health from the accreditor, although they have their work cut out to make that happen.

Jack Scott, chancellor of the state's two-year-college system, raised the possibility of special trustees in an interview. They can be invited in by a college's board of trustees, he said, or be sent in by the state when a college goes bankrupt or loses its accreditation -- a situation where the "board has no authority."

The special trustee can have a range of powers, said Scott. They might serve more of an advisory role, or can assume much of a board's responsibilities. The trustee can also strengthen a college's hand in "getting to financial stability" by making unpopular program cuts.

While students and staff members at the colleges fret over what happens next, the commission, part of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, issued a reminder that misleading statements by college representatives about the accreditation process are a no-no.

In a recent news release, the commission challenged assertions, made by a faculty member at CCSF on a local radio show, that questions about teaching were not part of the college's accreditation woes.

The particular faculty comment that seemed to stick in the commission's craw was from Alisa Messer, an English instructor at City College and president of the local chapter of the American Federation of Teachers, who blamed funding cuts for the college's accreditation problems, and said: "We're doing an amazing job of working with students. That's not the question here."

In fact, the commission cited longstanding problems with instructional planning, academic program review, the tracking of student learning outcomes and faculty evaluations. And statements like Messer's could cause misunderstanding about the accreditation process, according to the commission. Messer, however, also said on the radio show that the college faces many challenges and that it takes the commission's report seriously.

"Accreditation exists to provide assurance to the public" that a college is operating properly, Barbara A. Beno, the commission's president, said in an interview. "That's why the commission issued a press release, just to get the facts out there."

As a result of the commission's public rebuke, faculty members might be less willing to criticize the process.

The tussle isn't the first between California's community colleges and the accreditor. A few years ago those tensions boiled over with charges by many in the system that the commission had been overly harsh in issuing public warnings to some community colleges. But those feuds have largely been resolved, Scott said.

Karen Saginor, a librarian at City College of San Francisco and president of the college's Academic Senate chapter, said faculty members had received the message from the commission and were working with CCSF's leaders to fix problems at the college.

"We take the recommendations of the accrediting agency very seriously," Saginor said. "Whatever they want us to do, we will do."

CCSF's interim chancellor, Pamila Fisher, struck similar notes in a written statement last week. She also promised that the college's students would not be locked out next year.

"We are NOT closing. We are not going to let that happen," Fisher said. "City College is far too important to San Francisco and to our students."

Cutting Back

The stakes are particularly high at CCSF, which enrolls 90,000 students and is California's largest college. As a result, it would be difficult for any other institution to take over the college's operations, as El Camino Community College did in 2005 for Compton Community College, when Compton lost its accreditation. That could be a possibility for Redwoods and Cuesta, although Redwoods is relatively isolated in rural Humboldt County, and far from the reach of other community colleges.

The commission's criticisms of the three colleges vary widely, and reports from teams that visited the colleges are complex. But similar threads emerge. Most of all, the colleges have struggled to cope with budget cuts, which have exposed existing management problems. And all three have had recent leadership turnover.

California's 112 colleges have absorbed deep budget cuts in recent years, and have been forced to turn away almost 300,000 students. Total enrollment is down to 2.6 million from 2.89 million, system officials said.

The commission's "show cause" reports are evidence that some of the colleges have not been able to properly adjust to the fiscal crisis.

"It is tough in tough times," Scott said.

Cuesta, for example, must improve its financial planning to "ensure sufficient funding levels for ongoing operations," according to the commission's February report. The commission is concerned about the financial stability of the college, which has been running deficits -- \$1.3 million last year.

Cuesta, which is located in San Luis Obispo, enrolls about 12,000 students. Other problem areas the commission identified at Cuesta were strategic planning and the technology infrastructure.

College officials said in February that they would work with the commission to meet its recommendations. But they also criticized the accreditor's findings, saying that the college had made needed improvements when it was put on probation, in 2010, such as the hiring of key administrators, and the creation of a technology plan.

"I am extremely disappointed with the commission's actions," Gil Stork, Cuesta's president, said in a written statement at the time. The college did not respond to a request for comment.

Redwoods, which enrolls 6,900 students, is working on seven recommendations by the commission. Like CCSF, the college has failed to adequately track and assess student learning, according to the report. Other recommendations are aimed at better record keeping and strategic planning. On the whole, the site visit team found that the college is headed in the right direction.

"College of the Redwoods is in transition to a new era that would address each and every one of these issues," according to the team's report.

A New Focus?

Perhaps the most striking problem the commission identified at CCSF was a hard-to-believe number of administrators. Only 39 staff members oversee the college, which employs more than 1,800 faculty members to teach 90,000 students.

The commission found that CCSF had dipped dangerously into its financial reserves. And the dearth of managers may have contributed to deficit spending, Scott said.

“You want to be lean,” Scott said, but “you can’t really operate an institution well if you have an insufficient number of administrators.”

The ratio of administrators is not quite as bad as it looks, however, although CCSF is far from top-heavy.

Department chairs do not count as administrators, said Saginor, although they play administrative roles. Also missing in the top end of the equation are classified managers, meaning administrators of non-faculty divisions, she said.

The college has long been focused on serving as many students as possible, with a deep commitment to equity and access, even compared to other California community colleges. (It is in San Francisco, after all.) But Saginor acknowledged that the college’s priorities were being reconsidered, as painful as that might be.

If the college does invite in a special trustee, the commission might not decide there is “good cause” to extend the timeline for correcting problems at the college, said Beno. There is a perception that a “special trustee guarantees more time. It does not,” she said.

The commission must determine that the special trustee is getting the job done for that to happen. However, she said special trustees are generally helpful.

Scott met this week with the president of the CCSF’s Board of Trustees, John Rizzo. He said he was optimistic that the board was committed to making “strong reforms” and that CCSF was already making progress.

Even so, the crisis has been dramatic, shocking many in a community college system that has grown accustomed to calamity.

“This has been a very harsh wake-up call,” Scott said.

Colleges led faulty search for inspector

19 Jul 2012

By Carla Rivera carla.rivera@latimes.com

A review finds numerous flaws in community college district's procedures.

A new, independent review of the Los Angeles Community College District's \$6-billion campus construction program found a number of flaws in the process for selecting an inspector general to oversee the project, concluding that the eventual winner lacked essential experience and qualifications.

In the review released Wednesday, Los Angeles City Controller Wendy Greuel found that the original proposal for bids was vague on the functions and requirements for the office of the inspector general. The district initially did not specify, for example, that bidders would need to fill a full-time position of inspector general rather than only supplying support staff.

The first round of interviews was poorly conducted, the review found, and potential conflicts of interest were not checked.

For example, it was not disclosed that the president of the firm ultimately selected, Policy Masters Inc., had previously worked for Gateway Science & Engineering Inc., which had contracted with the district on the rebuilding project.

(The district had accused Gateway of billing improprieties, which the company denied, and in April the two sides reached an agreement under which the Pasadena firm will continue to supervise the \$450-million building program at Los Angeles Mission College.)

Greuel's report also found that the district's own review panel lacked adequate instructions on how to evaluate proposals and that a separate interview panel had apparently redefined the original role of the inspector general.

"The district should use this audit as a road map of the flaws we identified to look at existing contracts and the RFP [request for proposal] process to ensure they have tightened up controls and to ensure there are no questions about the integrity of the process," Greuel said in an interview.

Many of the findings mirrored those in an August 2011 report by State Controller John Chiang, which cited "possible malfeasance" in the district's selection of an inspector general, an office set up to police allegations of waste and mismanagement in the construction program. That report led the district's board of trustees to seek a review by Greuel.

Those allegations were detailed by The Times last year in a six-part series. The articles uncovered cost overruns, delays and shoddy workmanship in the ambitious project to modernize the district's nine aging campuses using bond money approved by voters in 2001, 2003 and 2008. About half the construction funds have been spent.

The L.A. County district attorney's office is looking into the hiring of the inspector general, officials said.

The college district said it has undertaken a series of reforms, including imposing a moratorium on new projects, centralizing management and setting new audit procedures. Officials said the new report, prepared by Harvey M. Rose Associates, a San Francisco consulting firm, may prompt further actions.

"The process used to hire the inspector general was problematic at best and we have taken numerous steps to improve our overall RFP process," Chancellor Daniel LaVista said. "We will review the controller's recommended areas for improvement and take steps to implement them where we have not done so already."

Trustee Miguel Santiago said those steps might include submitting a new proposal request.

"I have serious concerns with some of the issues I've read in the audit and no responsible option is going to be off the table," Santiago said.

Christine E. Marez, the head of Policy Masters and the current inspector general, said that, as a bidder, she was unaware of the deficiencies in the process. She said that although her firm was new, it had experienced staff who followed all the guidelines.

Marez said that since taking the position, many of the problems outlined by Greuel have been corrected and that she has overseen several other reforms that have saved the district millions of dollars.

"I work for the board and will continue to provide a level of integrity and accountability that I have stood for my entire career," Marez said.

Forks in the Road

Inside Higher Ed

July 24, 2012

By Paul Fain

Large numbers of students at four-year institutions are transferring to community colleges, according to a new study from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Most of them don't come back, but that isn't always a bad thing.

Roughly 14 percent of first-time students who enrolled at a four-year institution in the fall of 2005 had transferred to a community college by 2011, the study found -- excluding students who merely took summer classes at a community college.

Of the transfer group, about 17 percent eventually returned to their original four-year institution. A larger group, about 28 percent, went on to a different four-year. The other 55 percent either stuck it out at community colleges or dropped out, with that group split right down the middle.

The research sheds light on the “reverse transfer” pathway for students, which may be growing in popularity. There are many reasons students make the jump to a community college from a four-year institution, including some students' academic and financial struggles. But contrary to conventional wisdom that the two-year path is inferior, reverse transfer can benefit students.

“While reverse transfer may not be the best indicator for students aiming to complete a bachelor's degree, it is clearly a positive indicator for students transitioning to a more direct route to a shorter degree completion,” the report said. It is also “certainly preferable to withdrawing from a four-year institution and dropping out of higher education altogether.”

For example, the research suggests that some students leave their four-year colleges because of “fit,” and then later transfer to a different four-year college after regaining their academic footing at a community college, said Doug Shapiro, executive research director at the center and one of the study's co-authors.

“Students are using community colleges to serve all kinds of needs,” Shapiro said.

Those needs may include transferring to a two-year college to get a more practical degree for a tight job market. (This may even apply to graduates of four-year institutions, as the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel recently reported.) Or, in some cases, students take classes at community colleges to accelerate their path to a bachelor's degree.

To wit, students who enroll in summer classes at a community college are more likely to earn a degree from their four-institution than those who don't. About 78 percent of students at four-year institutions who enrolled in a community college for a summer session and then returned to their original institution successfully earned a degree, according to the report, substantially outpacing the 58 percent graduation rate of those who never attended a community college.

"It clearly is a very effective strategy," said Shapiro.

Giving Credit to Community Colleges

Of course, not all the news is good. After six years, two-thirds of reverse transfer students neither had a credential from a four-year college nor were enrolled at one, according to the study. And of the roughly 55 percent of reverse transfer students who do not return to the four-year sector, about half dropped out. (The rest either earned a credential from a community college or were still enrolled at one.)

The National Student Clearinghouse is a nonprofit that offers verification and research services to participating colleges, which voluntarily hand over their enrollment and degree information. Its members account for 96 percent of the nation's college students.

As a result, the center was able to track 1.3 million students who enrolled at four-year institutions in 2005 -- virtually all of the total new enrollment for that year -- and see where those students went over the next six years.

The resulting data is somewhat squishy, however, and is more of a broad snapshot of enrollment and transfer trends. That's because, as Shapiro acknowledges, the study was not able to get a great amount of detail on the enrollment status of students. For example, determining the definition of "transfer" status can be difficult, particularly for community college students, who tend to bounce around.

More sophisticated, longitudinal studies use smaller data sets from the National Center for Education Statistics. In particular, Clifford Adelman, a senior associate with the Institute for Higher Education Policy, has conducted such research.

However, the center's new study gives a national glimpse of the reverse transfer trend. It also builds on a recent study from the center that found increasing mobility among students.

Shapiro hopes the new report will help policy makers and others see the broad role community colleges play. Too often, he said, community colleges are taken to task for relatively low graduation rates without getting credit for serving students along complex transfer pathways.

The study could also help four-year institutions determine when it makes sense to try to bring back students who have transferred out to community colleges. Don't wait too long,

Shapiro said, noting that students are much more likely to return to four-year institutions after a short stint at community colleges.

“The likelihood of returning to the original institution drops off pretty substantially after one semester,” he said.

College Degrees Designed by the Numbers

The Chronicle of Higher Education

July 18, 2012

By Marc Parry

Campuses are places of intuition and serendipity: A professor senses confusion on a student's face and repeats his point; a student majors in psychology after a roommate takes a course; two freshmen meet on the quad and eventually become husband and wife.

Now imagine hard data substituting for happenstance.

As Katye Allisone, a freshman at Arizona State University, hunkers down in a computer lab for an 8:35 a.m. math class, the Web-based course watches her back. Answers, scores, pace, click paths—it hoovers up information, like Google. But rather than personalizing search results, data shape Ms. Allisone's class according to her understanding of the material.

With 72,000 students, Arizona State is both the country's largest public university and a hotbed of data-driven experiments. One core effort is a degree-monitoring system that keeps tabs on how students are doing in their majors. Stray off-course and you may have to switch fields.

And while not exactly matchmaking, Arizona State takes an interest in students' social lives, too. Its Facebook app mines profiles to suggest friends. One classmate has eight things in common with Ms. Allisone, who "likes" education, photography, and tattoos. Researchers are even trying to figure out social ties based on anonymized data culled from swipes of ID cards around the Tempe campus.

This is college life, quantified.

Data mining hinges on one reality about life on the Web: What you do there leaves behind a trail of digital bread crumbs. Companies scoop them up to tailor services, like the matchmaking of eHarmony or the book recommendations of Amazon. Now colleges, eager to get students out the door more efficiently, are awakening to the opportunities of so-called Big Data.

The new breed of software can predict how well students will do before they even set foot in the classroom. It recommends courses, Netflix-style, based on students' academic records.

Data diggers hope to improve an education system in which professors often fly blind. That's a particular problem in introductory-level courses, says Carol A. Twigg, president of the National Center for Academic Transformation. "The typical class, the professor rattles on in front of the class," she says. "They give a midterm exam. Half the kids fail. Half the kids drop out. And they have no idea what's going on with their students."

As more of this technology comes online, it raises new tensions. What role does a professor play when an algorithm recommends the next lesson? If colleges can predict failure, should they steer students away from challenges? When paths are so tailored, do campuses cease to be places of exploration?

"We don't want to turn into just eHarmony," says Michael Zimmer, an assistant professor in the School of Information Studies at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, where he studies the ethical dimensions of new technology. "I'm worried that we're taking both the richness and the serendipitous aspect of courses and professors and majors—and all the things that are supposed to be university life—and instead translating it into 18 variables that spit out, 'This is your best fit. So go over here.'"

Alert! You Are Off-Track

Ever since childhood, Rikki Eriven has felt certain of the career that would fit her best: working with animals. Specifically, large animals. The soft-spoken freshman smiles as she recalls the episode of Animal Planet that kindled this interest, the one about zoo specialists who treat rhinos, hippos, and giraffes. So when Ms. Eriven arrived at Arizona State last fall, she put her plan in motion by picking biological sciences as her major.

But things didn't go according to plan. She felt overwhelmed. She dropped a class. She did poorly in biology (after experiencing problems, she says, with the clicker device used to answer multiple-choice questions in class). Ms. Eriven began seeing ominous alerts in her e-mail inbox and online student portal. "Off-track," they warned. "It told me that I had to seek eAdvising," she says. "And I was, like, eAdvising?"

Yes, eAdvising. Universities see such technology as one answer to a big challenge. On average, only 31 percent of students at public colleges earn their bachelor's degrees within four years, and 56 percent graduate within six years. Such statistics have come under greater scrutiny as parents and politicians demand accountability from colleges. Tennessee, for example, doles out higher-education dollars in part by measuring how effective an institution is at graduating students.

Yet some students show up with ambitions that bear no relation to their skills. Or parents push them into majors that don't interest them. Or they feel like shoppers in a cereal aisle, confounded by the choices.

At Arizona State, which has more than 250 majors, the old system let students explore without much structure. A student could major in engineering to please his parents, only to pack his schedule with "Chinese Thought" and music, says Elizabeth D. Capaldi, the provost. No longer. Technology has redrawn the road map.

Under Arizona State's eAdvisor system—in use since 2008-9 and based on a similar effort at the University of Florida—students must pick a major in their freshman year and follow a plan that lays out when to take key courses. (Students can still study broadly, by choosing from five "exploratory" majors, like "arts and humanities" or "science and engineering," and staying in them for 45 credits.) If they fail to sign up for a key course

or do well enough, the computer cracks a whip, marking them "off-track." A student who wanders off-track for two semesters in a row may have to change majors.

If that sounds harsh, there's a rationale: One way to ensure that students will reach the finish line is to quickly figure out if they've selected a suitable track. So the Arizona State system front-loads key courses. For example, to succeed in psychology, a student must perform well in statistics.

"Kids who major in psych put that off, because they don't want to take statistics," Ms. Capaldi says. "They want to know, Does their boyfriend love them? Are they nuts? They take all those courses, then they hit statistics and they say, 'Oh, God, I can't do this. I can't do experimental design.' And so they're in the wrong major. By putting those courses first, you can see if a student is going to succeed in that major early."

Arizona State's retention rate rose to 84 percent from 77 percent in recent years, a change that the provost credits largely to eAdvisor.

For students who run off-track, the outcome can sting. Ms. Eriven was shocked to learn that she would have to change her major after the system flagged her. She cried, called her mother, and recalibrated her plans. In a meeting with an adviser, she described her interests. She likes science. She is family-oriented, interested in music, and good at writing. The adviser suggested a few possible majors, including psychology, family and human development, and creative writing.

Writing. It would involve only a couple of classes each semester. She could still take science and, she hoped, switch back to biology. So that's what she chose. "I didn't really have, like, a backup plan," Ms. Eriven says.

But what if you could rewind that story and shape a student's path before she reached such a crossroads?

You Will Pass (or Not)

When Adam Lange began working full time at Rio Salado College, in 2008, he was still an undergraduate at nearby Arizona State, a 22-year-old computer-science major with a budding obsession with data. Over time, that obsession would shape the learning experience for thousands of students—and drive his fiancée bonkers.

Mr. Lange's idea of fun is converting his home into a surveillance lab. He outfitted his cat, Sammy, who has an eating disorder, with a device that is read by a scanner every time the cat cranes his neck over the bowl. Mr. Lange monitors the logs and feeds Sammy a treat if he hasn't eaten. He also rigged a Webcam next to the fish tank, logging the coordinates of his Betta fish several times a second to find out what paths it commonly takes and how far it travels (90 feet in one hour!).

At Rio Salado, a community college with about 70,000 students, 43,000 of them online, Mr. Lange got excited about the behavioral data they leave behind: the vast wake of

clicks captured by software that runs Web courses. Records of when they logged in, opened a syllabus, turned in homework—all just sitting there. Could you mine the data to model patterns of students who succeeded in the past? Use the analysis to identify current ones likely to fail? And then help them? Many educators are now asking similar questions.

Mr. Lange and his colleagues had found that by the eighth day of class, they could predict, with 70-percent accuracy, whether a student would score a C or better. Mr. Lange built a system, rolled out in 2009, that sent professors frequently updated alerts about how well each student was predicted to do, based on course performance and online behavior.

To Mr. Lange, the underlying math doesn't differ much from what he might deploy in his fish espionage. Say the Betta makes two consecutive movements side to side and then 85 percent of the time swims upward. In the future, if the fish moves left and then right, Mr. Lange can say with confidence that it will then swim up. Similarly, Rio Salado knows from its database that students who hand in late assignments and don't log in frequently often fail or withdraw from a course. So the software is more likely to throw up a red flag for current students with those characteristics.

"There's a predictability about the fish," says Mr. Lange, now 26 and working for Ellucian, a higher-education-software company. "The same concept applies to students."

The software can help a professor identify students who may need extra assistance. But Rio Salado's experiments with more-formal intervention strategies have yielded mixed results. And in a cautionary tale about technical glitches, the college began sharing grade predictions with students last summer, hoping to encourage those lagging behind to step up, but had to shut the alerts down in the spring. Course revisions had skewed the calculations, and some predictions were found to be inaccurate. An internal analysis found no increase in the number of students dropping classes. An improved system is promised for the fall.

You May Also Like...

Austin Peay State University, a midsize institution about 45 minutes northwest of Nashville, takes the algorithmic approach to higher education one step further. Before students register for classes, a robot adviser assesses their profiles and nudges them to pick courses in which they're likely to succeed.

The project is the work of Tristan Denley, a programmer turned math professor turned provost. His software borrows a page from Netflix. It melds each student's transcript with thousands of past students' grades and standardized-test scores to make suggestions. When students log into the online portal, they see 10 "Course Suggestions for You," ranked on a five-star scale. For, say, a health-and-human-performance major, kinesiology might get five stars, as the next class needed for her major. Physics might also top the list, to satisfy a science requirement in the core curriculum.

Behind those recommendations is a complex algorithm, but the basics are simple enough. Degree requirements figure in the calculations. So do classes that can be used in many programs, like freshman writing. And the software bumps up courses for which a student might have a talent, by mining their records—grades, high-school grade-point average, ACT scores—and those of others who walked this path before.

"We're steering students toward the classes where they are predicted to make better grades," Mr. Denley says. The predictions, he adds, turn out accurate within about half a letter grade, on average.

The prediction process is more subtle than getting a suggestion to watch *Goodfellas* because you liked *The Godfather*. Take the hypothetical health major encouraged to take physics. The software sifts through a database of hundreds of thousands of grades other students have received. It analyzes the historical data to figure out how much weight to assign each piece of the health major's own academic record in forecasting how she will do in a particular course. Success in math is strongly predictive of success in physics, for example. So if her transcript and ACT score indicate a history of doing well in math, physics would probably be recommended over biology, though both satisfy the same core science requirement.

Mr. Denley points to a spate of recent books by behavioral economists, all with a common theme: When presented with many options and little information, people find it difficult to make wise choices. The same goes for college students trying to construct a schedule, he says. They know they must take a social-science class, but they don't know the implications of taking political science versus psychology versus economics. They choose on the basis of course descriptions or to avoid having to wake up for an 8 a.m. class on Monday. Every year, students in Tennessee lose their state scholarships because they fall a hair short of the GPA cutoff, Mr. Denley says, a financial swing that "massively changes their likelihood of graduating."

"When students do indeed take the courses that are recommended to them, they actually do substantially better," he says. And take them they do. Last fall 45 percent of classes on students' schedules were from the top-10 recommendations, and 57 percent from the top 15. Though these systems are in their infancy, the concept is taking hold. Three other Tennessee colleges have adopted Mr. Denley's software, and some institutions outside the state are developing their own spins on the idea.

Some people express concerns about deferring such important decisions to algorithms, which have already come to dictate—and limit—so much of what we see and do online. Mr. Zimmer, the Milwaukee information-studies professor, sees the value in preventing students from going down paths that may frustrate them or even cause them to quit college. But as higher education gets more efficient, he fears the loss of the unanticipated discovery.

"It's the same as if you're worried about whether or not Google or Amazon are going to present you with alternative topics, or only the topics that fit your history," he says. "We

hope the role of a university is to make sure people are exposed to diverse things and challenged."

Direction Through Data

At Arizona State, algorithms figure in course content, too. Thousands of students there now take math courses through a system that mines data on performance and behavior, building a profile of each user and delivering recommendations about what learning activity should be next. The system, created by the start-up company Knewton, has given the university a fresh way of addressing the continuous problem of students' being unprepared for college math.

It also offers a glimpse into what many more students will experience as teaching increasingly shifts from textbooks and lectures that feed the same structure of information to a class of 300, regardless of individual expertise, to machines that study users' learning patterns and adapt to them.

That excites some educators. George Siemens, a data-mining expert at the Canadian distance-learning university Athabasca, calls the traditional approach an inefficient model "that generates a fair degree of dropouts."

Knewton dismantles that model. Ms. Allisone's 8:35 a.m. class is not a lecture. Although students are supposed to show up at a fixed time, and an instructor is there to work with them, the action is on screen. Knewton allows Ms. Allisone to skip past some concepts she gets, like factors and multiples. When she struggles with inverting linear functions, the software provides more online tutoring. Two students who complete the same lesson might see different recommendations as to what to do next, based on their proficiency.

As the company develops and works with more data and content—major institutions like University of Nevada at Las Vegas are adopting its technology, as is the publishing giant Pearson—it will tailor instruction more finely. What time of day does a student best learn math? What materials and delivery styles most engage the student? Say you have the same concept explained in a video, in a textbook-like format, and in interactive Socratic steps. Knewton will associate a student's "engagement metrics" with those styles and use that to help determine the next step.

But what sounds flashy may be based, at least in part, on flawed assumptions, warns Richard E. Clark, a professor of educational psychology and technology at the University of Southern California. There is no evidence, he says, that there are "visual" learners who benefit from video over text, as Knewton's technique implies. Studies, he says, have shown that learning styles are not effective for shaping instruction.

The broader problem with data mining, as Mr. Clark sees it, is that it is seldom done right. Data analysts often make "questionable assumptions" about the meaning of keystrokes, he says. They assume, for example, that students who are spending the most time on some learning material are most interested in that content. "That assumption may

be true when people choose to watch Netflix movies but is not at all the case in many university courses where few choices are available," he says.

Meanwhile, dismantling old models leaves both professors and students adjusting to new roles.

Suzanne Galayda, an Arizona State math instructor, finds that it takes longer to penetrate the wall of computer screens and build rapport with students. In her remedial class, they start off feeling uncomfortable asking questions. But even as the software elbows her off center stage, it also helps her play her part with far more information—so much data about what students do, and when, that it sometimes surprises them.

"Students don't realize that we're watching them in these classes," she says.

Ms. Galayda can monitor their progress. In her cubicle on a recent Monday, she sees the intimacies of students' study routines, or lack of them, from the last activity they worked on to how many tries they made at each end-of-lesson quiz. For one crammer, the system registers 57 attempts on multiple quizzes in seven days. Pulling back to the big picture, a chart shows 15 students falling behind (in red) and 17 on schedule (in green).

On Wednesday, Ms. Galayda rubs her hands with satisfaction. The chart is mostly green. Mostly. When the class meets, she taps her nails on the hard drive of Carolina Beltran's computer. "You were working on it at 4 a.m.," the instructor tells the student.

"Yeah, I mean, like, I sleep. My sleeping schedule is weird," Ms. Beltran stammers.

Arizona State's initial results look promising. Of the more than 2,000 students who took the Knewton-based remedial course this past year, 75 percent completed it, up from an average of 64 percent in recent years.

In Ms. Galayda's experience, students "either love it or hate it."

Ms. Allisone raves: "I learned more in this semester than I have in a year in high school." She praises the clarity and concision of the system's instructional videos, contrasting them with the many teachers who "have issues communicating correctly."

But another freshman, a health-sciences major who requested anonymity because she did poorly for two semesters, recalls a downward slide that began when she started falling a couple of lessons behind. That scared her at first, until she talked with her peers. Some were six lessons behind. Twelve, even. How bad could two be? She didn't sweat it. As she juggled social life, work, and other classes, math fell through the cracks. She ended up having to retake the course, a case study in the danger of giving self-paced classes to freshmen.

"I like lecture better," she says. "I'm not used to teaching myself. So it was a huge adjustment."

The Social Network

These experiments are only the beginning. Colleges will very likely dig deeper into the data at their disposal, touching more and more aspects of student life. Already, some researchers are eyeing the next frontier: social life.

Research shows that social ties can influence academic success. If students are more integrated into campus life, they're more likely to stay in school. If a friend drops out, they're more likely to as well.

"If the university could model, at a high level, the social network of the college, that would be a very useful data layer," says Matthew S. Pittinsky, who co-founded Blackboard, a company that provides platforms for online classes, and later became an assistant research professor in the sociology program at Arizona State. A college might reach out to a student "who is not showing evidence of social integration," pointing out extracurricular activities and communities that might tie them more deeply to the institution, he says.

Working with computer scientists, Mr. Pittinsky started an academic research project that tiptoes toward a better understanding of social connections. The research team's raw material: anonymous logs from swipes made with Arizona State ID cards. When students use the cards, be it to buy food on campus or enter the fitness center, the transaction is recorded. The question that struck Mr. Pittinsky was whether social ties could be inferred from those trails.

Say two students swipe within 10 seconds of each other at different times of day in different contexts. Are they more likely to be friends? And can you predict attrition by pinpointing changes in how a student uses a campus? Say someone goes to Starbucks at 2 p.m. every day before a 2:15 p.m. class. Then stops. "If that happens three weeks in a row," Mr. Pittinsky says, "and we're not seeing log-ins into Blackboard, and maybe you've made a request at the registrar to have your transcript sent somewhere, there ought to be an adviser with a really big red flashing light saying, Reach out to this student."

The prospect of card-swi pe surveillance discomfits Mr. Zimmer, the Milwaukee information-studies professor. He worries that authorities might misuse location data to do things like track foreign students or organizers of a protest demonstration.

But the broader issue of privacy hangs over less Orwellian efforts to collect and monitor personal data. In his own syllabi, Mr. Zimmer includes a disclaimer disclosing what he can see via the university's online-learning platform, including "the dates and times individual students access the system, what pages a student has viewed, the duration of visits, and the IP address of the computer used to access the course Web site."

For his part, Mr. Pittinsky emphasizes that the card-swi pe research is "very focused on the ability to protect anonymity."

As for students, they've never been fond of adults meddling on Facebook, let alone getting all Big Brother with card swipes. "Creeping on us" is how Ms. Allisone, the freshman, describes the card-swi pe project. She has managed to keep one aspect of her

life—she hopes to transfer from Arizona State—from any "creeping." But that, too, may change.

Arizona State monitors requests for transcripts to be sent elsewhere, notes Ms. Capaldi, the provost. "Which," she says, "is kind of sneaky."