

Foothill-De Anza's parcel tax going down

By Diana Samuels

Daily News Staff Writer

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The Foothill-De Anza Community College District's Measure E parcel tax was on its way to receiving a failing grade Tuesday, with early election results showing it falling short of the two-thirds majority needed to pass.

As of midnight with 109 of 271 precincts reporting, 57 percent of voters favored the \$69 annual parcel tax compared to 43 percent against.

The tax was expected to raise nearly \$7 million annually for the district. College officials said they cut \$20 million from the district budget over the past two years because of state funding reductions and needed the tax revenue to meet student demand for additional classes.

In the past, parcel taxes have generally been used for K-12 school districts. In June, the San Mateo Community College District became the first community college district in California to pass a parcel tax, by a narrow margin of 67.1 percent.

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State college board to meet at El Camino

The Daily Breeze

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TORRANCE AREA

The board of directors for California's community college system will hold its regular public meeting at El Camino College today and Tuesday.

The Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges meets once per year at one of the 112 community colleges in the system, and this year the members chose El Camino. The 17-member board sets policy and provides guidance for the 72 districts and 112 colleges in the system.

In 1995, the board began its practice of holding one meeting a year at a community college campus, with the remaining meetings held in Sacramento. The visit to El Camino will be the first board meeting in the Los Angeles area for a number of years.

The meeting starts at 9:30 a.m. today in the college's Alondra Room, ending with a 5 p.m. closed session, and resuming at 10 a.m. Tuesday.

CSU transfer bill benefits El Camino students

The Daily Breeze

From staff reports
Posted: 11/08/2010

TORRANCE AREA

CSU transfer bill benefits El Camino students: El Camino College students will be among the tens of thousands of students statewide to benefit from a new streamlined process to transfer to the California State University system.

Senate Bill 1440, also known as the Student Transfer Achievement Act, was recently signed into law by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and is designed to simplify the transfer process between California's community colleges and the California State University system, while establishing a transfer degree from community colleges.

The statute goes into effect in fall 2011 and establishes a transfer associate degree for those students who have completed 60 transferable units that include general education and major preparation courses. Community college students who obtain the associate degree designated for transfer will be admitted to the CSU with junior standing.

Fees or tuition, it's too much

LA Times – Editorial

November 10, 2010

Both the UC and Cal State systems want to increase fees or tuition. The increases are threatening to price middle-class families out of California colleges.

Congratulations to the students of California State University. Finally, the \$4,000-plus they pay to attend will be called "tuition" — which is what it actually is, although for years California maintained the polite fiction that students at UC and CSU were just paying "fees," as though this was pin money to cover the cost of a campus dance.

But whatever it's called, it's been rising too fast for struggling families in a bad economy. In 2008, there were gasps as Cal State fees were raised to \$3,048 a year. Now the \$4,200 yearly tuition is expected to rise by 5% next semester and an additional 10% the following academic year, climbing close to \$5,000 — more than three times what it was a decade ago.

Meanwhile, UC President Mark Yudof on Monday released a "letter to California" calling for an 8% increase in fees — which also look and feel a lot like tuition — to more than \$11,000. This, after a wallet-emptying 32% increase last year. UC campuses also have some of the highest room-and-board prices of any colleges, public or private, in the nation, which are charged in addition to fees. UC Berkeley, for example, is the second-highest, according to a recent report by the College Board.

The increases would be more understandable if the two university systems were as poorly funded this year as almost every other state program, including K-12 schools. But after stinging cuts last year, both systems were the recipients of largesse in the most recent budget: \$260 million for Cal State and about \$265 million for UC. In addition, both received one-time federal stimulus funds. Neither system was made financially whole, but nothing is whole about state services in the current economic climate.

Both university systems plan to add financial aid for more students, which is of little help to struggling middle-class families. They're the ones who'll pay for the increased financial aid through the fee and tuition increases. UC fees have more than doubled in less than a decade. And next year, the universities cannot expect more stimulus money, so what will happen to the price of public higher education then? Costs are rising so fast that California families cannot even plan for their children's education.

Some price increases might be unavoidable, but both systems should look for further budget-paring possibilities as well. Yudof already has done the right thing by planning to centralize and

streamline UC's administrative operations, but there are smaller items the universities could consider. Does UC, for example, need to continue its policy of providing homes for high-level executives? Yudof's rented home alone costs \$11,500 a month. Although each cut would be insignificant, a series of smaller trims could partly offset budget deficits. It's also appropriate for top managers to show that they're willing to chip in for the good of students and the university systems.

Cal State's fee — sorry, tuition — increases warrant special concern. Cal State is the workhorse of the two systems, created to supply the vast majority of bachelor's degrees for the state at a cost that almost any student could afford. Yet it's where the increases have been steepest.

As painful as it is, the universities should consider reducing enrollment for a couple of years, pushing more students to start their college careers in the less-expensive community college system. And the Legislature should finally get up the nerve to impose significant fee increases — with waivers for those who cannot afford the added cost — at the community colleges, the one place in the state's higher-education system where fees are too low, by far the lowest in the nation. Middle-class families can easily afford an increase, which would fund more classes as well as fee waivers for low-income students. At a time when every penny counts, this would provide higher education for the most students at the lowest cost.

El Camino College to host meeting of the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges

The Compton Bulletin, November 10, 2010

From Staff Reports

TORRANCE—El Camino College hosted the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges on Nov. 8 and 9. The board meets once per year at one of the 112 community colleges in the system and this year the members chose El Camino College.

“We are pleased the Board of Governors selected El Camino College for 2010,” said Thomas M. Fallo, president of El Camino College. “We are delighted to host this group and look forward to introducing the members to just a few of the many outstanding students, faculty, and staff here at El Camino College.”

El Camino College especially welcomes ECC alumni and Board of Governors member Lance Izumi. A past president of the Board, Izumi attended El Camino College the summer after graduating from Gardena High School and right before he went to UCLA to study history and economics.

He also holds a master’s degree in political science from the University of California at Davis and a juris doctorate from the USC School of Law.

“I decided to take a summer typing class at El Camino College and it was one of the best courses I have taken in my whole life,” said Izumi, senior director of education studies at the Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy (PRI), a San Francisco-based public-policy think tank. “When I went to UCLA I was really confident in my skills and ready to type my term papers. And now, as a writer by profession, I would not be as accomplished without those typing skills.

“I think that my experience at El Camino College mirrors the experience of a lot of people in community colleges across California. So many people attend classes at community college — one class or a series of classes, earning a certificate or a degree. Everyone is part of the California Community Colleges system and everyone has individual stories of success about their good experiences.”

The Board of Governors sets policy and provides guidance for the 72 districts and 112 colleges in the system. The 17-member board, appointed by the governor, formally interacts with state and federal officials and other state organizations. The Board meets regularly throughout the year, usually in Sacramento. It develops and recommends policy, and reviews and comments on policies developed by other groups, locally-elected boards, and the Legislature.

In 1995, the Board of Governors began holding an annual meeting at a community college campus, with the remaining meetings held in Sacramento. The Board alternates holding its campus meeting between Northern, Southern, Bay Area, and Central Valley locations, whenever possible.

The upcoming visit to El Camino College will be the first Board meeting in the Los Angeles area for a number of years. Last year the board met at City College of San Francisco.

The Board visit will include a tour of the El Camino College campus on Monday afternoon; and a tour of ECC Compton Center on Tuesday morning.

Compton College District CEO a finalist for position at Peralta

The Compton Bulletin, November 10, 2010, Cheryl Scott

The head of Compton's Community College District is in the running to take the job of chancellor at Peralta, the Governing Board of the Peralta Community College District announced.

Current chief executive and provost, Dr. Lawrence Cox, is one of three finalists for the position, an announcement that comes at a time of speculation over whether Cox would remain in his position at the Compton Center.

Sources at the college who have spoken on condition of anonymity have said that Cox had been concerned that he had not received assurance that his contract would be renewed.

After interviewing 10 applicants for the position, the 12-member Chancellor's Selection Committee chose Cox; Dr. Edna B. Chun, vice president of human resources at Broward College in Florida.; and Dr. Ed Gould, superintendent and president of Imperial Valley College in California.

Cox was not available for comment for this article as of press time.

Two weeks ago, a delegation of Concerned Citizens of Compton led by Assemblyman Isadore Hall attended a meeting of the El Camino Community College Board of Trustees, expressing concern about the extended timeline for accreditation.

Hall, who does not favor replacing Cox, praised the provost's efforts to keep the community informed about the accreditation process and commended him for energizing the Compton Community College District Board of Trustees.

Cox is credited with helping breathe new life into the board. Prior to his arrival, the body had only three of five seats filled. The Bond Measure CC Citizens Oversight Committee had termed out, and the foundation board was not functional.

In addition to his efforts on the board, Cox has also played a pivotal role in the effort to establish accreditation for the El Camino College Compton Center.

"We are looking forward to the work we have to do. We relish the challenge," he said. "Our FCMAT (Fiscal Crisis and Management Team) scores have shown improvement every time.

We are waiting with baited breath for the next one, which is due out in September or October.

It will be the result of their last visit, which took place in July. We are confident that it will show even greater improvement than the last." Cox serves as chair of the Governance Committee, which is one of several committees required by ACCJC for the lengthy and

involved process of establishing eligibility for accreditation and for the actual accreditation of the college.

He has also been leading the Compton Community College District in fulfilling its responsibilities in the accreditation process. He said recently that the board will be a collaborator in the process.

“They will be the primary liaison in the community and will keep everyone aware of where we are in the process and what we are doing to achieve the ultimate goal of accreditation. We have a very hard-working board and I appreciate their eagerness. They are proving their mettle and they are an integral part of the overall goal of returning the college to the Compton Community College District once it has been accredited as a standalone college.”

The ACCJC revoked Compton Community College’s accreditation in 2006. While the required criteria are the same for any college seeking accreditation, it is agreed that the revocation will be a factor in evaluating the center’s eligibility.

“That is undoubtedly true to a certain extent,” said Cox. “But the requirements are still the same as for any college. Our job at this point is to focus on each of the criteria and see that they are each fulfilled as required. FCMAT today is a different organization than it was in 2006. Its standards are constantly rising. We need to achieve excellence in every area of responsibility. Then eligibility will be established.” In the official announcement, Peralta administrators called Cox “a visionary who has been successful working at the executive level in large community college systems and local community college districts.”

Cox has served as provost and CEO at the Compton Center nearly three years, beginning in 2008. During this time, he has garnered praise for achieving outstanding results. He restored fiscal stability by eradicating a long-held structural deficit; increased enrollment from 1,500 to approximately 10,000 students; and improved administrative capacity and processes as the college continues towards recovery.

Cox has held community meetings that have increased support and enthusiasm for the college and a new endowment of \$300,000 for student scholarships has been created since he arrived.

The Peralta District has scheduled two public forums where the three finalists will make statements and answer questions. The first will be held on the evening of Monday, Nov. 29, from 6 to 8 p.m. in the boardroom of the Peralta Community College District offices, 333 East 8th Street, Oakland. The second will be held during the day on Tuesday, Nov. 30, from noon to 2 p.m. at the Berkeley City College Auditorium, 2050 Center Street in Berkeley. Both will be open to the public.

The Board will interview the finalists on Nov. 30 and make its determination shortly thereafter. The new chancellor is expected to assume the position overseeing the four Peralta Colleges – Berkeley City College, College of Alameda and Laney and Merritt Colleges in Oakland – on July 1, 2011. The current interim chancellor of the district is Dr. Wise E. Allen, a long-time Peralta Colleges administrator.

Concerned Citizens of Compton weigh in at El Camino board meeting

The Compton Bulletin

November 3, 2010

Group led by Assemblyman Isadore Hall

By Cheryl Scott

A contingent of 50 Compton residents showed up at a recent meeting of the El Camino Community College District Board of Trustees to express their concern that the college is “dragging its feet.”

The group, led by Assemblyman Isadore Hall, encouraged the board to hasten the process of re-establishing accreditation for Compton College.

“The stakeholders of Compton feel as if they are not being communicated with — or, perhaps being excommunicated,” Hall said. “They feel as if they’ve been excluded from the entire process.”

Compton Community College Board of Trustees Member Deborah LeBlanc told the El Camino officials, “It feels more like a dictatorship than a partnership. We want to remain engaged in the process.”

El Camino officials, while sympathetic to the Compton residents, responded that their actions have been dictated by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, or ACCJC.

The board emphasized that the recently released timetable for the accreditation process is dictated entirely by the commission.

“This is the first time this has ever been done,” said Dr. Lawrence Cox, CEO of the Compton Community College District. “There are no established procedures for one district formally turning over a college to another district. But there should be no misunderstanding of the intention of El Camino to do that. Right now we are focusing on getting through the

accreditation process. The end result will be the accreditation of the El Camino Compton Center as a college in its own right.”

But residents insist that the ACCJC has designed a process so complex and time consuming that it could drag on forever. El Camino officials agree that the mountain of paperwork and reports are so extensive that they won't be able to submit an application for eligibility until 2012. And that's just the first step.

“Representatives of the Accrediting Commission initially estimated a 10-year process for accreditation,” said El Camino President Dr. Thomas Fallo. “We are on schedule.”

But privately, ECC officials admit that the timeline is cumbersome and could cause significant delays in securing accreditation, a process that is under the sole control of the ACCJC.

“It's important to remember that during the entire process, the direction, guidelines and timelines, from eligibility and candidacy through full accreditation, are determined by the ACCJC, not El Camino College, the ECC Compton Center, the Compton Community College District or any other entity,” said official spokesperson Ann Marie Garten of El Camino College.

But Compton officials remain outraged that the process is expected to take so long and that they have not been consulted about the process or the timeline. “We have no one who can give us ongoing information about the college's role in the process,” said Marie Hollis of Concerned Citizens. “We have every reason to believe that El Camino would like to go on with the status quo. We have seen no change.”

The first step in the process is to determine eligibility of the center to receive accreditation. The center must illustrate how it meets the 21 criteria set by the ACCJC. It is up to El Camino College to establish goals and benchmarks for review. Once it has concluded the center has met those criteria, it will apply to the ACCJC for eligibility.

It is not possible to designate a firm timeline for the eligibility phase of the accreditation process, because timelines are determined by the activities and schedules of the ACCJC.

Once it approves the application for eligibility, the commission will determine a course of action and timeline that must be followed in preparation for the center's candidacy.

If accreditation eligibility is denied, the commission will notify El Camino College about deficiencies that must be corrected for the process to go forward.

The Center is currently working toward meeting all 21 requirements for eligibility, which includes providing evidence of sustainability in the areas of planning and program review and evidence of proficiency in student learning outcomes and assessment.

Once it is established that the Center is eligible for accreditation, El Camino College will apply for candidacy status of the Center. The ACCJC will establish a timeline for the preparation of the candidacy review.

El Camino officials have said that they are bound by the rules and timelines of the ACCJC, and admit that they are bound by the terms and conditions set forth by the ACCJC.

Adding to the lack of trust is the fact that El Camino College receives \$4 million for operating the Compton Center.

However, El Camino officials who have spoken on condition of anonymity say that they would like to finish up with the accreditation of the college, and that the money is not enough to make it take on the ongoing responsibility of running the Compton Center.

They also point out that the current situation takes a great deal of time, which is taken away from ECC students.

The bottom line seems to be that El Camino Community College District came through for Compton College when it would have had to close down operations after losing accreditation.

They also say that they would like to be finished with the operation of Compton Center but that they have to follow the format established by the ACCJC. For now, that format calls for Compton College to be monitored by the school district for many years.

They point out that Compton College is not being “re-accredited,” but that a new college currently being operated by El Camino will be “accredited” under its auspices.

“That’s a very big distinction,” said one El Camino staff member. And the ACCJC is not swayed by angry representatives from the city of Compton or by their demands that things move more quickly toward the ultimate goal of accreditation.

Nor is it swayed by El Camino officials who want to get the process completed just as much as the Compton residents do.

“The Process to Accreditation (v.2) is an excellent primer for all interested in understanding the Accrediting process.”

“El Camino College continues its commitment to provide the Compton Community College District with a fully Accredited college.”

Raise community college fees

Daily Breeze – Editorial

Posted: 11/13/2010

Access to a high-quality college education has for decades been a pillar of California's economic success. That's why so many

people are worried about rising fees in the CSU and UC systems, where they have more than doubled in recent years and, we've just learned, are set to go up again next year.

Although it sounds counterintuitive, access to our 112 community colleges - the third leg of the state's system of higher education - could actually be improved by increasing student fees, which are by far the lowest in the nation. Raising fees from \$26 to \$40 per unit, the level recommended by the Legislative Analyst's Office, would help the colleges restore services and classes, allowing them to educate more people and to do a better job serving the students they already have.

The national average for full-time community college fees is about \$2,700, nearly four times what California students pay. Charging \$40 per unit would bring an estimated \$150 million in new revenue, but students would still be paying less than half the national average.

Poor students wouldn't be affected, even by such a big increase. The very generous Board of Governors waiver program already covers all fees for nearly a third of community college students; a portion of any increase would go toward that program.

Most importantly, access - and quality - for all would actually be improved by such an increase. The colleges' biggest problem is that they don't have the funding to provide the classes students need. Additional fees could be used to restore classes and other services, such as counseling and support for the disabled.

We're certain many students who pay fees - by definition, those of at least middle income - would gladly shell out an extra few hundred bucks to get the classes to finish school and move on to a career or four-year college.

Increased fees, however, can't be an excuse for the Legislature to make deeper cuts in general fund support. The system did get a \$126 million increase in funding this year to accommodate thousands of new students, but that won't make up for previous service cuts. Higher student fees must go toward improving those services. As Scott Lay, president of the Community College League of California, put it: The state shouldn't double the price of a loaf of bread but provide only half the number of slices.

The importance of community colleges has only grown during this recession, as rising costs shut more young students out of four-year colleges and layoffs send more adults back to school to

learn new skills. But when the economy recovers, community colleges will be even more essential, helping remedy a huge expected shortfall in college-educated workers statewide.

As the UC regents and the CSU trustees finalize their plans for fee increases, the California Legislature should follow suit with a fee increase for community college students - accompanied by a resolve not to decrease general fund support for this essential system.

Report gives L.A. community colleges poor marks

Daily Breeze

By Dana Bartholomew Staff Writer

Posted: 11/13/2010

The Los Angeles Community College District campuses lag behind others across California, with only one in four students attaining their goal of earning a certificate, associate degree or transferring to a four-year university, according to a new study.

The nine-campus Los Angeles Community College District received especially poor marks for the lower completion rate of its black and Latino students.

"We've got to reverse the trend," said Nancy Shulock, executive director of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy at Cal State Sacramento, a co-author of the study released last week.

"The problem is that not enough students are finishing the academic program ... not enough students who begin are finishing."

Critics of the LACCD say its performance not only puts thousands of student dropouts at risk of lower-paying livelihoods but also fails to prepare a statewide work force that will need 1 million new college grads by 2025.

The problem is likely to worsen with the expected growth of the region's working Latino population, whose students have the lowest community college graduation and transfer rates.

District officials questioned the report, but acknowledged there is work to be done in retaining students.

"We know that the results aren't very good. We know we can do better," Chancellor Daniel LaVista said in an interview. "We aren't just awakening to the problems the researchers point out.

"We are trying to work with some methods of dealing with students who aren't as prepared as they should be ... at some methods of teaching basic skills."

The report, "Divided We Fail in L.A.," was released just weeks after another institute study found that more than two-thirds of California's community college students who sought degrees failed to attain them.

The latest study, commissioned by the L.A.-based Alliance for a Better Community, tracked 18,000 L.A. community college district students who sought some kind of degree from 2003 to last year.

The district - which includes Harbor College in Wilmington and eight other campuses - is the largest in the state, with more than 250,000 students. Of those, 68 percent are black or Latino, compared with 43 percent statewide.

The report also found:

Only 17 percent of LACCD students transferred to a four-year school, with a third of those finishing a transfer curriculum of 60 credits.

Only 5 percent earned a certificate and 9 percent an associate degree.

While two out of three students entered a second term, only half stayed in school a second year.

The study also found that racial and ethnic minorities in the L.A. district performed worse than their counterparts at other community colleges statewide. About 35 percent of whites and 30 percent of Asian-Pacific Islanders completed certificates, a degree or transfer, compared with 22 percent of blacks and 18 percent of Latinos.

Transfers for whites were highest, at 28 percent, and Latinos lowest, at 11 percent.

"There's a sense of urgency. We need to do something different," said Angelica Solis, of the Alliance for a Better Community, a nonprofit advocate for Latinos. "Unfortunately, there aren't enough counselors to advise students. There aren't enough support systems, with tutors, to help students get through difficult courses like math and college-level English."

Administrators and critics say there are many reasons for the high number of student dropouts in Los Angeles.

High schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District graduate only half their students, according to some reports, and many are woefully unprepared for colleges whose mission is to accept them.

According to Chancellor LaVista, 80 percent of incoming community college students in Los Angeles need remedial reading instruction - a number that soars to 90 percent for writing and 99 percent for math.

Students must struggle with juggling work, families and the high cost of living in L.A., he said. Many lack the skills - and money - to complete basic transfer requirements in two years, especially since the state's budget crisis means the campuses offer fewer and larger classes.

But LaVista disputed the transfer rates cited in the study, saying its definition of a degree-seeker is a student enrolling in six units of study the first year. When using the state definition of a degree-seeker as any student who applies to a four-year school, he said, 36 percent of L.A. students transfer.

"We're moving forward," said LaVista, who became chancellor in August. "We expect to stick to the knitting, to stay on course to our plan prior to the publication of this study."

To improve student success, study researchers recommended that LACCD campuses "target practices within LACCD to improve student outcomes," learn effective methods from other districts and identify policy changes that would make teachers and staff more effective - solutions that the district said are already being implemented.

Connecting With My Intellectual Family Inside Higher Ed BlogU

UNIVERSITY ♀ VENUS

By Anamaria Dutceac Segesten November 11, 2010 9:30 pm EST

I like conferences, I confess. There are so many types of conferences these days that it is hard to choose one's favorites: there are "regular" conferences, a slowly vanishing category. Then we have virtual conferences, which may be poised to become the new regular kind, with many billions in value. According to some, this is a growing trend, now in its infancy but emerging as a real alternative, with its own rules and skills that academics will have to develop and master. I must admit I have never been invited to attend such a virtual meeting place for academics and therefore I cannot express a true opinion. My feeling though is that the technological issues will deter from an atmosphere of warm collegiality and that only with some advanced technology in simulation rooms will it ever grow to be a replacement of the current physical meetings.

Another type of conference increasingly discussed these days is the unconference, a more democratic type of virtual academic reunion where, according to a well-circulated definition, the participants themselves determine the program. The advantages connected to the unconference are numerous, as Ethan Watrall explains, as it is more democratic, more dialogical or interactive and also cheaper than the traditional form. Perhaps because it is a very new thing, or/and because the humanities or the social sciences are slower in keeping up with technology than natural sciences, I have not attended nor even heard of an unconference organized in my field (political science) – perhaps this is indeed admitting my ignorance, backwardness and high degree of uncoolness, but this is the truth and I must stand up for it.

For me it is the regular conference type that remains the most attractive. Maybe presenting papers allows my artistic, performative side to emerge, just like in Itir's case. Maybe I am able to capture the vibes of a flesh and blood audience more directly, and to get more energy and inspiration from their almost imperceptible reactions. Maybe it is the possibility of looking at the members of the public in the eye and expecting, hoping, that they will stay afterwards for an informal chat and exchange of views. So is it so that I am more of the underconference type? Am I at the conference not because of the actual moment of presenting or discussing a paper, but because of its parallel universe, this "carnival in the churchyard" to quote Mark Sample?

Not quite, I answer. I like the formality of paper presentation and the discussion in the conference room just as much as I really get enriched, but also occasionally enraged, in the hallways and lobbies where the underconference takes place. This is why I have come to realize I like the **small** traditional conference. Perhaps this is not the place for fantastic networking as only few people attend it. But those who come are indeed interested in the narrower topic that also brought me there. I have the feeling of **belonging together** with

these other people with whom I share this or that clearly defined academic concern. I may disagree with them to the teeth, but nevertheless I like them being there, and I am quietly grateful for their interest in my subject, for giving me comments, critiques, attention.

I was almost going to write that I like these small conferences because they connect me to parts of my intellectual **family**. But thinking in family terms is such a womanly thing, isn't it?

Anamaria writes from Lund, Sweden. She is one of the founding members of the editorial collective at University of Venus.

Payment Scandal Rocks SF Unified

The Bay Citizen

Administrators funneled money into own accounts, documents show

By Trey Bundy on November 12, 2010

A group of San Francisco Unified School District administrators, including an associate superintendent, engaged in a long-running scheme to funnel district money into their personal bank accounts via nonprofit community organizations, according to internal documents.

The administrators worked out of the Student Support Services Department, which partners with community organizations to provide thousands of San Francisco students with health education, substance abuse counseling, violence prevention, after-school activities and other services.

The scandal has stunned San Francisco educators and thrown Student Support Services into turmoil at a time when the district faces a \$113 million deficit. Some vital student services have been threatened as investigators comb through millions of dollars of transactions dating back at least four years.

Documents obtained by The Bay Citizen under a California Public Records Act request show that administrators directed money from community organizations into their own pockets. Some also fabricated overtime reports and falsified signatures on district contracts. The records also include copies of checks and invoices, suspension and termination notices and contracts bearing signatures that the district says were falsified.

“It was a system developed by a small group of individuals operating outside of the budget and finance department,” said Deputy Superintendent Richard Carranza, who participated in the district’s investigation.

The documents, many redacted, show evidence of transactions totaling tens of thousands of dollars and possibly more.

In an interview, Carranza said the district opened the investigation in June after a community organization raised questions to him about irregular accounting practices. The San Francisco district attorney’s office is conducting a separate investigation, according to Carranza and others familiar with the inquiry. A spokesman for that office declined to comment.

The district’s investigation is focused on Associate Superintendent Trish Bascom, who is the former head of Student Support Services, and four of her co-workers. For years, until she retired in June, Bascom had primary control over money distributed to community organizations that were hired to provide services for the district. The department’s annual budget is nearly \$20 million.

The documents show that community organizations under contract to the district made payments directly to individual Student Support Services administrators. Carranza said such payments violated district regulations. Bascom's lawyer, Stuart Hanlon, confirmed that Bascom had approved the payments, but he said the transactions conformed to district regulations. Hanlon said the payments were bonuses approved by Bascom to make up for salary cuts.

"If they want to call it stealing, they can," he said. "I would call the district incompetent. It wasn't stealing. It was paying people bonuses for hard work."

Kevin Truitt, who succeeded Bascom, said investigators seized computers and documents shortly after he arrived at the end of June. The seizures, along with the removal of key department officials, forced Truitt and his staff to scramble to put programs in place.

"I'm not privy to the documents or computer files pertaining to the department I now run," Truitt said in an interview.

The scandal has made it difficult for Student Support Services administrators to track financing for programs, according to one district official.

In an e-mail, Carranza wrote that Student Support Services programs "are being fully funded. We are committed to ensuring that our students are not penalized for the actions of a few individuals."

In addition to Bascom, other administrators under investigation by the district include Meyla Ruwin, the department's senior executive director; Betty Wong, Bascom's assistant; and two of Bascom's administrative analysts, Linda Lovelace and Lilian Capuli, according to Carranza and documents.

Lovelace was fired in September, documents show, and she declined to comment for this article. Ruwin and Wong were placed on administrative leave, Carranza said. Neither could be reached for comment. Capuli received a termination notice on Sept. 7 but has requested a hearing to dispute the accusations, Tyler Paetkau, her lawyer, said.

Paetkau, in a letter to the school district, said district officials were using Capuli as a scapegoat. "Capuli simply followed the directives given by her superiors," the letter said.

In an August letter informing Lovelace of her dismissal, the district accused her of supplementing her \$83,000 salary with \$26,126.64 in unauthorized district money during the 2009-10 school year. According to the district and invoices, the money was paid to Lovelace by Bay Area Community Resources, a Marin County organization that operates after-school programs for San Francisco students.

Officials with Bay Area Community Resources could not be reached for comment. It is not known whether the group, or any other community organizations, are under investigation.

Lovelace was in charge of administering contracts between the school district and Bay Area Community Resources. According to her termination letter, she signed contracts on behalf of

officials who had not given her authorization and submitted false claims that she had worked 12-hour days during the school year.

“Your conduct in intentionally requesting and receiving an additional four hours of compensation every single day is tantamount to stealing,” stated the dismissal notice, which was written by Roger Buschmann, the chief administrative officer. “Particularly at a time when the district faces a multimillion-dollar deficit and forced layoffs of many skilled and diligent professionals, such conduct is appalling.”

Last May, documents show, Lovelace received a check for \$40,000 from Edgewood Center for Children and Families, a San Francisco nonprofit that provides mental health, violence prevention and teacher coaching services to the district. The termination letter alleged that Lovelace had gotten money from Edgewood “for which you knew you had not provided services.”

Jeff Davis, the Edgewood chief executive, declined to discuss details of the transaction except to say that all transactions involving the company had been authorized by the school district. Davis said Edgewood was cooperating with authorities.

“Edgewood could make a payment on full authorization without knowing if the money was later misused,” Davis said.

Carranza, the deputy superintendent, said the Edgewood payments had “absolutely not” been authorized by the district.

In May, Edgewood issued a \$15,000 check to Capuli, the administrative analyst, according to the documents. Capuli also received payments from Bay Area Community Resources, and possibly other agencies, totaling \$8,000 during the 2006-7 school year, the district alleges.

In a letter to Capuli, the district said the \$15,000 payment appeared related to her approval of a \$1,092.34 expense reimbursement to Bascom. It said there was no evidence Bascom had incurred the expense.

“At the very least, your approval of this invoice without making any effort to evaluate the accuracy of the receipts being submitted is negligent,” the letter to Capuli said. “At worst, it seems to involve a quid pro quo, in which you were approving payment of district funds to Bascom on an improper submission in return for her approval of the \$15,000 Edgewood payment to you.”

Paetkau, Capuli’s lawyer, denied the accusation.

Hanlon, Bascom’s lawyer, called it “totally false.”

Jennifer Gollan contributed reporting.

Growing Up Digital, Wired for Distraction

NY Times

By MATT RICHTEL

Published: November 21, 2010

REDWOOD CITY, Calif. — On the eve of a pivotal academic year in Vishal Singh's life, he faces a stark choice on his bedroom desk: book or computer?

By all rights, Vishal, a bright 17-year-old, should already have finished the book, Kurt Vonnegut's "Cat's Cradle," his summer reading assignment. But he has managed 43 pages in two months.

He typically favors Facebook, YouTube and making digital videos. That is the case this August afternoon. Bypassing Vonnegut, he clicks over to YouTube, meaning that tomorrow he will enter his senior year of high school hoping to see an improvement in his grades, but without having completed his only summer homework.

On YouTube, "you can get a whole story in six minutes," he explains. "A book takes so long. I prefer the immediate gratification."

Students have always faced distractions and time-wasters. But computers and cellphones, and the constant stream of stimuli they offer, pose a profound new challenge to focusing and learning.

Researchers say the lure of these technologies, while it affects adults too, is particularly powerful for young people. The risk, they say, is that developing brains can become more easily habituated than adult brains to constantly switching tasks — and less able to sustain attention.

"Their brains are rewarded not for staying on task but for jumping to the next thing," said Michael Rich, an associate professor at Harvard Medical School and executive director of the Center on Media and Child Health in Boston. And the effects could linger: "The worry is we're raising a generation of kids in front of screens whose brains are going to be wired differently."

But even as some parents and educators express unease about students' digital diets, they are intensifying efforts to use technology in the classroom, seeing it as a way to connect with students and give them essential skills. Across the country, schools are equipping themselves with computers, Internet access and mobile devices so they can teach on the students' technological territory.

It is a tension on vivid display at Vishal's school, Woodside High School, on a sprawling campus set against the forested hills of Silicon Valley. Here, as elsewhere, it is not uncommon for students to send hundreds of text messages a day or spend hours playing video games, and virtually everyone is on Facebook.

The principal, David Reilly, 37, a former musician who says he sympathizes when young people feel disenfranchised, is determined to engage these 21st-century students. He has asked teachers to build Web sites to communicate with students, introduced popular classes on using digital

tools to record music, secured funding for iPads to teach Mandarin and obtained \$3 million in grants for a multimedia center.

He pushed first period back an hour, to 9 a.m., because students were showing up bleary-eyed, at least in part because they were up late on their computers. Unchecked use of digital devices, he says, can create a culture in which students are addicted to the virtual world and lost in it.

“I am trying to take back their attention from their BlackBerrys and video games,” he says. “To a degree, I’m using technology to do it.”

The same tension surfaces in Vishal, whose ability to be distracted by computers is rivaled by his proficiency with them. At the beginning of his junior year, he discovered a passion for filmmaking and made a name for himself among friends and teachers with his storytelling in videos made with digital cameras and editing software.

He acts as his family’s tech-support expert, helping his father, Satendra, a lab manager, retrieve lost documents on the computer, and his mother, Indra, a security manager at the San Francisco airport, build her own Web site.

But he also plays video games 10 hours a week. He regularly sends Facebook status updates at 2 a.m., even on school nights, and has such a reputation for distributing links to videos that his best friend calls him a “YouTube bully.”

Several teachers call Vishal one of their brightest students, and they wonder why things are not adding up. Last semester, his grade point average was 2.3 after a D-plus in English and an F in Algebra II. He got an A in film critique.

“He’s a kid caught between two worlds,” said Mr. Reilly — one that is virtual and one with real-life demands.

Vishal, like his mother, says he lacks the self-control to favor schoolwork over the computer. She sat him down a few weeks before school started and told him that, while she respected his passion for film and his technical skills, he had to use them productively.

“This is the year,” she says she told him. “This is your senior year and you can’t afford not to focus.”

It was not always this way. As a child, Vishal had a tendency to procrastinate, but nothing like this. Something changed him.

Growing Up With Gadgets

When he was 3, Vishal moved with his parents and older brother to their current home, a three-bedroom house in the working-class section of Redwood City, a suburb in Silicon Valley that is more diverse than some of its elite neighbors.

Thin and quiet with a shy smile, Vishal passed the admissions test for a prestigious public elementary and middle school. Until sixth grade, he focused on homework, regularly going to the house of a good friend to study with him.

But Vishal and his family say two things changed around the seventh grade: his mother went back to work, and he got a computer. He became increasingly engrossed in games and surfing the Internet, finding an easy outlet for what he describes as an inclination to procrastinate.

“I realized there were choices,” Vishal recalls. “Homework wasn’t the only option.”

Several recent studies show that young people tend to use home computers for entertainment, not learning, and that this can hurt school performance, particularly in low-income families. Jacob L. Vigdor, an economics professor at Duke University who led some of the research, said that when adults were not supervising computer use, children “are left to their own devices, and the impetus isn’t to do homework but play around.”

Research also shows that students often juggle homework and entertainment. The Kaiser Family Foundation found earlier this year that half of students from 8 to 18 are using the Internet, watching TV or using some other form of media either “most” (31 percent) or “some” (25 percent) of the time that they are doing homework.

At Woodside, as elsewhere, students’ use of technology is not uniform. Mr. Reilly, the principal, says their choices tend to reflect their personalities. Social butterflies tend to be heavy texters and Facebook users. Students who are less social might escape into games, while drifters or those prone to procrastination, like Vishal, might surf the Web or watch videos.

The technology has created on campuses a new set of social types — not the thespian and the jock but the texter and gamer, Facebook addict and YouTube potato.

“The technology amplifies whoever you are,” Mr. Reilly says.

For some, the amplification is intense. Allison Miller, 14, sends and receives 27,000 texts in a month, her fingers clicking at a blistering pace as she carries on as many as seven text conversations at a time. She texts between classes, at the moment soccer practice ends, while being driven to and from school and, often, while studying.

Most of the exchanges are little more than quick greetings, but they can get more in-depth, like “if someone tells you about a drama going on with someone,” Allison said. “I can text one person while talking on the phone to someone else.”

But this proficiency comes at a cost: she blames multitasking for the three B’s on her recent progress report.

“I’ll be reading a book for homework and I’ll get a text message and pause my reading and put down the book, pick up the phone to reply to the text message, and then 20 minutes later realize, ‘Oh, I forgot to do my homework.’ ”

Some shyer students do not socialize through technology — they recede into it. Ramon Ochoa-Lopez, 14, an introvert, plays six hours of video games on weekdays and more on weekends, leaving homework to be done in the bathroom before school.

Escaping into games can also salve teenagers’ age-old desire for some control in their chaotic lives. “It’s a way for me to separate myself,” Ramon says. “If there’s an argument between my mom and one of my brothers, I’ll just go to my room and start playing video games and escape.”

With powerful new cellphones, the interactive experience can go everywhere. Between classes at Woodside or at lunch, when use of personal devices is permitted, students gather in clusters, sometimes chatting face to face, sometimes half-involved in a conversation while texting someone across the teeming quad. Others sit alone, watching a video, listening to music or updating Facebook.

Students say that their parents, worried about the distractions, try to police computer time, but that monitoring the use of cellphones is difficult. Parents may also want to be able to call their children at any time, so taking the phone away is not always an option.

Other parents wholly embrace computer use, even when it has no obvious educational benefit.

“If you’re not on top of technology, you’re not going to be on top of the world,” said John McMullen, 56, a retired criminal investigator whose son, Sean, is one of five friends in the group Vishal joins for lunch each day.

Sean’s favorite medium is video games; he plays for four hours after school and twice that on weekends. He was playing more but found his habit pulling his grade point average below 3.2, the point at which he felt comfortable. He says he sometimes wishes that his parents would force him to quit playing and study, because he finds it hard to quit when given the choice. Still, he says, video games are not responsible for his lack of focus, asserting that in another era he would have been distracted by TV or something else.

“Video games don’t make the hole; they fill it,” says Sean, sitting at a picnic table in the quad, where he is surrounded by a multimillion-dollar view: on the nearby hills are the evergreens that tower above the affluent neighborhoods populated by Internet tycoons. Sean, a senior, concedes that video games take a physical toll: “I haven’t done exercise since my sophomore year. But that doesn’t seem like a big deal. I still look the same.”

Sam Crocker, Vishal’s closest friend, who has straight A’s but lower SAT scores than he would like, blames the Internet’s distractions for his inability to finish either of his two summer reading books.

“I know I can read a book, but then I’m up and checking Facebook,” he says, adding: “Facebook is amazing because it feels like you’re doing something and you’re not doing anything. It’s the absence of doing something, but you feel gratified anyway.”

He concludes: “My attention span is getting worse.”

The Lure of Distraction

Some neuroscientists have been studying people like Sam and Vishal. They have begun to understand what happens to the brains of young people who are constantly online and in touch.

In an experiment at the German Sport University in Cologne in 2007, boys from 12 to 14 spent an hour each night playing video games after they finished homework.

On alternate nights, the boys spent an hour watching an exciting movie, like “Harry Potter” or “Star Trek,” rather than playing video games. That allowed the researchers to compare the effect of video games and TV.

The researchers looked at how the use of these media affected the boys' brainwave patterns while sleeping and their ability to remember their homework in the subsequent days. They found that playing video games led to markedly lower sleep quality than watching TV, and also led to a "significant decline" in the boys' ability to remember vocabulary words. The findings were published in the journal *Pediatrics*.

Markus Dworak, a researcher who led the study and is now a neuroscientist at Harvard, said it was not clear whether the boys' learning suffered because sleep was disrupted or, as he speculates, also because the intensity of the game experience overrode the brain's recording of the vocabulary.

"When you look at vocabulary and look at huge stimulus after that, your brain has to decide which information to store," he said. "Your brain might favor the emotionally stimulating information over the vocabulary."

At the University of California, San Francisco, scientists have found that when rats have a new experience, like exploring an unfamiliar area, their brains show new patterns of activity. But only when the rats take a break from their exploration do they process those patterns in a way that seems to create a persistent memory.

In that vein, recent imaging studies of people have found that major cross sections of the brain become surprisingly active during downtime. These brain studies suggest to researchers that periods of rest are critical in allowing the brain to synthesize information, make connections between ideas and even develop the sense of self.

Researchers say these studies have particular implications for young people, whose brains have more trouble focusing and setting priorities.

"Downtime is to the brain what sleep is to the body," said Dr. Rich of Harvard Medical School. "But kids are in a constant mode of stimulation."

"The headline is: bring back boredom," added Dr. Rich, who last month gave a speech to the American Academy of Pediatrics entitled, "Finding Huck Finn: Reclaiming Childhood from the River of Electronic Screens."

Dr. Rich said in an interview that he was not suggesting young people should toss out their devices, but rather that they embrace a more balanced approach to what he said were powerful tools necessary to compete and succeed in modern life.

The heavy use of devices also worries Daniel Anderson, a professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, who is known for research showing that children are not as harmed by TV viewing as some researchers have suggested.

Multitasking using ubiquitous, interactive and highly stimulating computers and phones, Professor Anderson says, appears to have a more powerful effect than TV.

Like Dr. Rich, he says he believes that young, developing brains are becoming habituated to distraction and to switching tasks, not to focus.

“If you’ve grown up processing multiple media, that’s exactly the mode you’re going to fall into when put in that environment — you develop a need for that stimulation,” he said.

Vishal can attest to that.

“I’m doing Facebook, YouTube, having a conversation or two with a friend, listening to music at the same time. I’m doing a million things at once, like a lot of people my age,” he says.

“Sometimes I’ll say: I need to stop this and do my schoolwork, but I can’t.”

“If it weren’t for the Internet, I’d focus more on school and be doing better academically,” he says. But thanks to the Internet, he says, he has discovered and pursued his passion: filmmaking. Without the Internet, “I also wouldn’t know what I want to do with my life.”

Clicking Toward a Future

The woman sits in a cemetery at dusk, sobbing. Behind her, silhouetted and translucent, a man kneels, then fades away, a ghost.

This captivating image appears on Vishal’s computer screen. On this Thursday afternoon in late September, he is engrossed in scenes he shot the previous weekend for a music video he is making with his cousin.

The video is based on a song performed by the band Guns N’ Roses about a woman whose boyfriend dies. He wants it to be part of the package of work he submits to colleges that emphasize film study, along with a documentary he is making about home-schooled students.

Now comes the editing. Vishal taught himself to use sophisticated editing software in part by watching tutorials on YouTube. He does not leave his chair for more than two hours, sipping Pepsi, his face often inches from the screen, as he perfects the clip from the cemetery. The image of the crying woman was shot separately from the image of the kneeling man, and he is trying to fuse them.

“I’m spending two hours to get a few seconds just right,” he says.

He occasionally sends a text message or checks Facebook, but he is focused in a way he rarely is when doing homework. He says the chief difference is that filmmaking feels applicable to his chosen future, and he hopes colleges, like the University of Southern California or the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles, will be so impressed by his portfolio that they will overlook his school performance.

“This is going to compensate for the grades,” he says. On this day, his homework includes a worksheet for Latin, some reading for English class and an economics essay, but they can wait.

For Vishal, there’s another clear difference between filmmaking and homework: interactivity. As he edits, the windows on the screen come alive; every few seconds, he clicks the mouse to make tiny changes to the lighting and flow of the images, and the software gives him constant feedback.

“I click and something happens,” he says, explaining that, by comparison, reading a book or doing homework is less exciting. “I guess it goes back to the immediate gratification thing.”

The \$2,000 computer Vishal is using is state of the art and only a week old. It represents a concession by his parents. They allowed him to buy it, despite their continuing concerns about his technology habits, because they wanted to support his filmmaking dream. “If we put roadblocks in his way, he’s just going to get depressed,” his mother says. Besides, she adds, “he’s been making an effort to do his homework.”

At this point in the semester, it seems she is right. The first schoolwide progress reports come out in late September, and Vishal has mostly A’s and B’s. He says he has been able to make headway by applying himself, but also by cutting back his workload. Unlike last year, he is not taking advanced placement classes, and he has chosen to retake Algebra II not in the classroom but in an online class that lets him work at his own pace.

His shift to easier classes might not please college admissions officers, according to Woodside’s college adviser, Zorina Matavulj. She says they want seniors to intensify their efforts. As it is, she says, even if Vishal improves his performance significantly, someone with his grades faces long odds in applying to the kinds of colleges he aspires to.

Still, Vishal’s passion for film reinforces for Mr. Reilly, the principal, that the way to reach these students is on their own terms.

Hands-On Technology

Big Macintosh monitors sit on every desk, and a man with hip glasses and an easygoing style stands at the front of the class. He is Geoff Diesel, 40, a favorite teacher here at Woodside who has taught English and film. Now he teaches one of Mr. Reilly’s new classes, audio production. He has a rapt audience of more than 20 students as he shows a video of the band Nirvana mixing their music, then holds up a music keyboard.

“Who knows how to use Pro Tools? We’ve got it. It’s the program used by the best music studios in the world,” he says.

In the back of the room, Mr. Reilly watches, thrilled. He introduced the audio course last year and enough students signed up to fill four classes. (He could barely pull together one class when he introduced Mandarin, even though he had secured iPads to help teach the language.)

“Some of these students are our most at-risk kids,” he says. He means that they are more likely to tune out school, skip class or not do their homework, and that they may not get healthful meals at home. They may also do their most enthusiastic writing not for class but in text messages and on Facebook. “They’re here, they’re in class, they’re listening.”

Despite Woodside High’s affluent setting, about 40 percent of its 1,800 students come from low-income families and receive a reduced-cost or free lunch. The school is 56 percent Latino, 38 percent white and 5 percent African-American, and it sends 93 percent of its students to four-year or community colleges.

Mr. Reilly says that the audio class provides solid vocational training and can get students interested in other subjects.

“Today mixing music, tomorrow sound waves and physics,” he says. And he thinks the key is that they love not just the music but getting their hands on the technology. “We’re meeting them on their turf.”

It does not mean he sees technology as a panacea. “I’ll always take one great teacher in a cave over a dozen Smart Boards,” he says, referring to the high-tech teaching displays used in many schools.

Teachers at Woodside commonly blame technology for students’ struggles to concentrate, but they are divided over whether embracing computers is the right solution.

“It’s a catastrophe,” said Alan Eaton, a charismatic Latin teacher. He says that technology has led to a “balkanization of their focus and duration of stamina,” and that schools make the problem worse when they adopt the technology.

“When rock ’n’ roll came about, we didn’t start using it in classrooms like we’re doing with technology,” he says. He personally feels the sting, since his advanced classes have one-third as many students as they had a decade ago.

Vishal remains a Latin student, one whom Mr. Eaton describes as particularly bright. But the teacher wonders if technology might be the reason Vishal seems to lose interest in academics the minute he leaves class.

Mr. Diesel, by contrast, does not think technology is behind the problems of Vishal and his schoolmates — in fact, he thinks it is the key to connecting with them, and an essential tool. “It’s in their DNA to look at screens,” he asserts. And he offers another analogy to explain his approach: “Frankenstein is in the room and I don’t want him to tear me apart. If I’m not using technology, I lose them completely.”

Mr. Diesel had Vishal as a student in cinema class and describes him as a “breath of fresh air” with a gift for filmmaking. Mr. Diesel says he wonders if Vishal is a bit like Woody Allen, talented but not interested in being part of the system.

But Mr. Diesel adds: “If Vishal’s going to be an independent filmmaker, he’s got to read Vonnegut. If you’re going to write scripts, you’ve got to read.”

Back to Reading Aloud

Vishal sits near the back of English IV. Marcia Blondel, a veteran teacher, asks the students to open the book they are studying, “The Things They Carried,” which is about the Vietnam War.

“Who wants to read starting in the middle of Page 137?” she asks. One student begins to read aloud, and the rest follow along.

To Ms. Blondel, the exercise in group reading represents a regression in American education and an indictment of technology. The reason she has to do it, she says, is that students now lack the attention span to read the assignments on their own.

“How can you have a discussion in class?” she complains, arguing that she has seen a considerable change in recent years. In some classes she can count on little more than one-third of the students to read a 30-page homework assignment.

She adds: “You can’t become a good writer by watching YouTube, texting and e-mailing a bunch of abbreviations.”

As the group-reading effort winds down, she says gently: “I hope this will motivate you to read on your own.”

It is a reminder of the choices that have followed the students through the semester: computer or homework? Immediate gratification or investing in the future?

Mr. Reilly hopes that the two can meet — that computers can be combined with education to better engage students and can give them technical skills without compromising deep analytical thought.

But in Vishal’s case, computers and schoolwork seem more and more to be mutually exclusive. Ms. Blondel says that Vishal, after a decent start to the school year, has fallen into bad habits. In October, he turned in weeks late, for example, a short essay based on the first few chapters of “The Things They Carried.” His grade at that point, she says, tracks around a D.

For his part, Vishal says he is investing himself more in his filmmaking, accelerating work with his cousin on their music video project. But he is also using Facebook late at night and surfing for videos on YouTube. The evidence of the shift comes in a string of Facebook updates.

Saturday, 11:55 p.m.: “Editing, editing, editing”

Sunday, 3:55 p.m.: “8+ hours of shooting, 8+ hours of editing. All for just a three-minute scene. Mind = Dead.”

Sunday, 11:00 p.m.: “Fun day, finally got to spend a day relaxing... now about that homework...”

Nurses' Role in the Future of Health Care

NY Times

By PAULINE W. CHEN, M.D.

Published: November 18, 2010

At the start of my surgical training, I helped to care for a middle-aged patient who was struggling to recuperate from a major operation on his aorta, the body's central artery, and the blood vessels to his legs. As the days wore on, the surgeon in charge began consulting various experts until the once spare patient file became weighted down with the notes and suggestions of a whole roster of specialists.

The patient eventually recovered, thanks to the efforts of many. Nonetheless, one afternoon while walking around the wards with the senior surgeon, I couldn't help but make a crack about the sheer heft of the patient's chart; it was, after all, my job to carry it around while she visited with patients.

"Remember this for when you get out into the real world," she said, taking the chart from me and letting it dip in a way that exaggerated its bulk. "When the ship seems to be going down, you've got to get all hands on deck."

We might do well to remember that surgeon's advice right now.

As we inch toward 2014, the year that the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, the centerpiece of the health care overhaul, takes effect, it has become increasingly clear that the ship known as our health care system is in the process of sinking. And it is not spiraling costs or an overreliance on technology that is weighing most heavily on the health care system, but the sheer volume of patients it must serve.

Currently overloaded with a rapidly aging patient population and their attendant complex medical problems, the system has yet to absorb the 32 million newly insured patients on the horizon. Moreover, over the next 10 years, a third of current physicians will retire, and the physician deficit will increase from just over 7,000 to almost 100,000, with shortages in all specialties, and not just primary care.

But like crew members frantically moving deck chairs, policy makers, medical center administrators, third-party payers and even doctors and patients have remained focused on one thing: the physicians. In all the discussions about adjusting the number of medical schools and training slots, rearranging physician payment schedules and reorganizing practice models, one group of providers has been conspicuously missing.

The nurses.

Nurses currently form the largest sector of health care providers, with more than three million currently registered; but few have led or even been involved in the formal policy discussions regarding the future care of patients. To address this discrepancy, the Institute of Medicine and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation assembled a national panel of health care experts that has been meeting for the last two years to discuss the role of nurses in transforming the current

health care system. Their final report was published last month with no less ambitious a title than “The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health.”

The report, it turns out, lives up to its name. Free of the kind of diatribes that usually creep into discussions about the roles of different health care providers, this report instead relies heavily on the evidence amassed over the last 50 years in clinical trials on the efficacy of nursing care. Weighing in at almost 600 pages, it offers several recommendations, including what amounts to a rebuke of the current piecemeal education of nurses and a debunking of the notion that physicians are the only ones who should lead (and be reimbursed for) any changes in the current health care system.

Leaders in nursing have welcomed the report. “I think it’s a good blueprint for the future,” said Catherine L. Gilliss, president of the American Academy of Nursing, who was not a member of the panel.

Part of that blueprint includes innovative nursing-led services like the Transitional Care Model program at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, where nurses are assigned to elderly hospitalized patients deemed to be at high risk for relapse. For up to three months after discharge, the nurse makes home visits, accompanies the patient to doctors’ offices and collaborates with the primary care physician and family caregivers. In early trials, the program has significantly decreased hospital readmissions and costs by as much as \$5,000 per patient. But because not all third-party payers and institutions are willing to enroll patients in a nurse-directed program or pay for new nursing services, not all patients who are eligible for the special care can enroll because they won’t be reimbursed.

“What is fundamentally operating here is the culture of care,” said Mary D. Naylor, a principal investigator in the Transitional Care Model program and a professor of nursing at the University of Pennsylvania. “We don’t recognize how critically important it is to maximize the contributions of everyone.”

But the report was just as forceful in urging nurses to revamp the way they are educated, citing the decades-long struggle within the profession to define what exactly a nurse is. The term “registered nurse” can refer equally to graduates of two-year associate’s programs, four-year baccalaureate programs, and advanced master’s or doctorate programs. In addition to proposing the addition of postgraduate clinical training, or residency, programs, similar to what physicians currently go through, the panel recommended increasing the number of nurses with baccalaureate degrees to 80 percent from 50 percent and doubling the number of nurses with doctorate degrees over the next 10 years.

The expert panel is scheduled to convene again at the end of this month, this time to discuss implementing their recommendations. They will have their work cut out for them. Critics like the American Medical Association have charged that the report overlooks the extensive education and training of physicians and ignores the importance of physician-led teams in ensuring patient safety. In its official statement, the AMA warns that “with a shortage of both nurses and physicians, increasing the responsibility of nurses is not the answer to the physician shortage.”

Whatever the final outcome, leaders in the nursing community believe that the report is an important first step toward organizing nurses to better serve patients through the challenges of the next few decades.

“I don’t think any group has a lock on advocacy,” Dr. Gilliss said, “and I don’t believe that any one group is restricted from reaching out and being in the patient’s world, making home visits, doing a little something out of the ordinary.”

“There’s a need for many hands,” she added, “and this may be nursing’s shining moment.”

The Attention-Span Myth

NY Times

By VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN

Published: November 19, 2010

We seem to know a great deal about attention spans, those constituents of character that have become the digital-age equivalent of souls.

Everyone has an attention span. It can be short or long. Long is good. Good scholars, good citizens and good children have long attention spans. Attention spans used to be robust; now they are stunted. Technology — MTV, the Internet, the iPhone — shriveled them. Nicholas Carr, who argued in “The Shallows” that Web use practically causes brain damage, told PBS that technology is “pushing even more distractions and interruptions on us” and thus will never “return to us our attention span.”

At the same time, there is a pro-technology view of attention spans — rarer, but no less confident. Science writers like Jonah Lehrer have pointed to studies that seem to demonstrate perfectly respectable attention spans in gamers and Web users.

And so polemicists of various stripes continue to calibrate the effect of technology on attention spans. But I’m surprised that anyone ventures so far into this thicket of sophistry. I get stuck much earlier in the equation. Everyone has an attention span: really? And really again: an attention span is a freestanding entity like a boxer’s reach, existing independently of any newspaper or chess game that might engage or repel it, and which might be measured by the psychologist’s equivalent of a tailor’s tape?

Maybe my own brain is faltering in a Web wasteland, but I don’t get it. Whether the Web is making us smarter or dumber, isn’t there something just unconvincing about the idea that an occult “span” in the brain makes certain cultural objects more compelling than others? So a kid loves the drums but can hardly get through a chapter of “The Sun Also Rises”; and another ace algebra tests but can’t even understand how Call of Duty is played. The actions of these children may dismay or please adults, but anyone who has ever been bored by one practice and absorbed by another can explain the kids’ choices more persuasively than does the dominant model, which ignores the content of activities in favor of a wonky span thought vaguely to be in the brain.

So how did we find ourselves with this unhappy attention-span conceit, and with the companion idea that a big attention span is humankind’s best moral and aesthetic asset? In other eras, distractibility wasn’t considered shameful. It was regularly praised, in fact — as autonomy, exuberance and versatility. To be brooding, morbid, obsessive or easily mesmerized was thought much worse than being distractible. In “Moby-Dick,” Starbuck tries to distract Ahab from his monomania with evocations of family life in Nantucket. Under the spell of “a cruel, remorseless emperor” — his own single-mindedness — Ahab stays his fatal course. Ahab’s doom comes from his undistractibility.

In 19th-century American literature, the resting state from which characters seek distraction is sorrow or fury. No wonder distraction seems kind. In “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,” Tom,

the prototypical hyperactive rascal who plays with a beetle rather than sit still in church, resists sadness “not because his troubles were one whit less heavy and bitter to him than a man’s are to a man, but because a new and powerful interest bore them down and drove them out of his mind for the time — just as men’s misfortunes are forgotten in the excitement of new enterprises.”

In the 1920s, a decade before T. S. Eliot recognized being “distracted from distraction by distraction” as part of the modernist plight, Bertolt Brecht made the case for a “smokers’ theater,” which encouraged the audience to light up cigars during plays. Condemning his fellow Germans for being “uncommonly good at putting up with boredom,” he hoped that by smoking during a play — or pacing, talking, walking out — they could also cultivate individuality and ideally an immunity to tyranny. A healthy fidgetiness would keep them from sitting silently, sheepish and spellbound.

And speaking of sitting silently without fidgeting: that’s essentially what we want of children with bum attention spans, isn’t it? The first sign that a distractible child is doing “better” — with age or Adderall, say — is that he sits still. This is why the A.D.H.D. diagnosis, which popularized the idea of an “attention span” that can be pathologically short, grew out of the old “hyperactive” diagnosis. The hyperactive child squirmed at church and at the dinner table, embarrassing his mother.

At some point, we stopped calling Tom Sawyer-style distractibility either animal spirits or a discipline problem. We started to call it sick, even after an early twin study showed that a relatively short attention span is virtually synonymous with standard-issue irritability and distemper. But the fact that the attention-span theory makes news of what was once considered ordinary or artistic behavior is not what’s wrong with it. These cultural transitions — disruptive as they are — happen all the time as society’s demands on individuals change.

Instead, the problem with the attention-span discourse is that it’s founded on the phantom idea of an attention span. A healthy “attention span” becomes just another ineffable quality to remember having, to believe you’ve lost, to worry about your kids lacking, to blame the culture for destroying. Who needs it?

Style: The Dark Lady

The Easy Reader

By Erica Preus | November 17th, 2010

Local Designer Walter Mendez Paints The Town Black

Lurking quietly in the alleys of Hermosa Beach, our Dark Lady is vibrant yet subtle, sexy yet demure. Wreathed in black with bursts of red, she haunts the midnight crowd, searching for a choice way to satisfy her appetite. From her structured shoulders to her textured boots, she teaches us that, for fall 2010, fashion is anything but conventional.

“Darker colors tend to bring out the inner beauty of a woman,” says Walter Mendez of the Walter Collection. “You will be seeing a huge trend this fall of women wearing all black with hints of red. Black being such an important color in every woman’s wardrobe and red being the color that brings out that passion and beauty.”

A recent graduate of El Camino College and winner of both the Rigby Award for Most Outstanding and Improved Student and the South bay BMW White Challenge Award, Mendez believes the key to dressing a woman is about endowing her with the ability to realize her individual allure.

“My clothes appeal to women who love to feel beautiful and sexy in their own skin without having to be too revealing,” says Mendez. “Women who are both sexy and powerful come in a wide age range, so my designs are meant for the young, trendy girl as well as the older, contemporary woman.”

For Mendez, fashion was a hobby. By accident, he discovered he might want to turn a passion into a career.

“When I was in high school, my mom talked about opening her own clothing boutique,” explains Mendez. “I was so excited that I started making sketches of designs she could have in the store. I loved it so much, and I knew I could do this, but I wasn’t sure how to pursue it.”

After enrolling in college at El Camino, Mendez was focusing on a degree in Business when he decided that he had earned a respite from his serious studies and signed up for a sewing class. It quickly became his favorite class at school, and it was this fortuitous decision that led him to his true calling as a fashion designer.

“I was only a freshman, and my professor started talking about submissions for the fashion show...which were due in two weeks,” says Mendez., laughing. “But I needed at least six garments. I left the class, went home, and spent the entire weekend in my sewing room working. My mom had to come in and tell me that I needed to stop to eat. That collection won the Rigby Award.”

Now pursuing a degree in Fashion Design and Merchandising from California State University Long Beach, Mendez has been the recipient of multiple awards, recognizing not only his fashion accomplishments, but his humanitarian contributions as well.

“For the 2008/2009 year, I received the Henrietta C. Martin Service Award, which is a peer nominated honor granted to a student who shows an extreme commitment to community service,” explains Mendez, proudly. “For the 2009 fashion show, I also received First Place and Best overall for my collection. It was an amazing experience.”

Two years later, the Walter Collection has evolved dramatically from those first six pieces designed for El Camino’s fashion show. Mendez now finds himself eager to experiment with textures, patterns and colors to create a silhouette designed to flatter the female form.

“My work now is more about creating art, having a vision, and knowing how to put it together” says Mendez. “I am still learning every day, but the fact that I have taken my own initiative and created something that is my own gives me an advantage over other aspiring designers.”

New president picked for Skyline College in San Bruno

By Neil Gonzales

mercurynews.com

Posted: 11/22/2010

SAN BRUNO -- A veteran Skyline College administrator will take over as the school's new president in January.

The San Mateo County Community College District board has named Regina Stanback Stroud, who has been Skyline's vice president of instruction the past nine years, to succeed the retiring Victoria Morrow.

Stanback Stroud will be Skyline's ninth president, starting Jan. 3. The board gave her a two-year contract that pays an annual base salary of \$185,000, she said.

"I'm very excited "... to continue work with a wonderful, well-run district," said Stanback Stroud, 53.

Among her goals as president, Stanback Stroud said, is to mold Skyline into the educational and cultural center in the North County.

"I see us continuing programs (letting) people use the college as a resource and realize their economic and personal fulfillment," she said.

That effort includes possibly expanding online education, she said.

Making Skyline a cultural center means creating "a place where the community has access to the arts and access to the richness of the diversity of the community at large," she said. She pointed out that the college has robust programs in dance and the arts as well as many cultural student organizations.

The college has also fostered the development of environmentally -conscious programs -- something that has brought in millions of dollars in grants, she said.

A \$3 million state grant awarded to Skyline, for instance, provides education in the repair and maintenance of electric and hybrid vehicles.

Among the challenges Stanback Stroud faces are ongoing budget uncertainties largely because of the state's fiscal problems. The financial concerns call for Skyline to be creative in bringing in additional resources and work with the other district schools -- Cañada College in Redwood City and College of San Mateo -- as a team to maintain services, she said.

In the last two fiscal years, the district has cut about \$14 million from its budget. But in June, voters passed a \$34-per-parcel tax measure that is expected to generate about \$6 million annually over four years for academic programs and other student-related services.

However, district leaders are now weighing whether to ask voters to approve a construction bond initiative for campus upgrades not covered by two previous measures.

The board chose Stanback Stroud following a nationwide search lasting several months and drawing more than 40 candidates, leaders said.

"She knows Skyline and loves the school," board President Patricia Miljanich said. "She helps us keep the momentum going with the various activities there."

El Camino women's soccer team enjoys its playoff success

The Daily Breeze

By Tony Ciniglio, Staff Writer

Posted: 11/22/2010

Call it the ultimate leap of faith.

El Camino College women's soccer player Kiki Wilson had to decide between her job as a Black Angus server or El Camino's first-round playoff match.

Wilson chose soccer, rolling the dice on a program that had not won a postseason match since 1999.

Ultimately the unemployed Wilson scored the decisive goal in a 1-0 win over Santa Monica on Saturday that gave El Camino its first postseason victory in 11 seasons.

"My parents were not too happy, but it was definitely the best decision," said Wilson, a former South Torrance standout. "We're underdogs in every situation, it seems like. To come out and win our first playoff game in so long is just huge."

It was the latest dramatic moment in a resurgent season for an El Camino team that began South Coast Conference play 0-3 and 1-4.

Not only did El Camino rebound to qualify for the playoffs for the first time since 2003, it won its first postseason match since Coach Jaymie Baquero played on the 1999 team that advanced to the state final.

Now El Camino (13-6-3) takes on top-seeded Pierce (20-0-2) today at 2 p.m. in the second round, already having exceeded expectations.

"They're a feisty bunch. They fight until the end, they really do," Baquero said. "Not once have they given up. Even in our losses, we've come back and scored."

"I don't think many people expected us to win Saturday. The odds were not in our favor, that's for sure. But this team has really come together."

Center midfielder Justine Zavala, the pride of Bishop Montgomery, said El Camino's reputation had taken a hit in recent years.

Even Santa Monica had been using Facebook as a sounding-off board to poke fun at El Camino's lack of a postseason pedigree in recent years.

"To be honest, I wasn't hearing good things coming out of high school, but my first year here, I was very happy with the team, and I'm very happy about this year's team," Zavala said. "I think everyone was tired of the losing, so we all decided to step up."

"It wasn't that we weren't a good team. Mistakes just happened to this team, and we wanted to step up and not make those mistakes. That's been the difference."

Outside defender Hayley Curtis originally planned to go to Arizona State after finishing her high school career at Mira Costa.

Yet a sinus surgery to relieve her asthma problems forced Curtis to take a detour to El Camino. Almost 1 1/2 years after the surgery, Curtis said she has had nothing but positive feedback about El Camino.

"I came in the day before the first game, and I just wanted to play," Curtis said. "If you're having a bad day, this team will pick you up."

It wasn't until a string of three straight ties against the likes of Pasadena, Cerritos and Mt. San Antonio College that El Camino began to turn its season around. That ignited a six-match winning streak and a nine-match unbeaten streak to close the season.

"I think the tie at Pasadena is when we came together," Curtis said. "The girls there were mean, but we didn't let it affect us. We were looking out for each other, and that has carried on to the rest of the season."

And El Camino has truly made it a team effort.

Zavala and Curtis are the undisputed leaders as the central midfielders.

Alicia Sala is the last line of a stout defense that includes sweeper Renee Timoteo (El Segundo), central defender Jasmine Brink (San Pedro) and outside defenders Daniella Garcia (South Torrance) and Kiara Palma (Hawthorne).

Wilson and Shannon Hornbeck (Torrance) join Curtis and Zavala at midfield. Marilyn Cervantes (Gardena) and Callie Sala (Palos Verdes) shoulder most of the scoring burden.

The team features two sets of sisters: fraternal twins Alicia and Callie Sala from Palos Verdes and Renee and Leanna Timoteo from El Segundo.

The players take advantage of the "couch sessions" with Baquero in her office or via text message. Players say the team is unbelievably tight-knit.

"This whole team is close. There's no drama, which is so weird for a girls team," Wilson said.

Alicia Sala said the camaraderie has enabled El Camino to enjoy a breakthrough season.

"I feel like I have 20 best friends on this team," Alicia Sala said. "It's cool to be part of this. If you sit down and think about it, it has been a pretty monumental season."

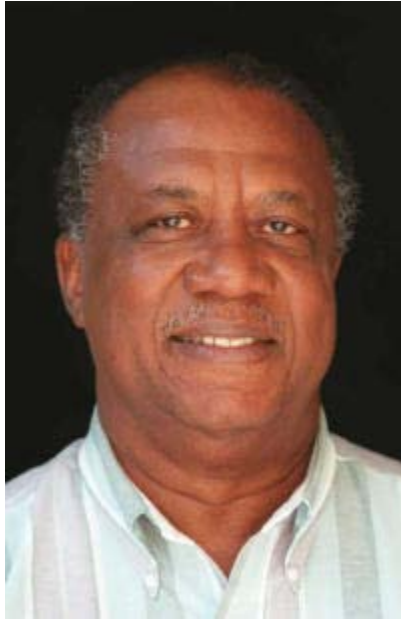
Just don't expect El Camino to celebrate at Black Angus.

ECC trustee Nathaniel Jackson dies at 80

The Daily Breeze

By Rob Kuznia Staff Writer

Posted: 11/23/2010 07:35:41 PM PST



Nathaniel Jackson

Nathaniel Jackson, who served El Camino College for nearly three decades - as a psychology professor, a dean and, after his retirement, a four-term board trustee - died this week in Los Angeles. He was 80.

Once a civil-rights activist who marched with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Jackson played a role in boosting the presence of minority students while a faculty member at USC. At El Camino, he helped bring services for minority and other marginalized students to the Torrance-area campus, and was instrumental in persuading colleagues to take the scandal-stricken Compton College under its wing.

During his 15 years on the El Camino board of trustees, Jackson represented the Inglewood community. In describing his own style, he once said, "I'm seen as middle of the road but, on the other hand, I'm somewhat of a stickler and I don't want watered-down classes."

Although El Camino board votes are typically unanimous, he did not shy away from taking controversial positions.

Jackson won a battle with cancer several years ago, but the cancer returned. In September 2009 he underwent back surgery to have the cancer removed and was never able to attend another school board meeting.

Family members declined to publicly divulge the form of cancer, but said he died peacefully in his sleep early Sunday at a medical facility. Early last week, in a brief ceremonial event, the El Camino board officially vacated his seat.

One of his most influential votes was the one in favor of a contentious plan to take over Compton College, which lost its accreditation in 2006 because of out-of-control financial instability. Two of his five colleagues voted no. As a result of the 3-2 vote, the Compton campus still exists, although it is currently known as the El Camino Compton Center.

At 6-foot-2, Jackson cut an imposing presence physically, and possessed a deep, sonorous voice.

His grandchildren used to jokingly call him Mufasa, after the patriarchal lion in the Disney movie "The Lion King" portrayed by James Earl Jones.

"He was very humble - just a sweet, sweet man," said his granddaughter, Kerri Webb, who works as a spokeswoman for the Los Angeles County Probation Department.

"He had all the accolades, all the certificates, all the degrees, she said. "He very much could have been a cocky man. People who have half of what he had are, in fact, cocky. He just had a cool, calm, confident head on his shoulders."

Jackson was the target of some criticism in August, when a local board watcher and political consultant went public with the complaint that the terminally ill Jackson hadn't attended a meeting in about a year, and yet was still receiving his \$400-a-month pay in absentia. A subsequent investigation by the district attorney's Public Integrity Division found no legal wrongdoing.

Jackson met his wife, Mary Joan Jackson, while attending Los Angeles City College in the late 1940s.

"Mama was pretty hot - I saw the pictures," Webb said with a laugh. "She was getting a little play from some of the boys in the class and he decided to make his move. He offered to tutor her. And the rest is history."

Both were the first members of their extended families to attend college, and both became schoolteachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District. They celebrated their 58th anniversary in October.

Jackson went on to obtain a bachelor's degree at what is now California State University, Los Angeles, a master's degree at USC, and a doctorate in human psychological behavior and education leadership from United States International University.

His college teaching career began in the late 1960s at USC, where he was an adjunct professor.

During his time at USC he became active in the civil-rights movement. He wrote a book titled "Integrating American Schools."

Jackson began working at El Camino as a psychology instructor in 1983. He later served as the dean of instructional services and student services.

He helped bring to El Camino the Extended Opportunity Program and Services program, which offers career counseling and tutoring to students of color and other at-risk students.

Ray Gen, El Camino's current board president - who worked with Jackson for five years - said he "was a model for all of us."

"He was always a strong, strong voice for students," he said. "I hope to one day be half as good as he was."

Jackson served as an elder at Full Harvest International Church in Los Angeles, and also worked as a therapist from his home in his own private practice.

"He was an awesome listener, and that's what people wanted at the end of the day," Webb said.

Jackson was also friendly with movers and shakers at Inglewood City Hall. Webb, who used to work there, said she always knew when he was on the premises, because she could hear the cries of merrymaking.

"He had so many friends," she said. "He would come in my office and say, 'Hey baby girl, you want to go for lunch?'"

In addition to his wife, Jackson is survived by a daughter, Natalia Denise Roberts; a son, Dion Jackson; and two grandchildren.

Services will be at 10 a.m. Monday at Crenshaw Christian Center, 7901 Vermont Ave., Los Angeles.

Peralta finalists to visit East Bay amid unrest

By Matt Krupnick
Contra Costa Times

Posted: 11/26/2010 12:00:00 AM PST

Three finalists vying to be the Peralta Community College District's next chancellor will visit the East Bay early next week, but employees are asking the district to repeat its search.

The candidates -- veteran administrators Ed Gould, Edna Chun and Lawrence Cox -- will answer questions at public forums Monday and Tuesday. Peralta's board of trustees is scheduled to interview them in a closed-door session Tuesday.

Peralta instructors say they were not consulted during the search, much of which occurred over the summer. The district's faculty union, the Peralta Federation of Teachers, plans to survey its members on a vote of no confidence in the search process because of the timing.

"I would have liked to see the process slowed down from the beginning," said Debra Weintraub, the union's president. "If I were coming in (as chancellor), I would want people to have felt part of the process. Otherwise, I would have a lot of work to do to win people over."

The district, which includes Oakland's Laney and Merritt colleges, Berkeley City College and the College of Alameda, is searching for a replacement for former Chancellor Elihu Harris, who was ousted by the board this year after a series of missteps, including raises given improperly to administrators and a no-bid contract he steered to a longtime business partner and friend. Longtime Peralta administrator Wise Allen is leading the district until a replacement is found.

It is not clear when trustees will vote on the appointment, but they have said they want a new chancellor by summer. Board President Abel Guillen did not respond to phone messages this week.

Gould is president and superintendent of Imperial Valley College, east of San Diego. He arrived there in 2008 after serving as a dean at Capella University, a for-profit online school. He also has worked in the statewide community-college chancellor's office and has held leadership positions at several community colleges, according to his biography on the Imperial Valley College website.

Chun, who holds advanced degrees in music and East Asian languages, is vice president for human resources and equity at Florida's Broward College, which changed its name from Broward Community College when it started offering bachelor's degrees last year. She has written two books about diversity among students and college employees.

Cox, chief executive officer of the Compton Community College District in Los Angeles County, has run the Compton district since 2008, taking the reins of a system recovering from a corruption scandal that led to a state takeover. He previously held positions at colleges in Ohio, Illinois and Tennessee.

Marine fights his way back

By Rob Kuznia Staff Writer

Posted: 11/27/2010 07:13:22 AM PST

As a tank machine gunner in the notorious battle of Fallujah - then the most dangerous city in Iraq, if not the world - Darlim Mena endured nine months of hell.

It was a time characterized by living in constant fear of snipers, mortars and IEDs - fears that all too often were realized.

And yet, when it was all over and he was back in Santa Monica, part of him wanted to return.

In Iraq, he felt like he had a place. Here, he felt adrift. He drank too much. His marriage fell apart.

"I was crying, I was drinking too much, I didn't know anybody," he says now. "I missed the Marine Corps."

One of his war buddies - also feeling unmoored after the tour - committed suicide.

Luckily for Mena, an opportunity opened up before his life unraveled past the point of no return.

In August 2008, a post-9-11 GI Bill went into effect granting vets more educational benefits. Today, Mena is using those benefits to pay for his schooling at the Lawndale campus ICDC College, a vocational school that also offers associate degrees. He's studying to become a physical therapist for veterans.

Mena isn't alone. Thanks in part to the bill, known as the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, enrollment of veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is skyrocketing at post-secondary schools in the South Bay and beyond.

At ICDC, which has four campuses in the Los Angeles area, the total number of veterans has shot up in five years to about 170 from just a dozen. Most of them are taking online classes from all over the nation.

The increase at El Camino College near Torrance has been similarly pronounced, doubling in a single year, from about 200 to the current 400. To better handle the tide, El Camino will open a new veterans center in the spring.

Also reporting significantly higher numbers in recent years are California State University, Dominguez Hills, and Los Angeles Harbor College. Farther north, UCLA established its own veteran resources office just two years ago.

The new GI Bill isn't the only factor. Elita Fielder, a spokeswoman for ICDC, said that according to her conversations with young veterans, a bigger catalyst is the lousy economy.

"When they came back, they really thought they'd be able to find jobs right away, and the work they did would somehow be able to transfer easily," she said. All too often, young veterans find themselves unqualified for the rapidly changing work force.

Across California, about a quarter of the veterans ages 24 and younger were unemployed in 2009, according to a report released this month from California's Employment Development Department. That's significantly higher than the rate of 20 percent among the general population in that age group.

As for the new GI Bill, it pertains only to veterans who have served since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. The educational benefits can be quite generous. A veteran with three years of active service can receive up to \$9,600 for three years' worth of schooling, said David Hall, ICDC's veterans administration certifying representative. Many also receive a housing stipend - veterans in this area receive around \$2,100 a month. Some also receive Pell grants or other federal grants to pay the balance of their expenses.

But, as Mena's story indicates, the price for those benefits can be unbelievably steep.

A 35-year-old man with a spare frame and an ever-

present 5 o'clock shadow, Mena is a soft-talker, but speaks emphatically and articulately.

"We were like zombies with no souls," he said. "Sometimes you prefer dying to living another day in hell."

As Mena tells the story, when he signed up for boot camp to be a Marine in January 2001, he never thought he'd see combat.

To the Florida native, enlisting seemed a great way to see the world. But the 9-11 terrorist attacks changed everything.

Shortly afterward, Mena was deployed to the Philippines, where terrorists were thought to be in hiding. For several days, a convoy of hulking ships containing tanks and 1,200 troops sat off the coast, waiting for the final word.

If the view from the shore was ominous, the mood on the inside was pent up and tense.

"I remember everybody was kind of scared," he said. "We were ready to rock and roll."

It never happened. The mission was aborted and Mena was sent for a short stint to South Korea, where he slept in a tent on the icy ground, guarding against the possibility of a North Korean invasion.

Then came the war in Iraq. Mena - who'd been trained for warfare in the jungle, not the desert - was informed he'd be going.

In April 2004, he participated in the first battle of Fallujah, which turned out to be an unsuccessful attempt by the U.S. military to capture the city. (It was triggered largely by the

infamous capture and public mutilation of four private military contractors from Blackwater USA.)

"At the time, I did not realize it was the most dangerous place in the whole, wide world," Mena said.

Most of the raids, Mena recalls, were performed late at night. His crew slept between noon and 5 p.m. Painfully aware of the enemy's penchant for decapitating captured soldiers and dragging them through the streets, the men in his unit had a pact: should they be captured, they would pull the pin on a hand grenade, "like a kamikaze."

Once, at 3 in the morning near the Tigris River, his convoy was hit from both sides - one by an IED and the other, a rocket-propelled-grenade. Two of his close friends were severely injured by shrapnel.

"It goes straight through your skin and into your bones," he said.

One was the friend who took his own life upon returning to the States.

Another horrific experience was cleanup duty after a battle, in which Mena and others loaded the bodies of fellow Marines into ice containers, which were eventually shipped home.

For many servicemen, Mena said, the hatred and violence starts to feel normal.

"I have friends, they've done four or five tours of Iraq," he said. "Here is different. They can't transition. This is too peaceful, you know what I mean? So they go back and they feel more loose. ... They can unleash the animal out there."

Mena, too, wanted to return to Iraq. But the woman who would become his ex-wife persuaded him to go to school. He took care of a few general education classes at Santa Monica City College. Then he came to ICDC for physical therapy. He plans to graduate in January.

"I have friends who were injured in Iraq and I have friends that are veterans that came back with no limbs," he said. "I would like to one day be a physical therapist to help them."