Pay for Performance

September 4, 2012 - 3:00am

By Scott Jaschik

In April, a union representing part-time adult education instructors at the City Colleges of Chicago agreed to a contract that based raises in part on student performance -- a highly unusual arrangement in faculty collective bargaining. Observers debated the significance of the move, given that it was just one of a number of union chapters in a large community college system.

On Saturday, the American Federation of Teachers chapter that represents nearly 1,500 full-time professors and professional staff at the seven colleges in the system announced that members had voted to accept a contract that eliminates the "step" increases that reward seniority every year. The contract also creates a bonus system under which all of the faculty members in the union could earn bonuses based on eight metrics on student outcomes, such as graduation rates and movement from remedial to credit courses.

Historically, faculty unions in the United States with step increases have fought against most proposals to eliminate them, and many have been skeptical of linking pay to student outcomes, arguing that low graduation rates are more likely to reflect student socioeconomics than what goes on in the classroom.

The contract was passed with the support of 72 percent of voting faculty members and 80 percent of professional staff members. But many faculty leaders opposed the deal and the union leaders at two of the system's campuses recommended that members vote no.

Tensions around the agreement are clear from the rhetoric around it, even after the union members approved it. While a spokesman for the college system spoke about how the contract de-emphasized seniority in favor of accountability, a spokesman for the union insisted that key protections for seniority remained.

Laurent Pernot, vice chancellor for institutional advancement for the City Colleges of Chicago, said that the contract reflected the goal of Chancellor Cheryl Hyman to promote accountability and value "performance over seniority."

The bonus pay will be given to all faculty members if the district achieves certain goals, and will not be awarded individually. "We're calling it student success pay. It's a group incentive," he said.

There are eight metrics, and partial bonuses may be earned if some but not all of the goals are met. The metrics involve:

The number of students who earn degrees or certificates.

The number of at-risk students earning degree or certificates.

The number of students who transfer to a four-year institution within three years of enrollment.

The number of remedial students who advance to college-level work.

The number of new full-time students who earn 30 credits in their first year.

The number of part-time students who earn 15 credits in their first year.

The percentage of former students who are employed in the fields for which they received training.

The median earnings of graduates in fields that they studied.

Pernot said that a joint faculty-administration committee will discuss ways to prevent "moral hazards" in meeting the goals. For instance, he said that the agreement specifically states that grades will not be used to measure success, so that there is no incentive for grade inflation.

He said that the goals are "meaningful but achievable."

For example, the goal on the number of graduates would require that, five years from now, the system graduate 25,000 students -- up from 8,567 this year. (There are intermediate goals for the years between now and then.) The goal would bring the three-year graduation rate for the system to 20 percent, double today's rate of 10 percent.

But Pernot noted that the current rate is up from 7 percent two years ago -- improvement he said "couldn't have happened without the faculty," and shows that the gains sought are possible to achieve.

He said that the elimination of step increases -- which will take place after one final increase agreed to in the contract -- reflect the idea that automatically increasing pay based on seniority is "an idea that has run its course and is not sustainable."

The contract has a mix of other measures -- cost-of-living increases but also an increased share of health care costs paid by employees.

Pawns for the Mayor?

As faculty members prepared to vote on the contract -- 10 months before the current contract expired -- the measure was criticized in parts of the Chicago labor world. Mayor Rahm Emanuel (who praised the new contract) is currently in a showdown with the union that represents elementary and secondary school teachers, and a strike is possible this month.

Some critics of the contract have speculated that the City Colleges offered the union a better deal than it might have otherwise so that Mayor Emanuel could embarrass the teachers' union by showing that educators are willing to approve contracts that take away long valued union benefits. One blog post said that the college faculty members have become "pawns" in the mayor's fight with the K-12 union.

Kaitlyn Rowney, a spokeswoman for the faculty union, denied that there was any pressure on the union to complete a contract now. She said that the contract is based on "what's best for our members, for students and for taxpayers." Asked if there were advantages to agreeing to the deal now, she said that "circumstances" may play into the union's strategy, but only to the extent that those circumstances advance the interests of faculty members and students.

She said that the union did not view the loss of step increases as a major blow for two reasons. One is that the steps have not always been fully financed in the past, "so there was already inconsistency." Also, she noted that "lanes" survived the contract even if steps did not. Lanes are career stages that do provide for higher salaries based on seniority, obtaining new degrees, and other factors. While the number of lanes has been reduced for new employees from four to three, reducing the number of times in a career that such raises are available this route, Rowney said that the preservation of lanes means that seniority still contributes to some raises.

As to the bonus pay, she said union members were reassured by the contract provision that grades would not be used to measure student outcomes. Further, she said that the goals outlined were "absolutely achievable" so there is a real shot at the faculty members earning the additional funds.

While Rowney acknowledged that the contract has some critics among the rank and file, she noted that the 72 percent of faculty members suggested a solid majority behind the deal.

'Fear, Fear, Fear'

Hector Reyes is assistant chair of the union chapter at Harold Washington College, where leaders of the union urged members to vote down the contract. An associate professor of physical sciences, he said that the reason the contract passed was "fear, fear, fear." He said that the message from the system union leadership was that if the faculty rejected this contract, things would only get worse.

"I think this contract is very damaging to us," he said. "This was not a vote for the contract, but a tactical vote by many professors."

Reyes said that the anti-seniority views being espoused in eliminating step raises are "part of an agenda to treat higher education like it's just another business." Faculty members don't arrive automatically knowing how to reach students, many of whom have not been adequately prepared for college, and many of whom have many challenges in their lives, Reyes said. As a result, there is a difference in the skills of someone who has been there longer, and that should be rewarded.

"It's very dishonest for them to say that seniority doesn't matter," he said. "Any employer who says that is just trying to have their bottom line served, and that leads to a revolving door. We have to ask whether having a revolving door is a good thing for higher education."

Rudy Fichtenbaum, an economics professor at Wright State University and national president of the American Association of University Professors, said he was not familiar with details of the Chicago contract, but that he does "not buy the argument that bonuses improve accountability."

The metrics related to job placement, he said via e-mail "can be affected by conditions in the local economy or by the type of career planning an placement services that an institution offers." He said these factors "have nothing to do with faculty performance." For that reason, he said that "holding faculty accountable for job placement is like holding faculty accountable for alcohol use on campus."

Fichtenbaum also questioned the idea that faculty member bonuses should be based on metrics such as graduation rates. "Many factors that affect graduation rates; the preparation of students, the level of support that colleges and universities provide to students in the form of tutoring and the availability of remedial classes, advising, transfers, family circumstances, jobs and other economic circumstances directly related to a student's socioeconomic status can all affect graduation rates," he said. "What happens in the classroom is just one small factor in determining graduation rates.... [B]onuses will simply provide an incentive to lower academic standards."

The Wisconsin Impact

Richard Boris, director of the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions at Hunter College of the City University of New York, said that the ideas in the Chicago contract may soon be seen at more colleges.

Linking pay to student performance "has not been at all common, but I think it's coming," he said. Governors and mayors are encouraging the idea, Boris said.

And while there have been some cases of unions giving up step pay increases, he said that typically has been accompanied by generous raises (and better economic times) than are present today. With step increases, he said, "the conventional wisdom of unions has been that when you have bad economic times such as this one, at least 60 to 70 percent continue to get raises." For that reason, he said, many administrations have tried to get rid of steps.

Boris said that the Midwest may be seeing more of a push by management on these types of measures and slightly less resistance from unions because of the success of Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker in eliminating most collective bargaining for public employees and because of the similar measure in Ohio (even though the latter was rescinded by voters).

"I can't believe that Wisconsin doesn't play a part" in what is proposed and what is accepted, Boris said.

Dan Walters: Bill adds a new factor for gaining California university tenure

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It may seem self-evident, but it's nevertheless a matter of state law that teaching is an "essential responsibility," along with research, for members of the University of California's faculty and "a primary responsibility" for those in the California State University system.

Those declarations are the legal criteria upon which faculty members are to be hired, promoted and given the much-coveted status of "tenure" in both institutions.

OK so far. After all, what's more fundamentally important for any public institution of higher education, not to mention the taxpaying public, than teaching and research?

But if Gov. Jerry Brown signs a bill that whipped through both houses of the Legislature in the final, hectic hours of the 2012 session, that will change – radically, perhaps.

A third element would be required in the hiring and promotion of faculty members. It's called "service." The specifics of Assembly Bill 2132 appear to give great weight to political, or at least semi-political, activities favored by those on the political left.

They include, in the words of a legislative bill analysis, "developing programs for underserved populations" and "outreach programs developed to promote cultural diversity in the student body."

The California State University system would be required to make "service" an element with teaching and the bill "encourages" the constitutionally independent University of California to include "service" in its evaluations.

So who wants this change?

Assemblyman Ricardo Lara, D-Bell Gardens, introduced the bill at the behest of the California Faculty Association and the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies, because, according to Lara's office, "some faculty feel that their service activities have not been appropriately recognized for purposes of merit, promotion or tenure reviews."

The bill moved easily through both legislative houses on mostly party-line votes – Democrats for it, Republicans against – culminating with a 24-14 vote in the Senate and a 51-27 roll call in the Assembly.

It was one of dozens of union-supported bills that won legislative approval and landed on Brown's desk, which makes it typical of the last week in that sense.

AB 2132 should, however, have received more than cursory attention because of its underlying philosophical, or ideological, basis.

Public university faculty members should, of course, be free to engage in whatever extracurricular activities they wish, as long as they don't compromise their primary duties. But should other activities be equated with teaching or research? Would it stop at outreach or wind up including political activism?

This is one of those slippery slopes.

Editorial: Lots of money measures

Daily Breeze

Posted: 09/03/2012

You thought it was only state taxes and Measure J on the November ballot? Then you thought wrong

IN addition to the two, competing statewide tax initiatives on the November ballot, there are nearly three dozen Los Angeles County measures asking for new taxes, expanded taxes or building bonds for various cities and school districts from Pacoima to Pomona and Lancaster to Long Beach.

Propositions 30 and 38 and the countywide measure J, which expands a half-cent sales tax for 30 years, are going to be enough for Angelenos to swallow. Many will find even more money measures on their ballots. Below is a summary of them, from Long Beach to Los Angeles. They come in two basic categories: taxes levied on people and businesses within specific cities, and bonds for school districts.

City taxes

Artesia: To pay for public safety, this city is asking for an increase in business taxes, except for businesses with less than $150,000 a year in gross receipts.

Bellflower: This city also wants more revenue for public safety and other services, but is seeking a 2 percent increase in the utility users tax for five years.

Culver City: On top of Measure J, Culver City officials are betting their residents will enact a half-cent sales tax for 10 years.

Downey: Voters will be asked to vote to "reduce" the tax on telecommunication services from 5 percent to 4.8percent. We put that in quote marks because while the tax rate may be shrinking, what the tax covers will expand from phones to wireless devices.

La Mirada: A one-cent sales tax for five years, to pay for a host of city services, will come before voters.

Los Angeles: Residents who live in the hillsides of the Santa Monica Mountains will be asked to pony up a few bucks a year to pay for preservation of the wild lands around them.

One measure - Measure HH - asks property owners around Griffith Park to pay $24 a year for 10 years. Another - Measure MM - targets those east of the 405 Freeway to Calabasas, asking for $19 a year for 10 years.

School districts

It's no secret that school district budgets have taken a hit in recent years, making it hard to pay teachers, let alone buy new technology, fix up classrooms or replace leaky roofs. To that end, several districts are asking voters to approve bonds in various amounts.

Bellflower Unified School District: $79 million.

Cerritos Community College District: $350 million

El Camino Community College District: $350 million

Inglewood Unified School District: $90 million

Redondo Unified School District: $63 million

Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District: $385million

Centinela Valley Union High School District is also looking for more revenue, but for academics (not for administrator pay, it makes clear). To that end, voters within the district will be asked to support a property tax, 2 cents per square foot for residential property and 7.5 cents for all other property.

Hour by Hour

Inside Higher Ed

September 5, 2012 - 3:00am

By Paul Fain

A philanthropist, one of America's wealthiest men, was worried about faculty pensions. The solution he successfully pushed, with the largesse of his foundation, led to the creation of the credit hour, which has become higher education's de facto standard unit of measuring academic work.

Andrew Carnegie never intended for the time-based credit hour to be used to measure student learning, according to a new report from the New America Foundation and Education Sector, which tracks the standard's history. But it has become a measure and a proxy for what students are supposedly learning.

An over-reliance on the credit hour, which links the awarding of academic credit to hours of contact between professors and students, has led to many of higher education's problems, according to the report.

"There is pretty compelling evidence that what we have right now isn't working," said Amy Laitinen, deputy director for higher education at the New America Foundation and the report's author.

One obvious concern is that colleges often reject transfer credits, wasting students' money and time, in part because they don't trust what constitutes a credit hour at another institution, according to the report.

The credit hour can also stymie innovation. For example, it is difficult to apply the "seat-time" standard to online classes, which are typically less tied to class time but are an important and rapidly growing element of higher education, the report says. Competency-based education, in which students learn at their own pace, is also a bad fit with the credit hour. So, too, is prior-learning assessment, where students can earn credit for learning outside of college, like training on the job or in the military.

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching warned about the inadequacy of the credit hour back in 1906, shortly after the standard was established.

After all, Carnegie's original motivation had nothing to do with college-level learning, according to the report. He wanted to create a free pension plan for underpaid professors, so they could retire at a reasonable age. In order to opt in, the foundation required colleges to sign on to a time-based standard to address another issue: college admissions requirements. More high school graduates were applying to colleges, and the new "Carnegie Unit" was an easy way to measure how much time high school students spent in each subject.

Colleges followed suit by converting their own course offerings into time-based units, and ignored the foundation’s warnings about the credit hour’s utility. The result is a standard of one credit hour for each hour of faculty-student contact time per week over a 15-week semester, with most bachelor degrees weighing in at 120 credits.

That standard falls short, according to the report, because the credit hour does not measure learning. Grades are supposed to do that, but plenty of research has identified problems with grade inflation. And even if grades did work, Laitinen said the credit hour still wouldn’t allow flexibility for students to learn at different speeds. For example, one student could master college-level calculus in a month in a self-paced class, while another might take a full semester (or longer) to become proficient.

As a result, Laitinen said, the credit hour is at the intersection of three of higher education's thorniest issues: cost, time and academic quality.

The report includes a quote from a 1938 Carnegie Foundation that remains relevant:

“The system of units and credits, which, useful as it was a third of century ago, is not good enough for American education today,” wrote Walter A. Jessup, the foundation’s then president. “Higher education appears to be well on its way to another stage of development in which promotion, at least in college, will be based upon ‘the attainments of minds thoroughly stored and competent.’”

Out of Time?

Blowing up the credit hour won’t be easy, in part because it’s so convenient. And any reforms need to be both thoughtful and deliberate, Laitinen argues in the report. That’s because just opening the floodgates to federal aid without some standard for measuring learning could encourage diploma mills and a wave of unearned credits for cash.

“Abusive interpretation of the credit hour could lead to fraud on a huge scale. But the credit hour is also archaic, a nonsensical basis for regulating online programs in which the whole notion of time in the classroom has no meaning,” according to the report. “Define the credit hour too tightly, and innovation would be stifled. Define it too loosely, and taxpayers would get taken for a ride.”

However, Laitinen, who is a former official at the U.S. Department of Education, said that balance can be achieved with policy fixes for the credit hour. And the key is for the federal government, accreditors and colleges to do a better job of talking to each other about how to get there.

The federal government, by determining whether colleges can participate in federal aid programs, has one of the biggest roles to play.

The Education Department recently attempted to set a consistent, standard definition for the credit hour. That controversial effort, which drew 1,200 comments, resulted in a vague, confusing definition, at least according to most observers.

It calls for one academic credit to equal one hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction time and a minimum of two hours of out-of-class work per week, over a 15-week period. A credit hour could also be the "equivalent amount of work over a different amount of time," according to the definition, which also tosses in learning outcomes and "evidence of student achievement."

A better approach, Laitinen writes, would be a rewritten definition that preserves the underlying meaning (See box at right). That new standard would allow colleges to "define the scope of courses in terms of evidence of achievement, learning outcomes and student work, instead of time," the report said.

A 'Fine Line'

Several colleges have experimented with decoupling college credit from "seat time" for decades, according to the report, including Excelsior College, Charter Oak State College, the State University of New York's Empire State College and Thomas Edison State College. More recently, Western Governors University and Southern New Hampshire University have used competency-based education to challenge the status quo.

But government policy can make or break that innovation, Laitinen writes. And while the report advocates for the Education Department to encourage new approaches, it said the federal government should not be in the business of setting its own standardized outcomes for measuring student learning. Instead, the report proposes three recommendations to move policy forward without being heavy-handed.

First, there is wiggle room within the current framework, according to the report. Western Governors' much-ballyhooed competency-based education approach gets the job done. And the online, nonprofit college does so without -- despite widespread belief to the contrary -- relying on an exemption that would allow the university to tie its credits to "direct assessment" of student competencies, rather than a traditional credit-hour calculation.

The Education Department also has in place a program through which colleges can serve as "experimental sites" to test learning-based financial aid policies. With this laboratory-style approach, the report said, colleges could try to award financial aid for credits earned through prior learning or through the demonstration of learning outcomes.

Finally, the report advocates for institutions and the department to give direct assessment a whirl, enabling colleges to drop the credit hour and assess student learning in programs that are eligible for federal financial aid. But the feds should set a high bar, Laitinen said.

“They just have to walk a fine line, but it can be done,” she said, adding that only the “best actors” should be allowed to participate in direct assessment.

Laitinen predicts that at least a few colleges will soon be able to drop the credit hour. One reason, she said is that both presidential candidates have expressed interest in tying credits to student learning.

“There’s a real desire to move away from seat time,” she said.

Santa Monica College to scrap winter classes

LA Times

September 6, 2012

Santa Monica College was one of the first community colleges in California to offer winter classes to help students hasten their progress toward a degree or transfer to a four-year university. But the Westside campus is joining a long list of schools statewide that have decided to scrap the session in response to severe funding cuts, officials said Thursday.

The college suffered nearly $8 million in state funding cuts in the 2011-12 fiscal year. All 112 community colleges, as well as the University of California and California State University face another hit mid-year if voters reject a tax measure on the November ballot supported by Gov. Jerry Brown.

Eliminating the six-week winter session will save about $2.5 million, said Donald Girard, senior director of government relations and institutional communications at the Santa Monica campus.

“It’s a difficult juggling act,” Girard said. “But by concentrating on cuts in the winter, we won’t have to devastate our spring semester as much as we would otherwise.”

About 11,385 students took courses in winter 2012, with about 400 classes offered, Girard said. The college will make a formal announcement soon so that students who had been accustomed to taking classes year-round can make other plans. Some of the college’s large population of international students, for example, may decide to return home during the break, Girard said.

Some students are opposing the cancellation and were planning to protest ahead of this evening’s Board of Trustees meeting, which is scheduled to include adoption of the school’s $182-million operating budget.

Parker Jean, president of Associated Students of Santa Monica College, said loss of the winter session will place a bigger burden on students seeking to advance their educations.

“It’s a direct reflection of budget cuts across the state,” said Jean, 19, a political science major. “It’s a shame we have to make these types of decisions locally.”

According to a history provided by the college, the Santa Monica campus in 1991 inaugurated an experimental compressed calendar that included a winter (1992) session, in which classes met more hours per week than during a typical semester. By 2000, the Los Angeles Community College District, the state's largest, began to adopt the winter classes, and in recent years, about 35 of the state’s 72 community college districts offered the winter session.

But California’s budget crisis and the resulting cuts to higher education have steadily whittled away at the offerings. In a recent survey conducted by the chancellor’s office, only 12 of 78 responding campuses indicated they planned to offer winter classes in the current academic year.

November ballot measure would allow major El Camino College upgrade

By Rob Kuznia The Daily Breeze

Posted: 09/10/2012

A construction bond measure on the Nov. 6 ballot would enable El Camino College to replace or renovate about half of the buildings on campus - including the football stadium, which would be torn down and rebuilt.

If approved by South Bay voters, Measure E would borrow about $350 million to upgrade the segments of the Torrance-area campus that construction crews couldn't get to after the passage of a similar bond measure about a decade ago.

"This is for the students of the future," El Camino spokeswoman Ann Garten said. "Many of the students that would benefit are currently in elementary or middle school."

Passage of Measure E would add $7 per $100,000 assessed value on top of the $17 already paid by area taxpayers for the 2002 bond measure. The cost to the average property owner would increase from the current $51 a year to $72.

Most of the projects from the $394 million facilities bond in 2002 are either newly finished or will soon come online.

Measure E is just one of several school-related tax-hike requests that voters in this area will face in November.

For instance, they'll help issue a verdict on two statewide initiatives - Propositions 30 and 38 - that would raise taxes for the benefit of schools. And, in an unusual undertaking, voters in Lawndale, Hawthorne, Lennox and the west Hawthorne-area neighborhoods that make up the tiny Wiseburn school district will decide whether to approve a region-wide parcel tax that would benefit their K-12 schools.

Not only would Murdock Stadium be replaced with bond proceeds, but Measure E would provide funds to upgrade classrooms, labs, lecture halls, and instructional equipment, as well as make health and safety repairs and energy-efficiency improvements, college officials say.

"Many of our buildings and facilities are more than 50 years old now, some are nearly 65 years old," said El Camino President Thomas Fallo. "They have been well-maintained, but, like any structures of that age, they need repairs and renovations."

The El Camino Board of Trustees decided to put the item on the ballot in mid-July, but the school's administration issued a press release last week to coincide with the beginning of the fall term.

Although the bond measure would tax businesses as well as residents, it was endorsed last week by the South Bay Association of Chambers of Commerce, which represents 53,000 businesses in the area, Garten said.

But the ballot measure did not receive unanimous approval on the El Camino board. Casting the lone dissenting vote on July 16 was Trustee Maureen O'Donnell. Reached at home, O'Donnell said she's skeptical about the idea of borrowing money to erect new buildings at a time when community colleges lack sufficient funds to staff them.

Bill Beverly, the college's board president, dismissed this argument as "silly."

"We're not building these buildings or making improvements for next year, we're looking down the road 15, 20, 25 years," he said. "Think about it: With the 2002 bond, some of the projects are just coming online. ... So we expect 10 years from now, when we're halfway through spending the new bond money, we'll be back in a climate where we're looking at expanding enrollment (and staffing) again."

A poll conducted in May suggests that Measure E could be a success. The bond measure needs just 55 percent approval to pass, but 68 percent of the likely voters surveyed said they'd support it, Garten said.

If the tax hike is approved, the football team would have to find another field to call home during the 2013 season. (The college is currently in negotiations with an area high school, though the administration declined to identify which one.) The new stadium would replace a 60-year-old facility that, unlike most of its contemporaries, is not encircled by a track.

Improvements also call for replacing the music building, student activities center and arts-and-behavioral-sciences structure, as well as renovating the student library and Marsee Auditorium.

They would enhance classroom space and training for future nurses, firefighters, and other first responders, as well as improve educational resources for students who are veterans, college officials say.

Officials insist that energy-efficiency improvements from the 2002 bond measure are already saving the college $100,000 each year. They say the current initiative would lead to an additional savings of $260,000 annually.

By law, funds from facility bond measures can only be spent on buildings, classrooms or instructional equipment. No bond funds can be spent on administrator pensions or salaries.

Voters in the El Camino College Community College District include residents of El Segundo, Hawthorne, Hermosa Beach, Inglewood, Lawndale, Lennox, Manhattan Beach, Redondo Beach, and Torrance.

Petroleum engineer recalls MESA role in career journey
MESA News Summer/Fall 2012

Estuardo Iriarte moved to South Central Los Angeles from Guatemala when he was eight years old. He began with MESA in 9th grade at the LA Center for Enriched Studies, and continued while a student at El Camino College in Torrance and California State University, Long Beach. Iriarte earned a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering in 2008 and a master's degree in dynamics, control systems and vibrations from CSU Long Beach in 2011. He has worked for Honeywell Turbo Technologies, the Valero Wilmington Refinery and Northrop Grumman Corporation, and is currently a production engineer for Occidental Petroleum Corporation in Long Beach.

Q: What was it like to arrive in a new country at such a young age?

A: The hardest part was the language barrier. My first year was pretty difficult but I quickly picked up the language. I was eight at the time and started the second half of second grade in the US. I recall being teased about not speaking the language. The first time I spoke out loud in class was in the fourth grade.

Q: What challenges did you face growing up in South Central LA?

A: Aside from the crime and violence in my community, the hardest challenge was staying away from bad influences. One of the contributions MESA provided me with was doing just that, it kept me busy enough to keep me away from the bad influences.

Q: What do you remember most about MESA in high school?

A: My mom, as a single mother, worked a lot to keep our family afloat. She did not have the time or knowledge to expose me to the world of engineering. MESA planted this engineering seed through many of its activities. Many of the college visits, MESA days and activities that I participated in gave me a good idea about the world of engineering.

Q: How did MESA help you at El Camino College?

A: At El Camino College I once again found a helping hand, this time in the form of mentorship and coaching from (MESA director) Arturo Hernandez, and workshops, internships and MESA study groups. MESA showed me what I needed to do, referred me to the appropriate people to set up my educational plan. Once my roadmap was set, MESA provided free workshops on the core classes I needed help with, provided me with great resources in the form of a computer lab and a place to study with fellow engineering students, contacts in the engineering community, scholarship opportunities and even helped me land my first internship.

Q: Were you the first in your family to go to college? If so, how does that feel?

A: My mother attended college in Guatemala, but it has no equivalency in the US. In the States, my mom supported us by being a janitor and cleaning houses. It felt great to be the first in our family to graduate from college in the United States. •

Cal Chamber's Neutral Position on Prop 30 Won't "Clear the Way"

By Joel Fox
Editor of Fox & Hounds and President of the Small Business Action Committee
Wednesday, September 12th, 2012

Governor Jerry Brown yesterday declared that the decision by the California Chamber of Commerce to stay neutral on his tax measure, Proposition 30, is "basically clearing the way" for the passage of the measure.

Not so fast, governor.

The chamber represents large businesses, many of which are afraid to take a position opposed to the governor considering he has the power to approve or veto legislation that concern the big businesses. The big businesses are also concerned that if Prop 30 fails, the governor will promote other tax measures that would affect the businesses directly. But the tax increase measure is not about big corporations.

Corporations won't pay more in taxes if Prop 30 passes. Many small businesses will.

Many small businesses pay their taxes through personal income tax. These small businesses will be greatly affected by the tax increases included in Prop 30.

The Tax Foundation, a nonpartisan tax research group based in Washington, D.C., annually ranks the states according to tax burden and business tax climate. California currently ranks 5th highest in tax burden and a lowly 48th in the category of having a good business tax climate. In its most recent report, note what the Tax Foundation says about the current tax burden on small business in California:

Since most small businesses are S Corporations, partnerships, or sole proprietorships, they pay their business taxes at the rates for individuals. ***That makes California's taxes on small businesses some of the most burdensome in the nation.*** *(Emphasis mine.)*

The situation for small business will only become more difficult if Proposition 30 passes.

Small business understands what Proposition 30 means and the Chamber of Commerce position of neutral will make no dent in the campaign to defeat it.

Broken system dooms CCSF

Chronicle Op-Ed

Posted: 09/13/2012 9:01 PM

The way things are going, City College of San Francisco will close this spring. Usually when an institution is in a dire life-or-death situation, those in charge make the tough decisions needed to right the ship. Therein lies the problem: It is not at all clear who is in charge, because CCSF has been part of a grand experiment in democratic management forced upon community colleges by an obscure rule adopted 22 years ago. While the original motivation for the shared-governance requirement was understandable, even laudable, in hindsight we can see that empowering everyone leaves no one in charge. California's community colleges are capsizing as a result.

In the 1980s, the "junior" colleges were still attempting to shed their origins as extensions of high schools. The faculty wanted the status and power of professors, like at the University of California where the academic senate plays a strong role in protecting academic freedom, maintaining standards for the professoriate and preventing the dumbing down of the curriculum. At UC and other universities, faculty members were not formally in charge but they had real influence because they had credibility with the trustees, with alumni and with the public. College administrators who didn't listen to input from the professoriate would do so at their peril.

Faculty at the community colleges asked for help in strengthening the role of their academic senates so they could be more like other colleges. But rather than insisting simply that their voices be heard, they sought actual authority - more formal faculty power than anywhere else in the country. The statewide Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges granted their wish in 1990. Since then, local college trustees and chancellors are required by law to defer to academic senates on a wide range of topics.

CCSF went all-out in implementing the new state requirement. Today, an Office of Shared Governance manages 46 committees that develop policies that feed into a faculty Executive Council. Further, a petition process can put any issue to a full faculty vote. The

CCSF Board of Trustees, elected by the voters of San Francisco to run the college, is required by the state to rubber-stamp the Shared Governance decisions (or indecision) or risk going to court to prove that the disagreement was "exceptional" and "compelling." The result of this blurring of responsibility is predictable: Decisions don't get made, no one is held accountable, and everyone blames everyone else.

Two independent reviews have offered stinging critiques of CCSF's processes. The accreditor found "a veil of distrust among the governance groups" instead of clear decision-making roles. A fiscal review found the college paralyzed by a culture that undermines good management, preventing it from making the decisions that would stave off bankruptcy. Decision-making "appears to have been driven more by power, influence and political whim, than reason, logic and fairness."

Faculty should have a strong voice. However, forced power-sharing does not produce cooperation; it generates posturing, pettiness and stalemates. The formal authority that the state bestowed upon academic senates went too far, resulting in community colleges that too often cannot adapt to the changing budgets and the changing needs of the state. A few extraordinary chancellors with accommodating faculty have been able to manage adequately, but most community colleges are stumbling along, failing to take steps that are critical to student access and success.

Responsibility for the mess lies ultimately with the state board, which needs to end the failed experiment. CCSF, however, cannot afford to wait for the state board to act. For the sake of tens of thousands of students, the CCSF academic senate should formally step aside to put the duly elected trustees squarely in charge so we all can hold them fully accountable.

If CCSF can't get its act together, those in charge should be fired. If the academic senate doesn't get out of the way to make it clear that the board of trustees are actually at the helm, then San Franciscans will know who to blame if the ship sinks.

Robert Shireman is the director of California Competes: Higher Education for a Strong Economy, a nonpartisan organization that develops recommendations for improved practices and policies in California higher education. He served in the Obama and Clinton administrations.

Dan Walters: Bankruptcy ruling could alter California pension law

By Dan Walters
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The public pension reform legislation that the Legislature and Gov. Jerry Brown adopted very carefully avoided any changes of current pensioners' benefits and those of future recipients now on state and local payrolls.

Not only would that have been politically impossible, but it's widely assumed that pensions are protected by the state constitution's ban on "impairing the obligation of contracts."

Therefore, all of the pension benefit changes apply only to future employees.

But is the legal barrier to changing current pension promises absolute?

Or could Stockton's municipal bankruptcy filing punch a hole through it?

Under bankruptcy protection, Stockton wants those who hold millions of dollars in city-issued bonds – or their insurers – to take a haircut, but it doesn't reduce the $29 million it pays each year to the California Public Employees' Retirement System. That doesn't sit well with the bond insurers.

Assured Guaranty Ltd., which insured many of those bonds and could lose over $100 million, complained in a bankruptcy court filing that Stockton "targeted its bondholders and left CalPERS and serious labor concessions off the negotiating table."

Another insurer, National Public Finance, added, "Rather than face the hard realities imposed by its unbearable liability to Cal-PERS, the city takes a pass."

The insurers, in essence, are asking bankruptcy Judge Christopher Klein to declare that the city's bankruptcy plan is inadequate because it ignores pension debt, thereby presumably requiring it to reduce pension costs. In reaction, Cal-PERS has told Klein that pensions should have more status than bonds.

During Vallejo's bankruptcy reorganization a few years earlier, CalPERS warned the city not to attempt to cut pensions and it didn't. Nevertheless, Vallejo generated union-backed, albeit unsuccessful, legislation to force cities to get permission from a union-friendly state board before filing for bankruptcy protection.

But what about the state constitution's protections of pensions as contracts? Wouldn't that shield them in bankruptcy court?

Not necessarily, as Judge Klein's ruling in a related matter implies. Stockton cut health care for its retirees, and they asked Klein to restore coverage, claiming "vested contractual rights." But last month, he declared that federal bankruptcy law trumps the state constitution's contract impairment provision.

"In other words," he wrote in a 40-page ruling, "while a state cannot make a law impairing the obligation of contract, Congress can do so. The goal of the Bankruptcy Code is adjusting the debtor-creditor relationship. Every discharge impairs contracts."

Could bond insurers force Stockton to reduce its retirees' pensions?

It's certainly possible. If it happens, long-held assumptions about the sanctity of California's public pensions will change.

City College near bankruptcy, audit says

SF Gate, September 19, 2012

Nanette Asimov

http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/City-College-near-bankruptcy-audit-says-3875651.php

City College of San Francisco is perilously close to bankruptcy, in part because it employs nearly twice as many faculty as similar colleges and pays them better - yet educates no more students on average, says a new financial analysis of the state's largest public school.

The college got into trouble because, unlike other colleges, it failed to make the budget cuts necessary to keep up with reductions in state funding, never set aside money for its growing retirement obligations, and "has provided salary increases and generous benefits with no discernible means to pay for them," says the review by the state's Fiscal Crisis & Management Assistance Team, authorized by state law to help public schools in financial trouble.

For example, employees receive 23 paid holidays beyond vacation and work less than 40 hours a week.

As City College fights to retain its accreditation and stay open, the new report flings back the curtain on a series of management errors that may doom the college of 86,000 students - or help it, if it's not too late.

"I look at this very positively," said John Rizzo, president of the Board of Trustees, who called the thick report a helpful tool, filled with recommendations for the college to use in its all-out effort to meet the strict timeline for change imposed by the regional Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges.

The college has until March 15 to prove it has made the structural changes needed to retain its accreditation. If not, the commission could yank that authorization in June, and the college would have to close.

Precarious finances

Meanwhile, the financial problems at City College are pervasive.

Its current budget, for example, assumes the passage of Measure A, a local property tax for the school, and Proposition 30, a state tax measure. But if voters reject the measures, City College will be in the hole by more than $11 million this year.

"The college needs to develop a plan right now if the tax measures fail," Michelle Plumbtree, lead author of the fiscal report, told the college trustees at a well-attended board meeting Tuesday night.

Even if the measures pass, the college will face a deficit of $2.5 million in just two years as the obligation to pay retiree health benefits soars without enough cash to pay for them, the analysis says.

The new report refers to "fiscal insolvency" rather than bankruptcy because no state college has gone bankrupt. One, Compton College, was about to go bust but received an emergency loan from the state - only to go out of business in 2006 after becoming the only community college to lose accreditation.

If City College can't pay its bills, "it would likely ask the state for an emergency loan," said Erik Skinner, interim chancellor for the state's community college system. "But the state budget is already spread thinly, so there's no guarantee."

Analysts compared City College to five college districts similar in size and demographics: Foothill-De Anza College District in Santa Clara County, and Santa Monica, Long Beach, Mount San Antonio and El Camino, all in Southern California.

In their report, the analysts refer to "full-time equivalent" employees and students, instead of counting individuals. Among their findings:

- City College employs almost twice the tenured faculty per 1,000 students (24) as the two largest comparison colleges, Mount San Antonio (14) and Santa Monica (12).
- City College has 58 employees per 1,000 students, compared with 41 at Mount San Antonio and 46 at Santa Monica - a "very substantial difference," analyst Mike Hill told the trustees.
- Employees who work at least 20 hours a week receive full benefits, negating much of the cost advantage of having part-time faculty.
- Enrollment has declined slightly since 2005, while the number of full-time instructors, counselors, librarians and support staff has grown.
- Faculty salaries rose by 25 percent over seven years, while revenue increased by less than 10 percent

Employees consistently told the trustees that City College operates "based on power, influence and political influences rather than reason, logic and fairness," according to the report. "The emphasis has been on keeping people employed and ensuring that they receive benefits, which is a positive goal but should not usurp the purpose of any college district, which is to serve students."

The next deadline for City College is Oct. 15, when it must provide the accrediting commission with an action plan.

Interim college Chancellor Pamila Fisher will present a draft version of that plan to the trustees on Sept. 27.

"The short-term cuts will be the most visible and painful," said spokesman Larry Kamer.

Negotiating changes

Plumbtree told the trustees, "We feel this is fixable, but you'll have to move quickly. (Labor) negotiations need to start now - a lot of your contracts are over and above what other college districts have."

But will the unions agree to the deep cuts that appear to be needed to keep the college viable?

Alisa Messer, president of the American Federation of Teachers Local 2121, which represents faculty, said earlier that the union has "consistently tried to help the college and to hold the whole college fiscally accountable - but also as a place where workers' rights and student access is preserved."

Dan Walters: Educators sullying state law to support Proposition 30

By Dan Walters
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Education Code Section 7054 prohibits K-12 and community college officials from spending public funds "for the purpose of urging the support or defeat of any ballot measure or candidate … ."

The state Supreme Court cited that law three years ago in ruling that it was illegal for a teachers union to use school district facilities to distribute political literature.

Throughout California, however, school officials are sullying the intent of the law by using official communications to plug passage of Proposition 30, Gov. Jerry Brown's sales and income tax increase.

One of many examples: Deborah Bettencourt, superintendent of the Folsom Cordova Unified School District in suburban Sacramento, sent a letter to parents and district employees warning "if the governor's Proposition 30 doesn't pass in November, we will again be faced with the reduction of the instructional year by up to six additional furlough days, a loss of learning time that will impact current students and their performance … ."

That's a virtual replay of the argument that Brown and his allies are making in their campaign ads and literature.

In the same vein, the California State University system has drafted letters for applicants for admission saying, "Because enrollment capacity is tied to the amount of available state funding, the campuses will be able to admit more applicants if Proposition 30 passes and fewer applicants if the proposition fails … ."

The letter continues, "the CSU budget would be less likely subject to cuts, and potentially could be increased in future years" if Proposition 30 passes.

Just Tuesday, the University of California at Berkeley announced a Proposition 30 Awareness Project to test the use of Facebook, Twitter and other social media to distribute information about the measure.

Ken Goldberg, an engineering professor, said in the announcement, "Although the outcome of this vote has an enormous potential impact on students, alumni, teachers, parents and employers, many are not aware of Proposition 30. The California Proposition 30 Awareness Project aims to change that."

It's quite understandable why school boards, university officials and administrators want Proposition 30 to win. Brown and state legislators have decreed that schools and colleges would suffer a $6 billion loss of funds during this fiscal year should it fail.

Nevertheless, the law against using school facilities and funds for political purposes remains on the books, and the 2009 Supreme Court decision indicates it's to be strictly applied. Moreover, it's a law grounded in good public policy.

If public funds and public facilities can be used to promote Proposition 30, it places California on a very slippery slope, leading to taxpayer-financed political propaganda.

Who's in Control?

Inside Higher Ed

September 21, 2012 - 3:00am

By Paul Fain

Robert Shireman has long criticized colleges and lawmakers for not doing enough to protect lower-income students. But now that he's back in California, after a stint battling for-profit colleges for the U.S. Department of Education, Shireman has found a new opponent: faculty leaders at the state's community colleges and an approach to shared governance he says created the mess at City College of San Francisco.

Meanwhile, City College's fight to keep its doors open got a little more desperate this week. The college faces an accreditation crisis that could result in its being shut down next year, a nightmare scenario for California's largest public college and its 90,000 students.

City College's leaders pledge to do whatever it takes to save the college, and observers say shuttering it isn't a realistic option. But a new state-commissioned analysis found that City College is dangerously close to bankruptcy, with possible annual deficits of $25 million and a raft of obligations it can't afford.

The college's inability to appropriately manage its budget amid deep state funding cuts was a central theme of the complex set of problems identified earlier this year by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. And those financial woes and their structural causes were laid bare this week in the report from the Fiscal Crisis and Management Team, a state agency tasked with assisting public colleges and schools.

"City College of San Francisco has not developed a plan to fund significant liabilities and obligations such as retiree health benefits, adequate reserves and workers' compensation costs. Further, it has been subsidizing categorical programs with unrestricted general fund monies regardless of the effect on the general fund, and has provided salary increases and generous benefits with no discernible means to pay for them." -- Fiscal Crisis and Management Team

The report says City College employs twice as many full-time faculty, on a per-student basis, as comparable colleges in the system. It also outpaces other districts in numbers of support staff. And with 1,800 instructors, 842 of them full-time tenure-track, City College only had about 40 administrators on staff earlier this year, according to its accreditor.

Faculty members note that roughly 50 tenured professors serve in administrative roles but are not counted as administrators. Even so, the picture that emerges from both the accreditor and the fiscal crisis team is a college without adequate administrative control or stability, and an overstaffed faculty that receives unsustainably generous pay and benefits during a budget crisis.

Those problems festered because the college's leadership was not able to make tough choices, according to California Competes, the nonprofit group Shireman leads. This is due to a structural problem that affects other colleges in the system, he said. Boards can't move forward with controversial decisions, like trimming jobs and budget fat, Shireman said, because state regulation grants local branches of the Academic Senate for Community Colleges formal veto power over board decisions.

"That's just bad management," Shireman said. "The buck has to stop somewhere."

The statewide Academic Senate vigorously disagrees. In fact, its leadership said Shireman and California Competes are completely off-base in their interpretation of the regulations that define shared governance in the state.

"This structure does work," said Michelle L. Pilati, the Academic Senate's president and a professor of psychology at Rio Hondo College. "Boards have the power to act."

California Competes plans to make its case to the statewide Board of Governors sometime soon.

Board Powers?

Shireman has powerful allies in the state, at least some of whom support his group's new shared governance campaign. He also has a track record of waging fierce regulatory battles, having led the U.S. Department of Education's recent crackdown on for-profit colleges during his time as a department official.

Shared governance writ large is not the problem, Shireman said. He supports both the underlying state legislation as well as what he describes as a strong standards of shared governance. For example, he said his group would back regulations that matched up with the definition from the American Association of University Professors.

The problem, he said, is a "labyrinthine" approach to shared governance by California's community colleges that is perhaps unique in American higher education.

The state Legislature in 1988 updated a law calling for community colleges and their districts to "ensure faculty, staff and students the right to participate effectively in district and college governance, and the opportunity to express their opinions at the campus level and to ensure that these opinions are given every reasonable consideration."

The language in the bill (AB 1725) is fine, according to Shireman. But he said the supporting regulations drafted later by the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges give Academic Senates too much clout. Local governing boards have the choice of reaching "mutual agreement" with the faculty groups or essentially deferring to them on decision-making about a broad array of issues, extending well beyond curriculums and academics.

The result is “rubber stamping” by boards based on what keeps the faculty groups happy, according to California Competes, and the sort of passive decision-making that can lead to broken budgets. And if presidents or boards try to go against the will of the Academic Senates, Shireman said, they must weigh the risk of legal challenges.

“Extraordinary leaders can get past these requirements and get things done,” he said. “But we don’t have enough miracle workers coming to California.”

California Competes first weighed in on this alleged dysfunction with a report released earlier this year, saying the group was motivated by widespread complaints from an advisory panel of college and business leaders. But Shireman recently upped the ante with a strongly-worded opinion piece in the San Francisco Chronicle, titled “Broken System Dooms CCSF,” and other material on the group's website.

The Academic Senate has fired back with a document challenging Shireman’s arguments, which Pilati calls confounding and without merit. Boards have several ways to exercise control, according to the faculty group, and do so all the time.

“The final decision to accept or reject recommendations remains in the hands of the local board of trustees,” Pilati wrote. “The claim that faculty are granted decision-making authority without accountability is simply inaccurate.”

A key distinction, she said, is that faculty can contribute to the process of budget and institutional planning, but the final decisions rest with boards.

“Ideally they talk it through and they find a compromise,” Pilati said. But “boards do things that the faculty don’t like all the time.”

Other faculty groups are backing the Academic Senate in this battle. Jonathan Lightman, executive director of the Faculty Association of California Community Colleges, called Shireman's assertion that shared governance caused City College's woes "extreme" and "counter-productive." He also said faculty bring needed expertise to boardrooms on teaching and learning.

"While local trustee boards have the ultimate responsibility for governance, their decisions should be guided by those with the specific knowledge of how best to serve our students," Lightman said in an email.

Pilati also criticized Shireman’s use of City College as an example in the debate over shared governance. While she acknowledged that the college clearly has “extensive” problems, “that isn’t a reason to indict a governance system that is working across the vast majority of colleges.”

An Uphill Battle

City College has lacked consistent management in recent years, with the indictment of one ex-chancellor and the resignation of his successor due to health problems. But the college will soon have a new leader to help with its accreditation and money woes.

Earlier this month the college's Board of Trustees invited in a "special trustee," a relatively rare move that has helped in past crises at other California community colleges. Not everybody liked the idea of ceding control to an outsider, of course, and some students and others protested at the board meeting where the invitation was announced.

The special trustee will serve in an advisory role to the board, but will also share some powers, said Erik Skinner, interim chancellor of the California Community Colleges system.

"It is an intervention system that relies heavily on relationships," Skinner said. "They're going to help the district through some incredibly difficult choices."

The system office is looking for candidates, and plans to present two or three finalists to the statewide governing board in the next few weeks, said Skinner. Leadership skills in tough times are the main qualifications for the job, and former college presidents could fit the profile.

Skinner said the report from the state's fiscal crisis team was a "road map for recovery," with recommendations that will help the special trustee, local board and college leaders to move quickly to comply with changes needed to make the college solvent and to assuage the concerns of accreditors.

But that won't be easy, and some decisions are out of City College's hands.

For example, if voters reject a proposed state tax hike as well as a local parcel tax, the report said the college will have projected budget deficits of roughly $25 million next year and $28 million the following year.

Even with new tax revenue, the college needs to bring its expenses down, according to the crisis team. And that will require changes to its administrative structure and decision-making.

"Past decisions have reduced the management team to spectators rather than organizational leaders," the report said. "Under this organizational and cultural model there is no responsibility or accountability because it is often unclear how or by whom decisions have been made."

Dan Walters: California school cut warning looks real

By Dan Walters
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When Gov. Jerry Brown and the Legislature fashioned the 2012-13 budget, their evident goal was to persuade voters to finance it by enacting new sales and incomes taxes at the Nov. 6 election.

Toward that end, they decreed that should the tax measure be rejected by voters, automatic triggers would cut spending by $6 billion, all but a fraction of it from education.

Ever since, Brown and other advocates have beseeched voters to pass Proposition 30 to save schools from those cutbacks, including a sharp reduction in the school year.

It is, of course, a form of political extortion, telling voters that if they fail to do what Brown and legislators want, schools will suffer – based on the poll-tested assumption that education is the single most popular thing that government does.

Had they threatened, instead, to cut welfare or close prisons, the political impact would have been much less because those are much less popular than schools.

So will this ploy work, overcoming voters' historic reluctance to raise taxes?

Brown has been campaigning vigorously, using the school cut warning. However, two new polls indicate that if anything, support has been drifting downward. Approval is now no better than a 50-50 bet – strongly influenced, it appears, by voters' sour view of the state's economy and its politicians.

If it doesn't work, would Brown, et al., allow the school cuts to take effect, or would they pull back, especially since they'd have the influential "education coalition," including the California Teachers Association, pushing them to reconsider?

Brown has said that there would be no relief from school cuts because there's no other money available, and the budget he signed seems to bear that out.

He's counting on $8.5 billion from Proposition 30 for the 2011-12 and 2012-13 budgets, and has only enacted $6 billion in trigger cuts should the measure fail, leaving a big gap that state officials say would have to be filled with even more spending reductions beyond schools.

The gap could even grow billions of dollars wider. The budget, for example, assumes that California will get about $1.5 billion from a surge in Facebook's huge stock offering, but its shares have dropped by nearly 40 percent. And other revenues are already falling short of projections.

Another factor is the $6 billion that Brown and legislators have promised counties to pay for "realignment" of criminal justice and social services.

Proposition 30 contains a constitutional guarantee of that payment. If it fails, counties (and their unions) would demand that politicians still honor the commitment, rather than shift funds to schools.

Thus, educators would not be the only stakeholders pressuring Sacramento should new taxes fail.

It would be a battle royal.

A Song of Vice and Mire

The Chronicle of Higher Education

September 24, 2012

By Rob Jenkins

For fun, I've been reading George R.R. Martin's marvelous fantasy epic, A Song of Ice and Fire, about a medieval-ish kingdom and its wars and intrigues. If you haven't yet encountered the books (five in the series so far), I highly recommend them, as Martin deftly intertwines fantastical elements, such as dragons and wights (medieval zombies), with a quasi-historical storyline to create a kind of J.R.R. Tolkien-meets-Philippa Gregory effect.

What fascinates me most about the narrative, however, is the extent to which it parallels my experiences as a community-college professor and administrator. As I follow the political machinations of the fictional court at King's Landing—the alliances and conspiracies, the jealousies and betrayals, the dalliances and beheadings—I am frequently put in mind of actual people I have known and events I have witnessed over my 27-year career. Sometimes I wonder if George R.R. Martin isn't really just a pen name for some old colleague of mine who has been secretly plugging away all these years at a monstrous roman-à-clef.

I suppose that is an indictment of community colleges, but I believe it is a fair one. Because, truth be told, for all of their many fine points and all the good they do for society, community colleges have historically been rather bad at governance, to say the least. On many two-year campuses, if not most, corruption, cronyism, abuse of power, and fiefdom-building constitute business as usual.

I make that observation as someone who has worked at five two-year colleges and visited dozens more, who corresponds frequently with colleagues around the country, and who reads everything available about community colleges. But the truth of what I'm saying should be obvious to anyone who has followed recent high-profile cases involving alleged corruption and mismanagement at two-year institutions in Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, New Jersey, and New York. To name a few.

That isn't a new phenomenon. In California's community-college system, the largest in the country, such problems grew so rampant that in the late 1980s the state legislature mandated a shared-governance model, intended to give faculty members and other key stakeholders significant involvement in how those institutions were run. Yet more than a decade later, Linda Collins, then president of the system's Academic Senate, wrote: "We have yet to create structures and cultures that support and nurture the practice of shared governance throughout the state's community colleges."

Her statement seems to still hold true today for most of the country's community colleges. Despite the best efforts of many faculty members, some administrators, and national organizations such as the American Association of University Professors and the National Education Association, true shared governance has still not become the model of choice at most two-year campuses.

Over the years, the two most common forms of governance I have observed are what I would characterize as feudalism and Soviet-style dictatorship.

What the two models have in common, of course, is that both are authoritarian in nature. Both feature relatively small groups of sycophants who place themselves in orbit around the leader, jockeying for position and seeking to consolidate their own power through flattery and zealous support of the official agenda. Neither model is particularly kind to dissidents or independent thinkers.

One difference between the two is that, under the feudal model, shared governance is paid only the barest lip service, if any at all. Some of the organizational bodies necessary to support shared governance, such as a faculty senate, might exist in name but are only window dressing, without any legitimate function.

The Soviet model, on the other hand, tends to have all of the trappings of democracy, or (in this case) shared governance—faculty and staff senates, policy councils, standing committees. Their meetings are often conducted with great fanfare. But in reality they are under the iron-fisted control of the leader and his or her cronies, and every decision made is part of the approved agenda.

Another important difference is that a feudal lord or lady may, on occasion, be relatively benevolent. The dictator is rarely, if ever, that.

For those reasons, the Soviet model, which may on the surface seem to embrace shared governance, is, if anything, even more inimical to it than feudalism is.

It's easy to tell, by the way, if your college has adopted one of those two models:

The same people tend to be named to the most important committees, over and over.

Those people, instead of more-qualified colleagues, are ultimately rewarded for their "service" with promotions or other key appointments.

The committees always seem to reach conclusions or submit reports that are widely praised by the leader.

Those who disagree find themselves released or disinvited from future committee service, while known dissidents are never invited to serve in the first place.

Anyone who dissents too loudly or too publicly is punished, often in a highly visible way, in order to serve as an object lesson to others.

Does any of this sound familiar?

Of course, authoritarian leadership is not peculiar to two-year campuses. Recent history has shown that even some of the nation's most prestigious research universities are not immune, as presidents, provosts, trustees, and deans (not to mention powerful football coaches) have been known to engage in a fair amount of fiefdom-building. But I believe that community colleges are especially susceptible to the phenomenon, for several reasons.

The first is the growing trend of community-college presidents who have never been full-time faculty members. These days, most chiefs of two-year colleges seem to have backgrounds in other areas: business and industry, law, elementary and secondary education, or student services. Many, in fact, are not even qualified to teach anything offered on their own campuses. They hold graduate degrees in areas like higher-education administration.

There's not necessarily anything wrong with such degrees, but I think it's problematic when too many leaders see a doctorate purely as a credential—as a ticket to a high-paying, upper-level administrative position—and not as a mark of scholarly achievement. The proliferation of online doctoral programs offering those sorts of degrees illustrates the problem. Such degrees tend to be expensive and often do not carry a great deal of prestige, but do technically qualify the recipient for one thing: to be a community-college president.

I also believe that it is potentially a problem when the president of a college has no significant experience as a faculty member and, therefore, cannot even remotely relate to faculty concerns or understand how a college faculty is supposed to function. In my experience, such leaders can even be openly hostile to true shared governance, which, to their way of thinking, gives the faculty far too much power.

Couple that attitude with a natural affinity for the kind of top-down leadership that is standard operating procedure at most companies, and it's easy to see how a president can quickly earn a reputation for being heavy-handed and dictatorial.

Another reason community colleges seem especially susceptible to authoritarian governance models is closely related: the "corporatization" of the American campus. Other academics, including (notably) the former AAUP president Cary Nelson, have commented on this trend at great length, but suffice it to say: The corporate model, while no doubt affecting nearly every institution in the country to some degree, has gained a solid foothold at community colleges, where it has found a group of leaders predisposed to embrace it.

Finally, governance at community colleges tends to flow top-down because of the pervasive nature of what I have called in previous columns the "13th grade" mentality. For some people, community colleges are not "real" colleges but rather occupy a place somewhere between a high school and a university—perhaps closer to the former than to the latter. Plenty of people in government, and even within the two-year institutions themselves, believe that community colleges should be run much like high schools, with strong, autocratic leaders and little or no input from the instructors.

Whatever the reason, it's obvious from the headlines that governance and leadership are especially thorny issues for many two-year colleges. Our failure to embrace true shared governance has, it seems, opened the door to corruption, mismanagement, and abuse of power. The results might not be quite as dramatic as George R.R. Martin's novels, but then again, you can never be too sure. If you don't hear from me again after this column is published, you can assume that I'm probably in a dungeon somewhere, awaiting my execution—figuratively speaking, of course.