Shortcomings...

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Audit Confirms Commission Shortcomings

by David Balla-Hawkins, CCCI Legislative Advocate

The Office of the State Auditor released its report on the Accrediting Commission of Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) June 2014. This is the result of ACCJC’s advocacy during the 2012-13 legislative session seeking Joint Legislative Audit Committee (JLAC) approval of the audit. State Senators Jim Beall (D-Santa Cruz) and Jim Nielsen (R) carried the proposal through the Committee. JLAC approved the audit in its entirety, not just a portion. Before the audit, ACCJC operated in closed session, it could not be audited and that results would be disappointing and inconclusive at best and, at worst, might incur the ire of the Commission, resulting in negative repercussions for the colleges.

On the contrary, as the process leading to JLAC approval developed, ACCJC actions and the behavior of its representatives confirmed the need for a state audit. ACCJC’s own boards found themselves confronting an agency that considered itself above the law and came away from meetings with ACCJC President Barbara Beno describing her as “combative, arrogant and dismissive.”

While the original concept focused on the cost of the accreditation process for the colleges, the JLAC learned more about the issues swirling about the ACCJC and the colleges it accredits, the scope of the audit was expanded to include the laws and regulations governing the new accreditation process. The role of the government and the State Chancellor’s Office in accreditation, the procedures and policies of the ACCJC, accreditation criteria and any changes over the period from 2009 to 2012, and comparisons among the six regional accreditors in terms of process and results. Three California community colleges were chosen for the study.

The resulting audit report confirms many of the concerns raised by critics of the ACCJC, including incorrect or misleading accreditation policies that were applied inconsistently; ACCJC meetings that lack transparency; a faulty appeals process; a huge discrepancy in the sanction rates imposed by ACCJC on the California Community Colleges in comparison with community college sanctions imposed by other regional accreditors.

Investment . . .

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Real “Student Success” Requires Investment

by Jeffrey Michels, CCCI Executive Secretary

In responding to the Student Success Task Force Force proposals (approved by the Community College Board of Governors in 2012), one of CCCIs core messages was that reform without investment is a recipe for failure. New ideas, we argued, can be great, but are less needed than new money because California Community Colleges in the 21st century are less broken than starving. It is chronic underfunding that has led to our over-reliance on the faculty, the main weakness of our system with these faculty marginalized and kept from providing full professional service to our students. And our overcrowded classrooms, like understaffed student services, have more to do with money than any lack of innovativeness.

We offer too few choices for students and too little support for teachers, and no list of reform goals or accountability tools seems likely to change that. So when the buzzword became “student success,” CCCI called out for investment.

As California’s economy has improved, however, and as the state has begun to allocate categorical dollars for “student success,” we find it challenging to see a new challenge, and one that many of us had foreseen. In its zeal to support innovation, the state seems to be diverting funding and dedicated need that existing programs to recover from years of cuts. Worse still, rather than reinventing our colleges by investing in good teaching, the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 budgets appear to deliberately move money away from the classroom, as far from educators as possible.

Millions of new dollars are now flowing to community colleges with specific restrictions that may limit the money’s effectiveness. In 2014-2015, $50 million was added to the previous “matriculation” funding under the new heading of the Student Success and Supportive Services (SSS) program. In 2015-2016, another $100 million was added for SSSP. Plus, $70 million was allocated for “student equity plans.” The State Chancellor’s Office defines these as “core services” that colleges provide, after all, is instruction.

When part-time faculty are excluded from pedagogical discussions and professional development, are forced to string together too many underpaid teaching assignments at multiple colleges to make even a modest living, and are not even paid (or expected) to hold office hours, students lose. When full-time faculty receive no more time must be spent verifying part-time faculty reports (not to mention hiring and evaluating part-time faculty, who rotate in and out every semester) than the can spend helping students, that doesn’t mean they are bad.

The worst of the so-called reformers like to talk about a “new normal” where the public is tired of hearing that teachers are underpaid or that classes are too big. When the new normal, these layoffs insist, people hate taxes and investing in schools. So we need new ideas, they say: ways to fund “student success” without hiring more teachers or raising pay; ways to standardize instruction and assessment (since the myth of the good teacher who needs to be attracted