The Way Forward for City College

By Sherrill Amador, Frank Gornick & Steven Kinsella

As the clock ticks toward a July 31 deadline, there is a call to “give more time” to the City College of San Francisco to make the changes necessary to prevent its loss of accreditation. Unfortunately, the problem isn’t the clock – it is the college’s unprecedentedly flawed structure as well as federal law. However, there is a path forward that will protect students, taxpayers, and the San Francisco community served by the college.

During its 2012 evaluation by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC), City College was found to be in terrible condition; evaluators noted scores of deficiencies that needed fixing by the college. Problems included deficient student services, outdated instruction guides, antiquated computer systems, and lack of fiscal controls.

The college was in a precarious financial position -- laden with $4.6 million in unpaid student fees dating back 10 years, a payroll system that allowed access to 125 people, and a self-insured workers compensation fund that had a $4 million negative balance. Additionally, many internal control weaknesses resulted in overpayments and underpayments of staff salary, employees receiving unverified health and other benefits as well as underreporting of vacation time taken.

While CCSF continued to construct new buildings, many students attended classes in old buildings that were deteriorating due to deferred maintenance. There were also insufficient student resources for library and learning support.

The independent evaluators found that these and other problems occurred and persisted because CCSF had one of the worst organizational structures among the California community colleges, with decisions often made by committees that were not accountable to anyone, rather than by faculty or administrators responsible for their actions. These deficiencies are cheating students of the education they need and wasting millions of taxpayer dollar.

A year later, after having warned and advised the college to make significant improvements while still accredited, the Commission found that very little had been done. The college was still out of compliance with more than 50 accreditation standards. Only two of the 14 recommendations for improvement provided to the college in 2012 had been completed. The college’s substandard structure and lack of progress left the Commission no choice but to terminate accreditation.

Despite the efforts of some leaders to help City College swiftly improve, internal discord has prevented sufficient progress. This dysfunction has been documented by independent parties, including the college’s own external auditor and the state’s Fiscal Crisis Management Assistance Team, an auditing agency that twice reviewed and
reported on portions of City College’s operations. (A U.S. Department of Education audit that began in November 2013 is ongoing.)

It is important to put this in perspective. The Commission, made up of member colleges, has evaluated its member colleges in California – now numbering 117 – for more than 50 years, each school every six years. A team of expert peer evaluators (experienced faculty members and college administrators) assesses the school’s academics, finances, facilities, technology, and governance. The Commission does not take over, or close, a failing college. Instead, like an auditor, it points out deficiencies and recommends improvements to help a college remain open. Each college determines its own future.

In recent history, only one other California college has been in a similar predicament. Compton Community College was so substandard that it lost its accreditation and was shuttered in 2006. Compton College has been rebuilding as a strong, effective educational institution under the guidance of El Camino College, and hopes to re-apply for accreditation soon.

While some plead that City College simply be given more time to fix its problems, this is not up to the Commission.

Congress and the Department of Education have specified that an accrediting body allow no more than two years for a substandard college to come into compliance or lose its accreditation. The “two-year rule” is designed to protect students and taxpayers. In fact, the Department of Education has put all accreditors on notice that they could lose their federal recognition if they do not apply the two-year rule. Without federal recognition of the Commission as an accrediting body, every community college in California could lose access to taxpayer dollars – federal financial aid for students. Any change to the two-year rule requires Congress to enact a new law.

Since last summer, critical leadership changes have occurred at City College, and the school is beginning to turn things around. However, by their own testimony, City College representatives estimate that it requires up to four years to fully recover.

Yet there is a plan that protects students and the college:

CCSF could seek accreditation anew by applying for “candidacy” status. A candidate college is eligible for federal financial aid and state funding; its students’ course credits are generally transferrable, and its degrees or certificates are recognized, as long as the college is eventually successful in obtaining accreditation after a period of candidacy. Currently there is a candidate institution in the State Center Community College District, and within the last five years Woodland Community College, Moreno Valley College and Norco College were candidates before becoming accredited.
Candidate status would allow City College a fresh start. It would provide two to four years of time for it to complete its recovery and to ensure that it meets all accreditation standards.

ACCJC has advised and supported City College throughout the college’s accreditation history, and especially since 2012. All the other member colleges in California are fulfilling peer accreditation standards that they themselves have established. This begs the question: Why should City College be accredited without meeting the same standards?

The solution for City College is clear: candidacy leading to re-accreditation, while administrators, faculty and staff work together to address the school’s remaining structural deficiencies.

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