City College of San Francisco redoubles efforts to fight closure

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People’s World

On July 3rd, 2013 another chapter in the saga of the future of City College of San Francisco (CCSF) took an unexpected turn when the accreditation committee, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC), revealed its decision to pull accreditation for CCSF after the finish of this academic year.

CCSF has been engaged in a year-long process, attempting to fix issues that ACCJC laid down last year as conditions for the college to keep its academic standing. Rather than taking the improvements made thus far as a sign of the future health of the institution ACCJC decided, instead, to pull the college’s accreditation, which would end the ability of the college to offer degrees, transfer credits or accept state funding – affecting 85,000 students.

The ACCJC itself stated that the threat to shutter CCSF was not at all based on the academic performance of the college, but detailed several issues that it had with the governance of the school – such as its decisions to run with fewer administrative staff, its desire to keep cuts in education as far from the classroom as possible and its opting to run with lower monetary reserves.

City College of San Francisco is not taking these results meekly, the college has until the end of this month to lodge an appeal against the ACCJC panel’s decision, and in the meantime it is also pursuing legal avenues against the accreditation entity.

The official complaint, filed by the California Federation Teachers (CFT) jointly with American Federation of Teachers local 2121 (AFT 2121) against ACCJC, has reached nearly 300 pages. The commission initially rejected these findings with a dismissive seven page letter in response, but have been compelled by the U.S. Department of Education to give serious reconsideration to the complaint and compose a response that gives the findings their due weight, finding their first response insufficient.

A teach-in, Wednesday evening at CCSF’s Mission Campus, organized by Save CCSF, featured a presentation delivered by **former CFT President Marty Hittelman,** who has been a bellwether for exposing the out-of-compliance practices of ACCJC. Hittelman’s detailed report last year, entitled “**ACCJC Gone Wild**“, outlines the problematic features of the process of accreditation, fostered directly by the secretive institutional philosophy which the process embraces. It was in this document that Hittelman leveled the observation that “The ACCJC has become a rogue accrediting body.”

At the center of the controversy is the nature of the relationship the private agency has with the public colleges under its influence. Accrediting companies are paid fees to assess the status of academic institutions and are supposed to comply with the education codes. ACCJC has garnered complaints about its practices in the past, most remarkably when it yanked the accreditation of Compton Community College in 2006. Many other community colleges have come to the realization that ACCJC has sanctioned nearly half of the community colleges in California, which is unusually aggressive.

Hittelman relayed his experiences with ACCJC’s accreditation panels, which he stated are made up of “failed administrators” of community colleges themselves. Barbara Beno, the president of ACCJC was once president of Vista Community College in Oakland and was forced to leave the district in 2000. Hittelman said that the agency has created a “reign of terror” in California, with community college faculty and staff now in fear of speaking against the ACCJC out of trepidation that their own college will face sanctions in retaliation for the criticism, likening it to his experiences with the Red Scare among academia in the 1950’s.

Hittelman’s presentation concluded with his recommendations that the CCSF community keep up the fight with their three-pronged strategy, 1) continued union legal work, 2) broadening campus coalitions, 3) expanding street heat efforts by Save CCSF. He noted that Beno dangled the possibility in statements reported in Huffington Post that the panel’s decision might not be irreversible. Hittelman attributed this rare public shift to the all-out efforts of the school’s community to keep pressure and scrutiny on the agency.

Break-out sessions, brainstorming for future actions, and public comment on the nature of this crisis finalized the agenda for the evening. Shanell Williams, CCSF’s Ocean Campus Associated Student President, Alissa Messer, President of AFT 2121, and Alyssa Picard, field organizer for AFT, all took suggestions from the participants of the teach-in and also offered some concrete options for future actions.

Joe Berry, founder of the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor, offered this succinct observation of the way forward for CCSF to battle forced closure by those who would remove the strongest institutions of education in the U.S., “We are the Chicago of higher education, we have to be the Chicago teachers’ union” in our resistance.