

Broken system dooms CCSF

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Published 8:03 p.m., Thursday, September 13, 2012

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.

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