



July 9, 2013

AAUP Issues Statement on the Accreditation of City College of San Francisco

For more background, see Hank Reichman's "[What Happened at City College of San Francisco?](#)" on *Academe Blog* and see more on the [reaction to the ACCJC announcement](#).

On Monday, July 8, 2013, the AAUP's Executive Committee issued the following statement.

On July 3, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges announced that it was revoking its accreditation of City College of San Francisco (CCSF), a two-year institution, effective July 2014. Because non-accredited institutions may not receive public funds, this decision, if not rescinded, will compel CCSF, with 85,000 current students and eleven campuses and sites, to close its doors, leaving more than 2,700 faculty and staff without employment and the city of San Francisco without a public community college. CCSF would be the largest U.S. institution ever to lose its accreditation.

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has long taken an interest in the accreditation process, urging most forcefully in its 1968 statement on "[The Role of the Faculty in the Accrediting of Colleges and Universities](#)" that "the appraisal of the academic program should be largely the responsibility of faculty members." That statement also recommended standards for both institutions and accrediting commissions. In 2008, the AAUP issued three additional documents on accreditation: "[Institutional Accreditation: A Call for Greater Faculty Involvement](#)," "[The Faculty Role in Regional Accreditation Service on Evaluation Teams](#)," and "[Looking the Other Way? Accreditation Standards and Part-Time Faculty](#)." Last year the AAUP and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation jointly published an advisory statement on "[Accreditation and Academic Freedom](#)," which urged accrediting organizations to emphasize the principle of academic freedom.

Taken together, these documents provide important guidance both to accrediting teams and to faculty and administrations undergoing accreditation review, but the AAUP has not generally passed judgment on individual accreditation decisions. The case of CCSF, however, raises serious concerns because of its potentially broad impact and the numerous reports in the media and elsewhere of widespread faculty, student, and community dissatisfaction with both the decision and the process that led to it.

To be sure, CCSF has in recent years faced daunting challenges and problems, which few deny. These were, according to most accounts, largely products of severe budgetary cuts amounting over several years to about \$53 million in an institution with an annual budget of around \$200 million. In this context, CCSF reportedly chose to protect as much as possible its instructional budget, cutting back instead on administration and dipping into reserve funds. The long-term wisdom of these moves may be debatable, although the oft-repeated claim that CCSF has "too few administrators" will seem far-fetched to faculty at most U.S. institutions where corrosive administrative bloat is common. Since ACCJC placed CCSF on "sanction" a year ago, however, whatever financial problems existed are, it seems, being addressed. Faculty and staff unions agreed to significant reductions in compensation. California voters in November passed Proposition 30, which began to restore needed state funding to public higher education. That election also saw passage in San Francisco, with 73% support, of Proposition A, which enacted a parcel tax that will generate approximately \$16 million per year for eight years for CCSF. While there is disagreement over whether these funds are best employed to restore salary cuts, among other things, or whether they should be used to rebuild reserves, it would appear that CCSF has significantly improved its fiscal condition. In addition, CCSF's response to ACCJC's review was hampered by the untimely serious illness of its former president, who was respected by faculty and students.

One thing is certain: ACCJC has not questioned the quality of the education offered to students at CCSF. Indeed, according to data posted by the Chancellor's Office of the California Community Colleges, on the most commonly cited metrics for community college student success, including transfer and completion rates, CCSF almost uniformly scores better than most other community colleges in the state. As recently as 2007 CCSF was named by The New York Times as a model community college. CCSF has also been exemplary in its efforts to rely principally on full-time tenure-track faculty and to provide part-time faculty with fair compensation and working conditions conducive to student learning. CCSF's extensive and active system of shared governance and its support for academic freedom have also been commendable.

While the AAUP is not now in a position to pass judgment on specific actions of the ACCJC or on CCSF's responses, we cannot ignore the growing chorus of complaints from faculty organizations, individual faculty members, students and community groups that ACCJC's actions are excessive and unfair, and not only at CCSF. Some have gone so far as to accuse the commission of going "rogue." According to reports we have received, some 25% of California community colleges are now on some sort of sanction by ACCJC. Although ACCJC oversees just 5% of U.S. community colleges, some 35% of U.S. two-year institutions on sanction have been placed in that status by ACCJC.

In April, the California Federation of Teachers (CFT) filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) questioning ACCJC's impartiality and its compliance with its own policies as well as state and federal law. CFT alleges that, during its evaluation of CCSF, ACCJC violated ten federal regulations and a federal statute and committed procedural errors and due process violations. The union argues that the accrediting agency lacks transparency and violates or

inconsistently applies its own standards, calling into question the ACCJC's treatment of CCSF and all California community colleges. Although ACCJC quickly dismissed the complaint, on June 10 the DOE ordered ACCJC to conduct a more thorough review of the charges. On July 1, CFT filed an amended complaint, which takes into account more recent ACCJC actions, which allegedly include barring the public from a "public" meeting, passing a policy allowing the Commission to shred and destroy documents pertinent to the CFT complaint, and attempting to prevent witnesses from providing evidence.

CFT, it would appear, is not alone. In 2010, the ACCJC and its President, Barbara Beno, received a unanimous vote of "no confidence" from the California Community College Independents, a coalition of independent faculty unions representing some 25% of California community college faculty. One reason for such votes may be that ACCJC does not adequately involve faculty in its accreditation reviews. Of the seventeen review team members who visited CCSF, thirteen were active or retired college administrators, one was a trustee, and just three were faculty.

But dissatisfaction with ACCJC may not be limited to faculty. In 2009, a task force of faculty, administrators, staff, students and trustees convened by former California Community College Chancellor Jack Scott offered several recommendations for improvement to ACCJC. One suggestion was to "work more cooperatively to have accreditation result in improvement rather than compliance." Another was to broaden the composition of the accreditation review teams and a third was to "scale accreditation expectations" to those of other agencies, presumably referring to the abnormally high sanction rates. In a January 20, 2010 letter ACCJC essentially rejected all recommendations.

In light of the above concerns and on behalf of the membership of the AAUP the Executive Committee therefore

1. Expresses its support for faculty, students, staff, and community members at CCSF who are working hard to ensure the survival of their institution;
2. Urges the ACCJC to reconsider its revocation of CCSF's accreditation and to meaningfully and publicly address the complaints lodged by faculty and others about its functioning; and
3. Charges the AAUP Committees on Accreditation and on Community Colleges jointly to look thoroughly into the concerns discussed in this statement and to report the results of their inquiries to the AAUP Council as soon as feasible.