

REDWOODS COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT
TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE VISIT
Academic Senate for California Community Colleges
Community College League of California
September 28 and 29, 2009

This report is in response to a request for technical assistance by Superintendent/President Jeff Marsee and Academic Senate Co-Presidents David Holper and Allen Keppner. The technical assistance visit was conducted on September 28 and 29, 2009, by Scott Lay, President and CEO of the Community College League of California, and Jane Patton, President of the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges. The purpose of the visit was to assist the board, administration, faculty and staff in improving communication and developing a common understanding of participating effectively in district and college governance in order to improve the campus climate and more effectively serve students.

The team's observations and recommendations were made following a governance presentation for the entire college community and separate meetings with trustees, faculty, classified staff, managers/supervisors/confidential, vice presidents and the superintendent/president. The recommendations should not be viewed as a set of prescriptive solutions, but rather as catalysts for further discussion and improvements in governance at the college.

Observations

The broad participation of trustees, faculty, staff, and administrators in the technical assistance visit clearly demonstrated recognition of the problems facing the college with regard to participatory governance and a shared desire by all to resolve these problems for the benefit of the district and its board, employees and students. Throughout the seven separate meetings (faculty had two opportunities to attend) with the six constituencies, several issues were raised numerous times and by more than one group. These issues, we believe, have a great impact on the current climate and affect the ability of all constituencies to work together.

Overall, the Technical Assistance Team ("team") found that constituency members have a general understanding of and commitment to the principles of participatory governance and the need for broad participation in institutional decisions and processes. However, questions and comments raised throughout the day demonstrated that many individuals are comfortable with college traditions that may not be consistent with best practices under the law.

Formal processes

The board of trustees has adopted a board policy (BP 2510) that appropriately establishes consultative processes with constituencies for whom a policy change will have a significant effect. In this policy, the board recognizes the special role of the college's academic senate in areas of academic and professional matters. With the additional observations about current institutional practices found below, the team found that the administrative procedures (AP 2510 and 2511) of the district meet the minimum requirements of board policy and state law.

The college has a formal College Council that is the body through which consultation is organized to occur. According to administrative policy 2511, the College Council's membership is determined jointly by the Superintendent/President and the Academic Senate. While the current membership on the College Council appears to be consistent with BP 2510, Administrative Policy 2511 leaves the membership to be agreed to by the Superintendent/President and the Academic Senate. Further, multiple constituencies

stated that the College Council has not met regularly while significant decisions moved forward over the last several months, although the team's visit followed the summer break.

Communications and campus climate

The college has an established institutional culture, developed over many years under the leadership of several previous administrations. Many trustees, staff and faculty members have been at the college for a long time and are comfortable with the ways things have been done in the past. In contrast, most administrators are new, follow a series of short-tenure administrative leaders, and have been given direction from the board and president to effect changes. It appears that the number of changes and the pace of change have resulted in undue stress, confusion and frustration and as a result, campus morale has suffered. In addition, the changes are perceived to have been developed at the senior administrative level and not as the result of collaborative efforts, resulting in a lack of buy-in. Even within the Board, it appears that a strong "old versus new" climate exists. Across most groups, there is evidence of a "we/they" perspective. There was concern that the recent college reorganization plans did not sufficiently take into account staffing and workload needs and that changes made to the Education Master Plan had not had sufficient consultation, even though it assumed policy changes subject to consultation.

While the existence of a perceived "we/they" disconnect at a community college is not unique, as selection of senior administrative leaders from outside other districts is common, it may be exacerbated by the location of College of the Redwoods. The North Coast is a geographically isolated region with a deep history and economy unique to the region. There is a strong community among long-time residents and residential immigration from other parts of California is limited, and new residents may not "fit in" to the culture for many years, if ever. With limited leadership development opportunities within the college and the college's remote location, there is a perception that the senior college leadership employees will always be selected from outside of California or far from the North Coast, and will be just "passing through" on their way to other positions. While this perception is not consistent with the sentiments expressed to the team by at least some of the senior-level staff, it creates a culture of distrust and emotional detachment.

The trustees typically do not interact directly with the faculty and staff, perhaps due to fear of micromanaging or because of concerns that faculty/staff would bypass normal administrative channels.

Unfortunately the unintended effect is a level of unfamiliarity and distrust, which might be corrected with appropriate trustee participation in campus events or activities. Additionally, some faculty and staff said they were not acquainted with newer administrators on campus, and would welcome the opportunity to meet the newer members of the college's administrative team. Many colleges have been able to successfully provide opportunities for the district and college leaders to get to know faculty and staff without undermining the necessary decision-making process, which can build trust and break through the wall that sometimes is erected between board/administration and faculty/staff.

There seems to be some role confusion and uncertainty about who's responsible for setting or carrying out policies across constituency groups. Some people were unclear about the distinctions between the academic senate and union roles. The academic senate is led by two co-presidents, which is unusual. The faculty might want to reflect on their senate structure and whether having 2 leaders strengthens or weakens the senate, due to a diffusion of the faculty voice. The fact that the faculty went directly to the ACCJC speaks to the concern that they believed they could not get the response they sought within the district, although administration appeared surprised that faculty felt the need to elevate the concerns before my discussion.

All groups mentioned concerns about the level of distrust across the district. All groups expressed a desire to return to a climate of professional civility. There was also concern that people routinely take "sides" and that some people are resistant to let go of the past.

Pace of change

As mentioned above, faculty, classified staff and managers expressed concerns about the number of initiatives being taken by the college amidst significant budget cuts and a threat to the college's accreditation. Many of the changes, however, were identified by the board and senior leadership as essential for both the college's fiscal health and to restore unqualified accreditation status. Because the team was only prepared to review governance practices and the related campus climate, it was not prepared to evaluate which initiatives must be tackled concurrently. However, the perceived frenetic pace of new initiatives without a clear understanding of the motivation may be creating unreasonable reluctance by faculty, staff classified and managers to support the initiatives. Individual trustees, which went out of their way to state their support for the superintendent/president, appeared concerned that there is insufficient campus buy-in to effect all of the changes, and agreed that more needed to be done to promote understanding and participation.

Recommendations

To better align the Redwood Community College District's governance process and practice with the intent of AB 1725, accreditation standards and best practices, the Technical Assistance Team recommends:

- 1) To the extent the College Council continues to be the primary body for constituencies to provide input on policies under development affecting those constituencies, Administrative Policy 2511 should be amended to ensure the composition of the College Council reflects each constituency identified in Board Policy 2510. Having a strong classified senate would strengthen the staff voice.
- 2) A foundation of strong interpersonal communication begins with a level of respect and trust. The college might consider a retreat with the leadership of the various groups to begin goal-setting and team building. The major initiatives of the campus should be discussed and explained, and faculty and staff should explain if they have any substantive concerns. Faculty and staff should encourage administrators to stop by their offices, activities, etc. to take advantage of informal opportunities to get acquainted and build trust, and opportunities for trustees to meet casually with faculty and staff outside of the board room should be provided. All groups might find ways they can contribute to improving campus climate and develop ownership for the solutions across groups. Campus-wide activities and sharing the responsibility for developing future directions and executing changes may be a way to build the "we" culture.
- 3) Everyone's role needs to be better understood and respected. This is partly a result of the clash between governance policies established before the passage of AB 1725 and the requirements for participatory governance that now exist in regulation. In order to foster this understanding and respect, the district needs to set as a high priority the development of board policies regarding the roles and responsibilities for faculty, staff, and students per current regulation. It is recommended that an audit be conducted of existing practices and procedures, compliance with current regulations be evaluated, and that roles be defined consistently and written down so that all parties have the same understanding of their respective roles. All parties should focus publicly and privately on treating each organization and position with the respect owed the position, listening to all views, treating each other as they would like to be treated, and focusing together on issues that need to be addressed to better serve students.

4) The district could develop a culture of leadership development and help to "grow their own" administrators through activities such as shadowing, mentoring, incentives and leadership development activities. Because of its geographical location, this district would especially benefit from encouraging and supporting faculty and staff who wish to move into administrative roles, and the opportunity could provide faculty and staff greater understanding and commitment to the policy directions of the board of trustees and college president.

5) The district should hold annual reviews of its governance process with all constituencies to ensure the effective implementation of these recommendations and consider a subsequent visit of the Technical Assistance Team. Additionally, the district should develop a shared vision and commitment to improving its processes for the future without undue preoccupation on the past.

Conclusion

The Technical Assistance Team appreciates the full and thorough involvement of everyone who participated in the visit and who candidly shared their concerns and solutions about the participatory governance process in the Redwoods Community College District. We sincerely hope the recommendations will be helpful. While the number of recommendations is few in number, their scope is broad and they speak to the foundation of participatory governance necessary to function well as a district.

During the technical assistance visit, faculty, staff, administration, and board members expressed a sincere desire to improve the functioning of the district to benefit students. The evident level of passion and emotion among all involved reveals a strong connection to the district. Their commitment to the college and district they represent and their desire to move forward bode well in their effort to establish clear policies on participatory governance that will allow the district to function in an atmosphere of collegiality and clarity.

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