

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

(<http://chronicle.com/>)

◀ Back to Search Results (<http://chronicle.com/search?q=2-year+colleges+explore+a+new+model+of+accreditation>)

COMMUNITY COLLEGES ([HTTP://CHRONICLE.COM/SECTION/COMMUNITY-COLLEGES/33](http://chronicle.com/section/community-colleges/33))

California's 2-Year Colleges Explore a New Accreditation Model

By *Eric Kelderman* | MARCH 18, 2016

California's community colleges are going to find a new accreditor. Someday. Maybe.

The Board of Governors for the state's community-college system plans to consider a resolution on Monday that would establish a planning committee of campus leaders to explore "alternative structures for a regional accreditor, which will take many years to develop," according to a summary of the resolution.

(http://extranet.cccco.edu/Portals/1/ExecutiveOffice/Board/2016_agendas/March/Item-2.2-New-Model-of-Accreditation-FINAL.pdf)

At the same time, another group of chancellors is meeting with the current accreditor, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, the ACCJC, to help improve both its operations and its relationship with its members.

Those measures are just the latest in the continuing battle between the colleges and an accreditor that has been widely criticized (<http://chronicle.com/article/Why-California-Is-Trying-to/234629>) as too punitive and unresponsive to calls for change.

Faculty-union members, in particular, have demanded that the commission be dismantled ever since it voted, in 2013, to remove the accreditation of City College of San Francisco.

The commission "is no longer widely accepted in its community, and does not meet the needs of California public higher education," said a prepared statement from Joshua Pechthalt, president of the California Federation of Teachers. Mr. Pechthalt said that his members expect the community-college board to "outline important details of the developing plan to make this historic move to a new accreditor."

A Host of Uncertainties

But the practical and political difficulties of finding or creating a new entity to accredit the nation's largest higher-education system, with 113 colleges and more than two million students, have tempered some of the calls to immediately move to another regional accrediting body.

At a recent meeting of the system's chancellors, campus leaders recognized that such a change could take five years or more, said Brian King, chancellor of the Los Rios Community College District.

In the short term, he said, campus leaders are trying to improve communication with the accreditor and take the lead in reforming its processes.

The final resolution is significantly different from a previous draft, which specifically called for a two-year timeline for the colleges to move to either the Western Association of Schools and Colleges' Senior College and University Commission or the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

Fred Glass, a spokesman for the California Federation of Teachers, said the proposed formal resolution still calls for the system to "designate a new accreditor for the California Community Colleges."

But a move to either accrediting agency would present a host of uncertainties and require approval from the colleges that are already accredited by those agencies and from the U.S. Department of Education. The Western Association, for example, would have to gain approval from the Education Department to oversee two-year colleges, and rewrite its standards to include such institutions.

The Northwest Commission would have to gain approval for expanding its geographic boundaries — an unprecedented move. And there are questions about what would happen to the ACCJC's member colleges in Hawaii and the U.S. territories in the Pacific Ocean.

A Vindication and a Wake-Up Call

Even so, critics of the community-college accreditor deem a change necessary after years of conflict.

San Francisco's city attorney filed a lawsuit (<http://chronicle.com/article/In-San-Francisco-an/149655>) in 2013 contesting the ACCJC's vote to revoke the accreditation of City College of San Francisco. The judge eventually ruled (<http://chronicle.com/article/Accreditor-Still-Has-Final-Say/190177>) that despite some procedural mistakes, the accreditor had the final word on that decision, which it later upheld.

Last year the system's chancellor, Brice W. Harris, convened a task force that blasted the commission (<http://chronicle.com/article/Report-Urges-New-Accreditor/232741>) for being uncooperative, resistant to repeated calls for change, and disrespectful of the

governing structures and processes of its member institutions. Following that report, the system's board directed

(<http://californiacommunitycolleges.cccco.edu/Portals/0/DocDownloads/PressReleases/NOV2015/PRE-RELEASE-Accreditation-BOG-Approval-FINAL-11-16-15.pdf>) Mr. Harris to present a plan to find a new accreditation model, which was largely interpreted as a call for a new accreditor.

The accrediting commission has also come under greater scrutiny from the Education Department and the federal panel that advises the U.S. secretary of education on accreditation matters.

That group, the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity, voted (<http://chronicle.com/article/California-s-Community/234656>) in June to give the accreditor just six months to comply with a handful of standards it failed to meet (<http://chronicle.com/article/Despite-Fight-Over-2-Year/143635>) in a 2013 review. In addition, the panel rejected the commission's request to expand its authority to accredit baccalaureate degrees.

The advisory panel's warning was in some ways a vindication for critics. But it was also a wake-up call for the colleges' leaders, who worried that the accreditor could lose its status as a gatekeeper of federal financial aid. If the Education Department revoked the agency's recognition, the colleges would have just 18 months to find a new accreditor.

Signaling Taxpayers

That imperative was one of the many issues that college chancellors brought up during a nearly four-hour discussion on accreditation at an annual meeting held this week.

At the meeting, the chancellors decided that as the "dues-paying members" of the commission, they needed to be in charge of reforming the current accreditation process, said Frank Gornick, chancellor of the West Hills Community College District and a member of the accreditor's board.

Most important, the chancellors will work to help the commission retain its federal recognition, he said.

"There's nothing wrong with exploring other options" for accreditation, Mr. Gornick said. That sends a signal to taxpayers that the system is moving forward with positive improvements and not just shopping for lower standards, he said.

And, in the end, the move to another accrediting agency may not be necessary, said Mr. King of the Los Rios district.

"To me," he said, "the long-term question is not which accrediting body, but the model of accreditation that aligns" with the needs of the system.