

WEST VALLEY MISSION COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT
TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE VISIT
Academic Senate for California Community Colleges
Community College League of California
September 9, 2006

This report is in response to a request for technical assistance by Chancellor Stan Arterberry and Academic Senate Presidents Catherine Cox (Mission) and Angelica Buendia-Bangle (West Valley). The technical assistance visit was conducted on August 24-25, 2006 by Dr. Diane Woodruff, Vice-President of the Community College League of California and Mark Wade Lieu, Vice-President of the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges. Scott Lay, President and CEO of the Community College League of California, was also present as an observer. 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 separate meetings with the District Board of Trustees, the Chancellor and his Executive Management Team, District and College Administrators, District and College Classified Staff, District and College Faculty, and an open meeting for District and College community members. In addition, faculty and staff provided the Team members with extensive background materials. 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 district and college faculty, staff, administrators, and the board in the technical assistance visit clearly demonstrated recognition of the problems facing the district 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 meetings with constituent groups, 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 found that constituency members have a general understanding of the principles of participatory governance and the need for broad participation in institutional decisions and processes. However, this general understanding did not always translate into actual operation and process. A clear knowledge of current policies and procedures is not shared by all constituencies, and several participants cited difficulty in accessing participatory governance documents. Some board members are not clear about some elements of the participatory governance process, including the role of the District Budget Advisory Committee (DBAC.) Among faculty and classified staff, issues concerning the participatory governance process and negotiations have been intermingled and bargaining issues are influencing participatory governance processes. Faculty and staff are no longer participating on participatory governance committees and this is having a negative effect on vital work of the

college. In addition, when members of the college community are not attending meetings and getting regular information about college issues under discussion, participatory governance processes break down and the opportunity to improve participatory processes is thwarted.

The generally negative tenor of comments expressed by all constituencies regarding campus climate, morale, and communication is clearly related to the current status of negotiations between the district and the faculty and classified staff. Many people commented about the “pink slips” (March 15 notices) issued in 2003 as being a primary contributor to lack of trust, poor climate and low morale. Groups expressed a lack of trust in information being provided about the budget. This information centered around district budget information, and it is clear that such information is also central to the current negotiations stalemate. Communication about the budget has completely broken down. Several faculty described the budget process as “smoke and mirrors” and complained about not being able to get accurate budget figures that were transparent and easy to understand; district officials expressed frustration that after they provide accurate information in negotiations, the information is not accurately presented in the communications that are sent to other faculty and staff. All groups expressed frustration, anger, demoralization, and an earnest desire to move forward, and every group pointed to the resolution of negotiations as a step in that direction.

Every group commented on the problem of frequent turnover in senior administrative staff and the lack of consistent leadership in the district. In addition, the frequent turnover in senior administration results in the need for constant education of new leadership about district policies and procedures and less efficiency in the operations of the district. The Team observed that the district has a great reliance on the use of “interim” positions in senior administration. For example, Mission College now has an Interim President, Interim Vice President of Instruction and an Interim Vice President of Student Services.

When asked why people thought that senior administrators had left the district, many people remarked that they were not respected or treated well by some members of the board. They said that responses of some board members to administrators bringing items before the board showed a lack of confidence in the administration and often demonstrated a desire to find fault with what they had done. While members of the board probably do not intend to offend administrators by delving into great detail on certain board items or asking why administrators didn’t do something a different way than they did it, the result is that some administrators feel demoralized and want to leave the district. People commented that the problem is not that the board asks in depth questions which is their right and responsibility to do, but rather with the tone that some board members use when asking questions. In addition, the problem of some board members “micromanaging” was mentioned by every group we talked to. Micromanagement sends a message of distrust, abrogates the authority of the CEO, administrative team, faculty and classified staff and ignores the organizational structure, participatory governance decision-making systems and procedures. Trustees have the responsibility to honor the professionalism of college staff by allowing them to perform their duties.

Another issue related to the problem of the lack of consistent leadership was the lack of a clearly stated district vision and mission. Although the “West Valley College Administration Statement of Values and Commitments” is a good start and could serve as a positive model for the rest of

the district, the lack of a district vision and mission results in district efforts that appear to lack coordination or focus.

Several groups also indicated that excessively long board meetings were very difficult and showed a lack of respect for those who were presenting before the board. Faculty, staff, and administrators reported that they had endured meetings that lasted late into the night even though they had already put in a full day's work and had classes and responsibilities that required their return to work early the next morning. Some board members even acknowledged that "we talk too much and beat issues to death."

All groups voiced concerns about the current lack of trust, respect, and communication among all the groups. Many expressed the opinion that better communication would lead to improved respect. This in turn would lead to greater trust.

Recommendations

1) The district needs to exercise strong leadership to improve the current climate and morale among various constituency groups so they can work effectively together once again. It is recommended that an external facilitator(s) be brought in to provide team building and communications training. The board, administration, faculty and classified staff should work together to design activities and structured discussions aimed at building trust, mutual respect and a sense of community among the leaders of the district. Events and activities that build teamwork and community should be made a top priority. Opportunities should be provided to recognize publicly the good work being done by people in the district.

2) It is recommended that all members of the district community need to develop and practice a culture that treats other members, groups and viewpoints with respect. All involved in the participatory governance process should participate with the intent of seeking positive resolutions to issues and reaching consensus whenever possible. Participants should respect the opinions of all, conducting discussions in a professional manner, and focus on the student and learning environment. The board, administration, faculty leadership and classified staff leadership should take steps to model "from the top" a climate of mutual respect and seeking common ground. In addition, everyone in the district needs to declare their desire to do their part to change the current environment and move forward.

3) Everyone's role needs to be better understood and respected. Almost every person and group we talked to did not feel that their role in the district was understood, respected or appreciated. Currently, there is not a common understanding in the district of the roles of the board, Chancellor, management, academic senate, and staff. It is recommended 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 board sets the tone for the entire district and as such must serve as the models for participatory governance. To further this end, the board should participate in annual development

activities that review the roles and responsibilities of the board within the legal structure of participatory governance. After the new board members are elected in November, it is recommended that board members receive training in “boardsmanship” to understand their role as stewards of the public good and to distinguish between the board’s role in setting broad policy versus the administration, faculty and staff’s role in college and district operations. It is recommended that this outside facilitator help the board develop a greater understanding of the concept of delegation and how, in effective districts, the board delegates its authority for implementing policy to the Chancellor, who in turn delegates administrative detail and policy implementation to administrative staff and academic and professional matters to the academic senate.

5) It is recommended that the board look at the issue of time management to better structure and limit the length of board meetings. Few people do their best work when meetings go beyond a few hours, and the board should structure their meetings to allow those who wish to be there to witness the final decisions made in the participatory governance process. If there are many questions about a particular item, the board may want to consider using the time in the meeting to get the questions down accurately and then let staff answer them in writing before the next meeting.

6) The board has expressed its desire to improve communication with college constituencies and the communities that board members represent. To further this end and to help build trust and understanding of the board’s discussions and actions, it is recommended that the board explore ways to better share the details of its discussions and actions. Such ways may include a reconsideration of the format of board minutes to provide more detail for those who can’t attend, the video-taping of board meetings, and/or the broadcasting of board meetings.

7) The administration, the academic senate and classified senate are encouraged to work together to identify and prioritize key educational issues that need attention at the earliest stages before well-developed plans and proposals are in place. In general, early communication and continued dialogue as positions develop enhance the ability of all to be proactive, rather than reactive to needed change. It is good practice for affected constituencies to participate in discussions when they are in an embryonic stage rather than have the issues addressed by a small group and presented as a full-blown document to review.

8) Although many of the comments regarding budget information are colored by the current status of negotiations, it is recommended that the district nevertheless seek to improve ways to make budgetary information available and easy to understand not only for the budget committee and the negotiations teams, but also for the college community at large. Clarity in budgetary information and the basis for such information would help to remove misunderstandings that currently exist and would also help to restore a level of trust among groups. The district has just completed an outside review of the district budget by the FCMAT Team and all groups have expressed support for this effort and the clarity it may bring. To follow on this positively-perceived endeavor, the report of the FCMAT Team should be made available to all as soon as it is received.

9) Several issues arose concerning district policies and procedures related to participatory governance. Clearly some policies and procedures are not widely known or understood by some members of the college community. It is recommended that the district consider bringing representatives of all district groups together for a review of current policies and procedures, and if needed, work to revise policies and procedures to address the actual needs of the district. When complete, it is recommended that all policies and procedures be reviewed and/or approved by the Board and then be made readily available to all both on the district website and in written form from the Chancellor's office.

10) It is recommended that the Chancellor provide leadership to help the district develop and implement a common vision, mission statement and strategic plan that will provide focus and a foundation for future efforts.

11) The district will be unable to move out from under the current cloud of mistrust, disrespect, and lack of communication if negotiations with the faculty and classified staff are not resolved in a timely manner. The Team recommends that the district come to a resolution to negotiations as soon as possible in order to enable the district to focus on mutual efforts to restore morale and positive campus climate.

12) Faculty and classified staff are encouraged to resume attending committee meetings. In particular, it is recommended that a district task force be formed to discuss how faculty, classified staff and the administration can work together to grow enrollment back to base and capture growth funds so the district will not lose money that is so desperately needed for negotiations. In addition, it is essential that everyone come together to work on accreditation so that the accreditation of the institution will not be jeopardized.

13) After negotiations are complete, it is recommended that the district and bargaining groups look at different approaches to their traditional practice of adversarial bargaining. The current process is not working for anyone we talked to; everyone was angry, frustrated and dissatisfied with the way negotiations are being conducted. Several people used the term "totally dysfunctional" to describe the current negotiations process.

14) The district needs to provide a more effective mechanism to ensure that staff members have sufficient time and support to participate effectively in governance activities. Classified staff in particular indicated that it is very difficult for them to participate in governance activities because so many vacancies exist and they either have to impose on other colleagues in their absence or complete the original workload themselves when they return. Indeed, only one classified staff person was able to come to the individual constituent group meeting with the Technical Assistance team.

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 West Valley Mission CCD. We sincerely hope the

recommendations will be helpful. We will be available for further explanation of the recommendations if necessary.

During the technical assistance visit, faculty, administration, board members and staff expressed a sincere desire to improve the functioning of the district. The evident level of passion and emotion among all involved reveals a deep commitment to the district. Their deep regard for students, their love for the colleges and district they represent and their desire to move forward constitute a reservoir of potential that can be drawn upon to address the multiple issues and conflicts that currently exist. The cumulative talent, energy and devotion of the college's board, administration, faculty and staff bode well for the future. To improve the current situation in the district requires the involvement of all constituencies. The recommendations made above assume the participation of all, and it is imperative that the board, administration, faculty and staff come together in a mutually respectful manner to move the district forward.

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