

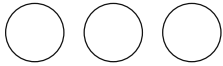
# State auditor slams accrediting group that sanctioned CCSF

Commission arbitrary, examiners conclude



**Nanette Asimov**

Updated: June 27, 2014 8 a.m.



The California state auditor slammed the commission trying to revoke accreditation from City College of San Francisco on Thursday, confirming accusations from faculty critics that it treats other colleges more leniently, is too secretive, and imposes sanctions significantly more often than do other accrediting commissions around the country.

Perhaps most damning to the future of the commission is the finding that California has other accrediting options for its 112 community colleges rather than relying on the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges for accountability.

"We can either find a new accreditor or we can reform this accreditor, but we need changes," said state Sen. Jim Beall, D-San Jose, who requested the audit last summer with Sen. Jim Nielsen, R-Gerber (Tehama County) after hearing complaints.

But commission President Barbara Beno hit back just as hard, clearly irritated that the audit is essentially a referendum on the commission's decision to revoke City College's accreditation, now delayed. Beno accuses the audit team of defaming her

agency with factual inaccuracies and relying on the allegations of critics suing the commission. She said she could not respond to those because of a pending lawsuit.

In short, "there is no indication from the report that any of the members of the team had the experience or competence to express opinions regarding matters of accreditation," Beno wrote to Elaine Howle, the state auditor, in a response included in the 74-page audit. Howle's point-by-point refutation of Beno's letter is also included.

The audit team examined the history of accrediting sanctions from 2009 through January, and found that the commission had given 15 colleges two years to come into compliance with standards, and had given six others more than two years.

By contrast, the team found that the commission voted to revoke accreditation from City College after only one year on sanction. Without accreditation, colleges can't receive state funding and must close. City College had been set to lose accreditation on July 31 but won more time to comply with standards through various means.

"We question why the commission did not give additional time to City College to address its deficiencies, similar to the consideration it provided" to other colleges,

the team said.

The team also noted that the commission did not sanction every college that was out of compliance.

All of this raises questions about the commission's reasons for taking such severe action against City College, the audit says.

As a private, nonprofit corporation, however, "the commission is not subject to state or federal open-meeting laws" and makes its most significant decisions about colleges in private.

But the vast majority of the colleges it accredits - 84 percent - are public schools.

"For that reason, we believe the commission should make its decisions at a level of transparency similar to that expected of the state's public institutions," the team concludes.

Also a problem is the commission's appeal process, which all but prohibits colleges from introducing evidence of progress, the audit says.

If the idea is to help colleges improve, "we would expect that the commission's appeal process would allow the institution to introduce evidence that would demonstrate the progress," the team said.

California's commission also sanctions colleges far more often than those in the nation's other five accrediting regions. From 2009 to 2013, California's commission sanctioned 53 percent of its colleges. The others sanctioned between 2 and 24 percent.

Among the team's recommendations to the state community college chancellor's office:

-- Help colleges communicate concerns to the commission;

-- Join with colleges to ask the commission to change its appeal process and for the chance to address problems before their comprehensive evaluation;

-- Identify other possible accreditors or the feasibility of giving colleges a choice of accreditors.

Paul Feist, a spokesman for state Chancellor Brice Harris, said colleges should have a single accreditor. But that should be a commission that "enjoys the confidence and support of its member institutions."

Tim Killikelly, president of the faculty union at City College, expressed satisfaction with the audit.

"It confirms a lot of what we've been saying all along. The report should make the Legislature think about what they need to do to create a fair accrediting process."

Assemblyman Phil Ting, D-San Francisco, said he supports such changes.

The commission "is run like a star chamber behind closed doors and in total secrecy," he said. "We need to reform (the commission) or pursue accreditation alternatives."

## Online extra

To see the audit, go to:

<http://bit.ly/liyFAei>

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Written By

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Reach Nanette on

Nanette covers California's public universities - the University of California and California State University - as well as community colleges and private universities. She's written about sexual misconduct at UC and Stanford, the precarious state of accreditation at City College of San Francisco, and what happens when the UC Berkeley student government discovers a gay rights opponent in its midst. She has exposed a private art college where students rack up massive levels of debt (one student's topped \$400k), and covered audits peering into UC finances, education lawsuits and countless student protests.

But writing about higher education also means getting a look at the brainy creations of students and faculty: Robotic suits that help paralyzed people walk. Online collections of folk songs going back hundreds of years. And innovations touching on everything from virtual reality to baseball.

Nanette is also covering the COVID-19 pandemic and served as health editor during the first six months of the crisis, which quickly ended her brief tenure as interim investigations editor.

Previously, Nanette covered K-12 education. Her stories led to changes in charter school laws, prompted a ban on Scientology in California public schools, and exposed cheating and censorship in testing.

A past president of the Society of Professional Journalists' Northern California chapter, Nanette has a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University and a B.A. in sociology from Queens College. She speaks English and Spanish