

Pima Community College slapped with 2 years of probation

Could then lose its accreditation if pervasive problems aren't fixed

- Carol Ann Alaimo Arizona Daily Star, Apr 18, 2013

Pima Community College has been given two years to fix its pervasive problems or effectively go out of business.

A sanction widely expected became official Wednesday when the college learned it's been put on probation by its accreditor, the Chicago-based Higher Learning Commission.

The change in status sparked renewed calls from faculty for the resignations of longtime Governing Board members, whose conduct the accreditor has called into question. The probation decision was made in response to a recent report that faulted the ethics and competence of college executives and board members.

PCC's problems ranged from corrupt contracting practices - in which executives knowingly broke rules to approve expensive, unbid contracts - to the board's mishandling of sexual harassment complaints against former Chancellor Roy Flores, according to the report from a fact-finding team the accreditor sent to Tucson in January.

Flores and other senior officials - many of whom still work at PCC - created a "culture of fear and retribution" that fractured the school's workforce, the report said. PCC's "dysfunctional" board failed for years to detect or act upon problems, it said. Some of the failings the accreditor noted were brought to light initially by Arizona Daily Star investigations into PCC's spending and business practices.

Flores resigned last year after eight women accused him of sexual harassment.

The accreditor said Flores, board members and other executives committed "serious breaches" of ethical standards.

For now, the probation action isn't expected to affect the college's students.

PCC will remain accredited while on probation, so students will still be eligible for federal financial aid and their college credits will be recognized by other schools. That would change only if the school fails to fix its problems within the two-year probationary window.

In that case, PCC could lose accreditation, effectively shutting down the institution that's been holding classes since 1969.

Without accredited status, PCC could no longer offer federal aid to students. Its credits would not be transferable and degrees would be virtually worthless. Wednesday's announcement marked the second time PCC has been placed on probation.

It also happened in 1989 amid allegations of misconduct by board members and the school's president at the time. In that case, the college successfully completed probation and corrected problems. Those faulted either resigned or were removed by the courts.

Zelema Harris, PCC's new interim chancellor, said in an email to employees Wednesday that the college has a chance to become a stronger organization during the probationary period. "We can use this opportunity to improve services to our students and the community," her email said.

Harris did not respond to four requests for further comment.

Her email said she'll provide an update at the May board meeting. Brenda Even, chairwoman of PCC's board, said in a phone interview that she and other board members intend to forge ahead with making necessary changes. "I feel a responsibility, and I think the other members feel a responsibility" to fix things, Even said, noting many corrective actions already are underway.

Even and board members Scott Stewart, David Longoria and Marty Cortez have faced mounting calls to quit in light of the accreditor's criticisms.

Joe Labuda, president of PCC's Faculty Senate, one of several employee groups seeking board resignations, said the college's problems aren't likely to be solved until those who hired and supported Flores are gone. "We need a fresh start," he said, and the faculty feels "we aren't going to get it from the people who helped create these problems."

On StarNet: Read the accreditor's letter to Pima Community College at azstarnet.com/pdf

Students unaffected for now

Students at Pima Community College will not be immediately affected by their school's being put on probation.

PCC's accreditation remains intact during the two-year probationary period, ensuring that qualified students can still receive federal aid, and that credits they earn can be transferred to other schools.

That would change only if PCC doesn't fix its problems to its accreditor's satisfaction by the time probation ends.

The accreditor's recent investigation of PCC, while harsh in its criticism of the school's top executives and Board of Governors, found no fault with the quality of the college's academic programs despite the turmoil at the top.

The University of Arizona, Arizona State University in Tempe and Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff each have said they intend to honor PCC transfer credits as usual during the probationary period.

"Concerns regarding Pima Community College's accreditation are not related to the college's academic programs and services," said a recent letter to PCC from UA President Ann Weaver Hart. Because academic quality is stable, "the transfer policies and procedures between PCC and the University of Arizona will remain unchanged," the letter said.

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