

# Accreditor visit brings Pima Community College closer to learning if sanctions will lift

- By Carol Ann Alaimo, Arizona Daily Star, Oct 1, 2016

Pima Community College's accreditor heard conflicting views about the quality of the school's leadership during a visit to Tucson last week, including a critique from a high-profile former insider.

A team from the Chicago-based Higher Learning Commission spent two days talking mainly to employees and Governing Board members about whether the school deserves a clean bill of health after four years under accreditation sanctions. The sanctions were imposed starting in 2013 because the college either didn't meet, or barely met, some of the accreditor's standards for the proper operation of an educational institution.

Chancellor Lee Lambert, hired to clean up a decade of mismanagement by a former CEO, told employees Wednesday after the review team left town that he thinks the school passed muster.

"We showed that PCC is well on its way to providing the best possible service to students and the community," he said in an email, and predicted the school's current sanction will be lifted next year.

The college refused to let the Arizona Daily Star attend what PCC described on its website as a "general community forum" with the accreditor. The forum was an invitation-only event.

A PCC student reporter did attend the session, something PCC officials later said they wouldn't have allowed had they known about it.

PCC spokeswoman Libby Howell explained the media ban on the accreditor's behalf by saying forum speakers had an "expectation of confidentiality," even though they spoke

before a room full of people. Attendees interviewed by the Star said they didn't request confidentiality and said the college never mentioned it to them.

A dozen or so speakers at the forum praised the chancellor's performance.

"I showed up to demonstrate the support of the business community," Ted Maxwell of the Southern Arizona Leadership Council said after the meeting.

"I believe Chancellor Lambert has been more open to seeking advice and input," on matters such as workforce development, Maxwell said.

Kelle Masyln, the Tucson community relations director for Arizona State University, praised the "close working relationship" between ASU and PCC.

About 50 groups and individuals met with the accreditation team over two days, including school executives, board members, students, faculty and staff representatives and two community groups.

The school cited numerous changes made to improve operations college-wide, such as new performance tracking measures, improved hiring practices and stronger links between the school's planning and budgeting.

Meanwhile, PCC's biggest critic, the Coalition for Accountability, Integrity, Respect and Responsibility, got a boost Tuesday when a community-colleges expert told reviewers at a separate session that she shares the group's concerns about PCC's current leadership.

Zelema Harris, an ex-commissioner with PCC's accrediting agency who has run three community colleges and won awards for leadership, said she joined the coalition because she's never seen a community college treat a community group as poorly as PCC treats the coalition.

Harris was an interim chancellor and an interim provost at PCC in 2013 and then retired to Tucson. She told reviewers the college has "totally disrespected and ignored" the group's concerns about lack of transparency, questionable hiring practices and other problems.

The coalition wants sanctions to continue. It does not favor of a show-cause order, the harshest possible penalty for PCC if the accreditor finds enough unresolved issues. College officials didn't respond Friday to a request for comment on Harris' critique. The accreditor is scheduled to rule in February on whether PCC should become sanction-free.

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