

Focus visit brings praise, scorn

By EDDIE CELAYA

The Higher Learning Commission's "focus visit" wrapped up Sept. 27 with a forum for community members. That meeting created little drama, unlike a more exclusive forum held earlier in the day between HLC reviewers and critics of the college.

The first meeting focused on criticisms from a community group known as Coalition For Accountability, Integrity, Respect and Responsibility, or C-FAIRR.

The second meeting was limited to invited guests.

The meeting between accrediting reviewers and C-FAIRR representatives started off fiery. C-FAIRR board chair Mario Gonzales began the proceedings by admonishing reviewers from 2010.

"That team is the one that gave a big, big pass to the college as sexual harassment issues were coming down," Gonzales said. "They discovered nothing. For what reasons, I have no idea."

As Gonzales continued, he was interrupted by reviewer Sherilyn Poole.

"We know the history, we've all read that," Poole said. "So if there is something you want us to know, this is the time."

Gonzales pressed on, alleging the HLC has continued to fail the college.

"The HLC has failed to vet information provided to it by Pima Community College," he said.

Gonzales said C-FAIRR is concerned about what it sees as various shortcomings at Pima.

The listed shortcomings range from the recent increase in tuition for local students (and decrease for out-of-state students) to diversity among the college staff.

Carol Gorsuch, a former PCC instructor, alleged multiple cases of executive power abuse. Specifically, she cited the case of former chemistry instructor David Katz.

"David Katz decided to take a stand, not only for himself but for all other faculty and staff who he knew had been targeted unfairly by the college administration," Gorsuch said. "In July 2016, a federal judge ruled in his favor."

Because of previous positions, that case and other similar cases are especially damning to Chan-

cellor Lee Lambert, according to Gorsuch.

"His two previous jobs included director of affirmative action and director of HR," she said.

For the HLC to truly help Pima, C-FAIRR sees only one solution.

"Our position is that PCC either remain on notice, or be placed again on probation," Gonzales said.

That notion, for the most part, was not shared at the larger community forum.

Many of PCC's business, non-profit and corporate partners were present and represented, letting their perspectives be known.

Many invitees praised PCC's workforce development program and its student workers.

"The work force development team has aligned their goals with our goals, which helps align their programs and curriculum with the industry," Raytheon representative Patricia Brown said.

Edwin Marquez of Southern Arizona Leadership Council expressed excitement "about Pima connecting with local businesses to help supply a quality workforce. I think the current adminis-

tration is doing a great job."

Others, such as Arizona State University's Kellan Maslan, praised Lambert for positive changes in the college's culture and programs.

"Over the last three years, we have had a great working relationship with Lee Lambert," Maslan said.

"He has focused on positive changes that benefit the student by aligning more with university programs. So when they go to universities, they're prepared."

Dave Perry, president of the Oro Valley Chamber of Commerce, concurred.

"Chancellor Lambert has brought a new level of engagement along with the new leadership he has at the college," Perry said. "While doing that, I think the college has stepped up its internal controls."

With the conclusion of the focus visit, the HLC will now consider its findings and render a verdict on PCC's accreditation status.

A final decision is expected be handed down by the HLC's governing board on Feb. 22, 2017.