

Editorial

Give the community college accrediting panel room to improve

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The semi-public commission that accredits community colleges in California on behalf of the federal government deserves to be upbraided. Even some of its own members concede that it has done too little to help the colleges it oversees improve, and has instead just sanctioned them at a rate much higher than any other regional accrediting agency in the nation.

The most dramatic sign that the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges had overstepped came in 2013 when it moved to yank accreditation from City College of San Francisco, which would have been tantamount to closing the school. More than 70,000 students who enrolled in the college's low-cost courses would have been out of luck; how would that have improved higher education in California?

Of course, the move might have been justifiable if the college had truly been failing its students. But the college's shortcomings — though a few were serious — had nothing to do with academic excellence; by all accounts, the college did a good job pedagogically. The shortcomings were about such matters as failing to keep adequate financial reserves and inadequately tracking student performance. In a lawsuit, a judge ruled in favor of the college, and the accrediting commission gave it a two-year extension to fix its problems.

A state audit later faulted the commission for dealing with different schools inconsistently and lacking transparency. A task force report also was harshly critical. And this week, the Board of Governors of California's community college system instructed its chancellor to develop a plan for improving the accreditation process, probably by switching accreditors.

That might be a little hasty. The accrediting commission, having been warned in the strongest possible way, should be given a chance to change its behavior. But it must also adjust its thinking. It shouldn't be faulted for the number of sanctions it gives; the commission's job is to hold schools to high standards. But as one commissioner admitted, "We've become more a compliance agency than a helping agency."

The community college system would need federal approval to switch its accrediting agency, and the overall process would take a decade to complete. At the same time, the commission is showing signs that it's finally listening. It's holding a series of meetings to hear critics' complaints, and has adjusted its disciplinary system to provide more improvement time for schools and has moved to be more transparent.

Just as colleges sometimes need the threat of serious consequences to make them pay attention and straighten up, so too did the accrediting agency.

<http://www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-accredit-community-college-20151118-story.html>