

Academe Online

Texas Hold Him

Members of the San Antonio community college system's board of trustees ignore faculty concerns and reward their chancellor with a generous contract.

By Robert J. Pohl

Note: *This is an expanded version of the print article.*

On September 15, 2009, faculty members from four of the five community colleges in San Antonio delivered an overwhelming vote of no confidence in Chancellor Bruce H. Leslie to the Alamo Community College District's board of trustees. (One college, Northeast Lakeview, didn't participate in the vote because the college is not yet accredited.) Faculty participation in the separate campus votes averaged 80 percent. The vote against Leslie was nearly unanimous, with a low of 91 percent at St. Philip's College and a high of 99 percent at Palo Alto Community College.

That night, George Johnson, president of the St. Philip's faculty senate, called for Leslie's immediate resignation and publicized numerous faculty grievances: "Dr. Leslie has repeatedly and consistently refused transparent dialogue. . . . His actions signal a refusal to listen to key stakeholders at this college. . . . Moreover, Dr. Leslie has repeatedly refused to allow records to be kept in meetings with faculty and staff. . . . The faculty believe that these actions are deliberate and made in an attempt to keep us unaware and uninformed. . . . Dr. Leslie has forgotten that faculty must drive curriculum."

A wall of professors stood behind Johnson in a display of solidarity, and thunderous applause followed his address. It was the first time in the history of the sixty-four-year-old community college district that a chancellor received a vote of no confidence.

The irony couldn't have been lost on Leslie: his unpopularity stems in large part from his attempts to unify the colleges. He apparently has succeeded only in unifying the faculty against him. Opposition to his unification plan was reinforced by a January 2010 report that concluded that pursuing single accreditation would most likely result in the loss of five to seven million dollars annually for St. Philip's College (because it would lose its status as a historically black college and the federal monies that come with that status). After numerous board meetings at which members of the community, the faculty, and the staff voiced their passionate opposition to the plan, Leslie and the board of trustees decided against single accreditation.

Although ACCD is now marketed collectively as the Alamo Colleges, the colleges (save for Northeast Lakeview) are independently accredited, have distinct identities, and serve discrete communities. St. Philip's College, well known for its culinary arts and technical programs, was founded in 1898 and is the only college in the nation designated as both a historically black and a Hispanic-serving institution. San Antonio College, founded in 1925, supports a renowned art department, a popular radio station, and an award-winning student paper. Palo Alto is designed specifically to meet the needs of first-generation college students, and relative newcomer Northwest Vista is the fastestgrowing college in the United States, according to ACCD board member James Rindfuss. Because Northeast Lakeview College is not yet accredited, 80 percent of its courses are San Antonio College courses. SAC faculty are regularly consulted about these courses.

In San Antonio and across the country, community colleges provide crucial educational opportunities to high school graduates and GED students. This past fall, more than 60,000 degree- or certificate-seeking students attended the Alamo Colleges, with a plurality, 22,028, enrolled at SAC. According to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, this year Texas community colleges enrolled 703,051 students, more than half of the 1.3 million students enrolled in college statewide—a level that mirrors community college enrollment nationally.

"Community colleges are open-door institutions, welcoming students turned away by many four-year colleges," community college researchers Thomas Bailey and Jim Jacobs noted last October in the *American Prospect*. "Thus, improving outcomes for community college students will have a disproportionate positive effect on minority and low-income students. There are, for example, more low-income African American and Hispanic students at Bronx Community College alone than there are in the entire Ivy League."

Community colleges are also much less expensive than most four-year institutions. At the Alamo Colleges, twelve hours of credit currently run \$781; taking the same number of courses at the University of Texas at San Antonio would cost \$3,808.70.

All for One and One for All?

One of the most contentious issues under Leslie's leadership has been accreditation. While Leslie's announcement in January 2010 that the district would not pursue single accreditation was a reprieve, the district has made many changes that members of the faculty believe were meant to prepare the way for single accreditation. Faculty members point to moves to standardize the curriculum and rebrand the distinct campuses as a single entity as evidence of Leslie's intentions. More evidence, they say, can be found in his efforts to institute a unified transcript as well as in a plan that may force professors to teach at multiple colleges.

On December 16, after five months of research, the twenty-one-member Accreditation Review Committee commissioned by Denver McClendon, chair of the Alamo Colleges board of trustees, issued an eighty-six-page report that concluded that pursuing single accreditation for the district would take about five years and cost \$1.83 million over the course of a decade. Maintaining independent accreditation would run about \$4.18 million over the same period. Although the district as a whole might save more than \$2 million if it pursued single accreditation, St. Philip's College would most likely lose its status as a historically black college, endangering \$5 million to \$7 million annually in federal grants. In the unlikely event that St. Philip's could successfully appeal to the Department of Education to maintain its status as a historically black institution, the other colleges could lose hundreds of thousands of dollars each year because the department permits a college to receive federal grants for being either a historically black college or a Hispanic-serving institution, not both—and the Alamo Colleges would be considered one institution if singly accredited.

Nor would single accreditation provide a quick fix for one of the most pressing issues Leslie faces: getting Northeast Lakeview College accredited. San Antonio, Palo Alto, St. Philip's, and Northwest Vista colleges are independently accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. In December, this accrediting agency rebuffed Northeast Lakeview's application for candidacy. In an article in the *San Antonio College Ranger*, Jeff Hunt, chair of SAC's theater and speech communication department, president of the faculty senate, and co-chair of the accreditation committee, blamed the board of trustees for pressuring Northeast Lakeview to apply for accreditation before it was ready. If the colleges threw their lot in together, the committee reported, the single accreditation process could take up to five years, after which time Alamo Colleges could apply for accreditation for Northeast Lakeview—which could take up to five more years to achieve.

Ed DesPlas, executive vice chancellor of the Dallas Community College System, the only other community college system in Texas that has independently accredited colleges, says maintaining distinct institutions makes it easier to build relationships with area high schools and recruit students. The centralized bureaucracy of a single-accreditation model "would affect the responsiveness and the quality of the relationship that the communities enjoy with independently accredited colleges," he said.

Board member James Rindfuss says he still sees potential benefits in seeking single accreditation. He says that six thousand of the district's students attend more than one college at any given time, and they run into bureaucratic red tape when they try to transfer. "The board even went to the trouble of passing a policy that required all credits be accepted among our various colleges," he said. "I've had students complain to me that they had to go and get a transcript from each college, and that's ridiculous."

Rindfuss acknowledges that many of the benefits of single accreditation—saving taxpayers money and streamlining the process for students, for example—can be obtained other ways, but he thinks those conversations wouldn't have happened if the district hadn't explored single accreditation. "Suddenly, when [faculty] feel the pressure coming from single accreditation, then they are going to show us how without doing single accreditation," he said.

At St. Philip's College, which has been the target of particular scrutiny, employees who are paid with federal Title 3 funding for historically black colleges are going to lose their jobs. The *Ranger* reported that 128 employees paid with Title 3 funding or with funding from the College Cost Reduction and Access Act cannot reapply for their jobs if their positions get absorbed into the college budget and paid for with "hard money"—district revenue. Many of these people have worked at the college for years, but because they are considered "external," they

cannot reapply for their jobs. Hiring of this nature is only advertised “internally.” Presumably, this allows the district to hire more parttimers and reduce the base pay of new appointees. The decision not to allow these 128 people to reapply for their jobs is in contrast to an April 5, 2001, memo that former chancellor Robert Ramsay sent to all employees. That memo said that the district’s intent was to provide internal and transfer opportunities for Title 3 employees from Budget Object Codes 12 and 14, regardless of the funding source.

A Dirty-Laundry List

Many of the faculty’s problems with the current district leadership are related to the single-accreditation issue, but the list of grievances hardly ends there. Complaints range from increasing class sizes to rising day-care rates and touch on nearly every conceivable topic in between.

Paul Martinez, president of the faculty senate at Northwest Vista College, said that he is especially concerned about the curriculum changes that were first instituted in 2008. The standardization process has been driven by the administration, he says, with little faculty input. He worries that creating a single curriculum for the diverse colleges will prevent professors from developing classes tailored to their specific student populations.

Two faculty senates wrote that standardizing curriculum is “fundamentally at odds with the basic principles of governing independently accredited institutions.”

Thomas Billimek, chair of San Antonio College’s psychology department, said that standardization forced him to drop general psychology as a prerequisite for several courses, including psychology of adjustment, childhood psychology, and human sexuality. Billimek says course standardization also doesn’t make sense because departments don’t share the same goals across campuses. For example, he says, San Antonio College’s psychology department is committed to transferring students to fouryear colleges for upper-division work, whereas other college departments merely offer courses.

Christy Woodward Kaupert of SAC’s political science department said that a disproportionate number of students at St. Philip’s College, for example, come from Title 1 schools, institutions that have the highest concentrations of impoverished families. In general, she says, the prerequisite standards for this group of students would not be suitable for SAC students and vice versa.

But Leslie, in an interview, said that critics who claim that standards are being lowered across the district are simply wrong: “We have a mission to define one high standard for all the colleges.”

Faculty members are also concerned about the district’s hiring practices. Leslie’s stated goal is to decrease the number of classes taught by full-time professors by 15 percent at San Antonio College and on average across the district by 6 percent, which would bring the total share of classes taught by part-time faculty members to 50 percent. Billimek opposes this plan, although he says he could support a goal of having 60 percent of classes taught by full-time instructors and 40 percent taught by part-time professors. When priorities were different, he says, full-time faculty taught 70 percent of classes.

Anna Budzinski, chair of SAC’s foreign languages department, said two of her department’s professors could not afford to live on part-time salaries, so she lost instructors in German and Chinese.

“[Budzinski] had a vision of making San Antonio College the center for language study, especially nontraditional languages,” Len McClure, who taught Chinese at SAC for three years, wrote in an e-mail. “I would have been happy to continue indefinitely earning a full-time salary without benefits, because I really enjoyed teaching. But I have a family to support, and a maximum income of \$14,000 a year just does not make it in this world.”

Leslie again denies that there is a problem. “Number one, there has not been any loss of instructors,” he said. “Forty full-time instructors were added this summer. . . . We actually have too many employees.” He also insists that he has increased the faculty’s role in decision making. “Since I’ve been here, I’ve actually done more to expand governance [to include professors] than has ever been done in the history of this institution. So those are false claims,” he said.

Hunt says that Leslie does meet often with professors’ representatives but that professors have “no power whatsoever.” “There is the question of is this really shared governance or just a facade of shared governance,” Hunt says. In 2008, Leslie restructured the faculty representation system, giving final authority over decisions to the vice chancellors. “Whatever the VC ultimately wants is what happens in the end.”

“In order to make a change, you have to have someone following you. No one likes drastic change,” Hunt added. “And [Leslie] has brought drastic change in every facet of our work environment.”

A Rough Transcript

On September 15, the night that professors at the district’s four campuses announced their votes of no confidence, Leslie told the Ranger, “I’m not threatened by it. . . . I work for the board, and I work at the pleasure of the board, so that is obviously the primary responsibility that I have, and so doing their bidding is what I am charged to do.”

The ACCD board of trustees hired Bruce Leslie in 2006, citing his extensive experience. Prior to a position in Connecticut, Leslie served as president of Onondaga Community College in Syracuse, New York, for twelve years, and he has also held administrative positions at community colleges in Illinois, Texas, and Washington. He received his PhD in higher education administration from the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas at Austin.

Shortly after his appointment in 2006, Leslie successfully encouraged the board of trustees to give raises to top-level administrators, whose incomes put them in the top 10 percent of incomes in the nation in one of the country’s poorest big cities. Leslie’s current salary—\$313,000, not including a retention bonus and other perks, such as an automobile allowance—puts him in nearly the top 1 percent. His total 2008–09 compensation of \$321,000, as reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education’s* most recent executive compensation survey, ranked twenty-third in size among executive compensation packages at sixty-nine of the nation’s largest community colleges. The median total compensation of community college executives surveyed in 2008–09 was \$290,405.

Leslie has a history of resigning before his official time is up. He left the twelve-college Connecticut Community College System in 1999 because campus presidents resisted his attempts to standardize the curriculum. *Community College Week* reported in 1999 that the presidents of all twelve colleges approached the board of trustees and requested Leslie’s resignation. “We agreed that we were unable to agree in terms of the direction of the system,” Leslie told *Community College Week* at the time. “I think that probably the issue came down to my belief that there needed to be some common standards across the system, and the colleges felt I was threatening their autonomy.”

But of his current curriculum-fueled conflict at Alamo Colleges, Leslie says, “Nothing is similar at all.”

In 2006, Leslie resigned from the six-college Houston Community College System two-and-a-half years before his contract was due to expire because of disagreements with trustees, according to the *Express-News*. Houston Community College System trustees did not return calls for comment. “[Your audience] will have to read between the lines,” said the receptionist.

The official version, as reported by the Houston *Chronicle*, comes from former board chairman Jay Aiyer: “We are parting on great terms.” But in August 2004, amid allegations that Houston Community College System trustees were practicing nepotism in violation of district policy, Houston press reported that “instead of heeding complaints about the problems, the paterfamilias of HCCS, Chancellor Bruce Leslie, apparently has sanctioned a climate in which would-be whistle-blowers either stay quiet or live in fear of retribution.”

Leslie said that the Alamo Colleges board of trustees gave him two directives upon his arrival: improve student success and improve operational efficiencies. He has decreased operating costs by several million dollars, Leslie said, and he also takes credit for retention, completion, and productive grade rates, which have improved since his arrival.

If changes Leslie has made to the structure and compensation of college staff and faculty are controversial, they are hardly rare. Over five years, college administrators’ salaries rose 35.6 percent nationally, journalist Gabriel Arana reported in a March 2009 *Nation* article. At the same time, the ranks of contingent faculty in non-tenure-track part- or fulltime positions have been growing. In 2007, 69 percent of faculty at all types of institutions nationwide were in contingent positions, up from 43 percent in 1975, and the proportion of faculty in contingent positions at community colleges is even higher.

“Some of these trends are natural,” Leslie said, after expressing skepticism about the data.

Not only do part-time faculty members at ACCD receive roughly half the pay for the same amount of work as their full-time colleagues, but, as *Inside Higher Ed* [reported](#) in late 2008, ACCD was also asking part-time faculty members to sign waivers that officially denied the actual number of courses that they were teaching, presumably to avoid paying benefits and higher base pay. Policy at ACCD dictates higher base pay and benefits for professors who teach twelve credits or more.

Gwendolyn Bradley, a senior program officer at the AAUP, said the practice “seems to mark a new low in the exploitation of part-time faculty.”

According to Linda Hill of Alamo College’s Department of Legal Services, the number of associate vice chancellors at Alamo Colleges has doubled since 2006, from three to six. The number of vice chancellors has more than doubled since 2006, from two to five. And the number of assistants to these positions has doubled since 2006, from seven to fourteen.

But Leslie says he has not doubled the size of the administration as critics claim. “In fact, all I did when I developed the current administrative model was I took current administrative positions and I reassigned them,” he said, “so there was no net increase in the number of administrators. So, again, those are false claims; those are political claims.”

“I don’t know how he can say that with a straight face,” says Hunt.

According to the “2010 Full-Time Staffing Summary,” funding for full-time positions at district, which has no contact hours with students, has increased by more than \$4.6 million from 2008 to 2010 alone. No comparable increases have occurred at the five colleges. The highest increase in funding for full-time positions at the colleges occurred at Northeast Lakeview, with an increase of about \$2.4 million over the same period of time. A decrease in full-time funding has occurred at SAC. Despite repeated requests, comprehensive budget information from 2006 to 2010 is not available online. Leslie arrived in 2006, and the public would benefit greatly from being able to access this information online and follow the managerial changes, as well as the redistribution of funds, that accompanied Leslie’s arrival.

McClendon says Leslie is “doing a good job. . . . He accomplished those things that we asked him to do.” Pressed for examples, McClendon cited Leslie’s employment contract, then mentioned the improvement in the district’s bond ratings and unspecified increases in efficiencies and student success.

Rindfuss was more specific about his support for Leslie. “Number one, he followed the instructions of the board,” he said. “Number two, he has achieved cost savings that we have asked him to achieve. Number three, he has made registration easier for students. And number four, he has made it possible for students to now be in more than one college without having to submit a dual transcript.”

Board member Blakely Fernandez, who was appointed in November, says she doesn’t want to second-guess decisions made before she joined the board, but she cited other recent public instances of friction between college faculties and administration as a “normal part of the academic universe.” “It’s really an important and amazing part of academic freedom that the employees can speak so strongly their minds,” she said of the September votes of no confidence. “It really is a beautiful and important part of academia, but it is also a constant part of academia, so I think there is a context for it.” She added that the accreditation review committee, which included students, businesspeople, administrators, and faculty members, might provide a good model for tackling other contentious issues.

But none of this—neither the no-confidence vote nor the dropping of plans for single accreditation—would be a great victory for faculty. Leslie’s immediate future seems secure. The same September night that four college faculties reported their votes of no confidence in the chancellor, the board of trustees passed a resolution in support of Leslie, and his contract continues until 2012.

“I think we are at the point where the board and the chancellor . . . are as close in agreement as you can possibly get,” Billimek said. “That, I think, is dangerous in any organization—there is no ability for checks and balances.”

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6/1/2010

AAUP: Texas Hold Him

the campaign of Tyler Ingraham, a college student candidate for the Alamo Community College District Board of Trustees. His e-mail address is pohl.robert@gmail.com.

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