

The Consultation Process and the Challenge of Change

By Karen Sue Grosz, President

Over the past year and a half, Chancellor Joshua Smith has established and begun to implement a consultation process for the California Community Colleges. One critical question, now that the chancellor has announced his departure, is what will happen to that consultation structure. Will a new chancellor choose to adopt and continue it? Or will a new chancellor establish a new consultation mechanism? The existing structure is far from complete, and its bugs will creep out of the woodwork over time, necessitating changes to make the process run more smoothly. Will a new chancellor want to work out the bugs in a predecessor's process or establish a new process? To what extent is consultation structure a product of personality?

The impetus for the consultation model that Chancellor Smith established came from "Towards Excellence in California Community Colleges," a document prepared by the Californians for Community Colleges. One section of that document reads:

Effective decision-making by the Board of Governors is enhanced when it directly involves the local districts. Similarly, the local districts are governed by boards of trustees in *partnership* with the board's chief executive officer and the faculty. *Effective decision-making by a board of trustees is enhanced when it directly involves those responsible for implementation of the district's education program.*

In order to involve local districts directly in the decision-making process, the chancellor first established Chief Executive Officers Council of twelve representative CEOs from around the state. FI was anticipated that this council would be followed by the establishment of 6 additional similar councils of Chief Instructional Officers, Chief Student Services Officers, Chief Administrative/Business Officers, Academic Senate, students, and Community College Associations.

The Academic Senate and CIO consultation guidelines will be acted upon by the Board of Governors at their September 1987 meeting, and Acting Vice-Chancellor Ronn Farland has been meeting with the officers and executive committees of both the Senate and the Chief Instructional Officers organizations as a first step in implementing that part of the consultation process.

The CEOs Executive Council has been meeting for the past several months, each meeting chaired by the chancellor. Early in the process, it was determined that the "overarching purpose of consultation" should be to minimize divisive fragmentation and unnecessary conflict within the system and to maximize a sense of shared vision and common purpose" and thus should include the following:

- a. Enhance the effectiveness of the colleges in achieving their established mission to the State of California;
- b. Assist the Board of Governors in its statutory roles of providing leadership, direction, and oversight for community colleges while preserving the maximum degree of local autonomy and control;
- c. Improve trust, communication, and mutual understanding between the system wide governing body and the districts and institutions; and
- d. Provide a structure for collaborative leadership that aims to create a sense of community within the California Community Colleges.

The Academic Senate portion of the consultation process recognizes that ". . .one of the basic principles of academic governance in higher education is that authority derives not only from the powers vested by law in governing boards and their staffs but also from the knowledge of academic disciplines and pedagogy which the faculty possess." Thus, the Senate is "the representative of the faculty on all academic matters and all professional matters. Faculty members can become an important link in the chain of decision-making if they take this mandate seriously. It will become a responsibility of the faculty, through their representatives on the state Academic Senate, to develop policy proposals of statewide significance and to present those policy proposals to the chancellor through the consultation mechanism.

Underlying all of this process is the basic element of building trust, without which no process can address the needs of the community colleges. Before the colleges can speak with a single voice, a need recognized repeatedly in the Master Plan Commission and Joint (Legislative) Committee discussions, there must be mutual trust among the key participants in the consultation process. The chancellor must trust the system and appropriately delegate responsibility to the local districts. They, in turn, must respond with similar trust and involve and inform the chancellor in their policy deliberations. Similarly, the administrations at all levels must trust the faculty and appropriately delegate meaningful responsibility to the local senates, which must respond with similar trust by keeping administrators at all levels involved and informed in their deliberations.

One cannot help but wonder what has caused this loss of trust, if indeed it ever existed to be lost. Does it result from a fragmented system of 106 colleges and 70 districts controlled by local boards which understandably hold their own interests paramount in decision-making? Does it result from the K-14 origins of the community colleges, an origin which suggests that administration is a “top-down” structure with edicts emanating from the principal’s office and little participation in decision-making from faculty or other administrators? Does it result from the desire of those in charge to manage their offices efficiently, thereby consulting in only the most superficial fashion by making a decision first, informing others of that decision, then implementing the decision, having met the obligation to consult simply by informing of the decision itself?

Undoubtedly there are complex causes of the lack of trust that underlie the desire to build trust through a consultation process, and undoubtedly all systems undergo similar coordination attempts from time to time. What is important to remember for the community colleges is that finally, after two years of Master Plan Commission review and the inception of reform legislation, the California Community Colleges are using the word “system” in a meaningful sense and arguing not about whether the Chancellor’s Office should have authority, but how much authority it should have. For us the process ahead is one of implementation of reform, not the agonizing process of analyzing the need for reform. We have done that analysis and have found much of value.

Obviously we cannot know at this point what a new chancellor will do with the consultation process. But we can attempt to use the consultation process, in its current embryonic form, to participate in statewide decision-making, continuing to build a collegial model that marks the community colleges as truly post-secondary.