

EdSource Today interview with Bob Agrella, special trustee of City College of San Francisco.

Conducted by Kathryn Baron at City College
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EdSource: What is the mood on campus right now?

Bob Agrella: It's hard to tell you precisely what the mood on campus is right now, because it is summer, and there are a lot of people not around, but I would say that the mood, in general, for those folks that I've been visiting with the last several weeks, is somber. I think people are taking this entire accreditation business very, very seriously. I asked that question of someone who is active in the classified senate, and he indicated that people are somber. They're concerned, obviously, about what's going to happen to the institution, and I think all of that is probably to be expected.

EdSource: You look more relaxed and less tired that I thought you would after the year you've been through.

Bob Agrella: [Laughs]. I think I'll take that as a compliment. Thank you very much! You should have seen me a year ago, though, you don't have much to compare it to. I try not to show anything other than a positive side, quite frankly, because I think that's important to extend that to people, and to be positive about retaining accreditation. I've always kind of tried to act that way. And I'm doing that here. I churn a fair amount inside in the process of doing that, but I think tone for the leadership of an institution is an important thing to set, and I try to do that.

EdSource: What has been the most difficult decision you've had to make since you became the *trustee extraordinaire*? And what were the immediate changes, going from the trustee who *could* veto to the trustee who *is* the board?

Bob Agrella: I think the trustee who could veto worked much more behind the scenes, tried not to get either the Board of Trustees or myself in a public, embarrassing position of trying to overturn a decision of the board. So it was much more behind-the-scenes, less operational than what it is now. Assuming the board's duties and responsibilities, I think, takes on a much bigger role, obviously, in the institution. The ability to, and the responsibility of making decisions is much greater than what it was then, and I'm just much more active now in the actual operations of the institution than I was previously.

EdSource: It's been about two weeks since the Board of Governors gave you extraordinary authority; what are the first things you did?

Bob Agrella: Well, I think some of the first things I did were to begin immediately working with Brice Harris at the chancellor's office. Brice has been very good about lending support, obviously, in all this. He's the one that made my appointment, so he definitely is supportive.

I think one of the first things I did was to arrange a meeting with the interim chancellor [of CCSF] and we both went down to see Mayor Lee, Ed Lee, in San Francisco. He's been a big supporter of the institution. We wanted to make sure that he is very much aware of

the steps that we're taking and keep him in the information loop. So I think those were probably the very first actions that I took.

Subsequent to that, there have been a lot of little actions, but those are just ongoing actions of the job, of being a trustee, and having signature authority within the institution.

EdSource: What is the most difficult decision that you had to make or will have to make?

Bob Agrella: I anticipate some difficult decisions, coming forward, and those difficult decisions will, of course, be in the areas that were identified by the commission, where the institution fell short of meeting the standards or the sub-standards. And those decisions will involve some finance issues.

While I think we've developed a good plan, looking forward and stabilizing the institution from a financial perspective, to carry that through is going to require continued sacrifice on a lot of people's part, and I think those decisions are going to be difficult. And I might say that one of the things that is compounding our problems right now is the loss of enrollment.

We're down in enrollment. As you know, California community colleges are enrollment-driven institutions. You're paid on enrollment. And so, as you lose enrollment, your financial base begins to go down, and that's the situation we're in right now. We've made considerable savings this past year. We have a budget this year that I think will sustain us, but we can't continue on this slide in enrollment that we are.

EdSource: How much has enrollment fallen over the last one or two years?

Bob Agrella: At a comparable point in time, it would be two years ago. Last year would not be a good period of time to compare, so we're comparing to a year before that. We're down pretty close to 14 percent, from that perspective.

Now, again, it's early in the registration period, and we've cranked up a marketing and public-information campaign that's got radio ads. It's actually very good radio ads. It's got publications, ads, in both neighborhood as well as other media sources. And so we're doing *that*, to get the word out, number one, that CCSF is a fully accredited institution at this point in time. Our intent is to retain that accreditation, obviously. We're open. Students should feel free to enroll.

[There is] a lot of misinformation on the part of students. You know, "What happens if CCSF loses accreditation?" None of us want to see that, but that's an inevitable question that comes up.

And a lot of misinformation, just lack of knowledge, on the part of students that once a credit is earned at an institution, they carry that as an accredited piece of their academic credential for the rest of their lives. So I mean there are many, many instances of very small liberal-arts colleges over the course of the last 25 years, in particular, closing their doors. Those individuals who gained their credentials through, or their degrees, through that institution they didn't lose that degree or credential. They didn't lose any of that

credit. They can take that credit and transfer it, and that's got to be known better by students, and by students' parents, as well.

EdSource: When you were talking about some of the difficult decisions, though, there has been talk about closing some of the centers. Is that a strong possibility?

Bob Agrella: That's a possibility, because we're looking at every aspect of the institution, so at this point in time I've not ruled anything out. I want to, however, make sure that the decisions we make are made on good information. We don't have all the information that we need to make some of these decisions, and that's part of the task ahead, to get the best information possible in order to make the best decisions possible.

EdSource: How is the search for a permanent chancellor going?

Bob Agrella: The search is actually going quite well. I received information this morning from the search firm that they sent out another email blast to a little over 300 potential candidates across the country. They've reported to me that they've had some good contact with some potential candidates already. We're early in the process, but I think it's going about as well as it possibly could go – maybe even better than I had even hoped for.

EdSource: How about with the folks whose contracts were terminated at the end of June? How is the hiring going for those positions? [Note: Contracts for most administrators, including all deans, were not renewed when they expired June 30, 2013, although those people may reapply for their jobs].

Bob Agrella: Actually, the hiring is going quite well in those. We were not successful in several of the positions. I don't have the exact number at this point in time, but we've been able to bring in some what I think are very strong people, having good backgrounds and experiences that will help us tremendously in the institution, and we've got some positions that we'll have to continue to put [on] an interim basis, which we have done. But I think we've made significant progress on bringing some talent into the institution.

EdSource: Have any of the people who lost their positions at that time been rehired?

Bob Agrella: Well, everybody who was, who had tenure here...who were in those administrative positions had an automatic right to go back to the classroom... There may be one or two people, and I'm not sure of that number right off the top of my head, who either chose to leave, or didn't have a position to go to. But the vast, vast majority of the folks who weren't rehired in the same position remain at the institution.

EdSource: What are the skills, strengths and traits that you need, that you have, to bring to this challenge?

Bob Agrella: A sense of humor, number one! It's important. I think you need to try and maintain some stability and have a sense of humor. But once you get beyond that, the serious side of it, I think, is that you have to have some experience in running institutions. You have to have experience in observing a well-run institution and what it takes to make a well-run institution.

Personal strengths, I think you have to not be afraid to talk to people. Not be afraid to let people know where you're coming from. Be honest with them. Not everyone wants honesty. But over the long haul, I've found in my career that people appreciate an honest "yes" or an honest "no," rather than a "maybe" or never getting back to them.

I think you have to develop a pretty thick hide, understanding that you're going to get a lot of criticism if you do things one way or the other. It's very, very difficult in a college setting to please everyone. You've got a vast audience to please in terms of faculty, classified staff, students, community. So the expectations, particularly for an institution like CCSF, that is a beloved institution in San Francisco, an important part of San Francisco's fabric, in terms of not only the academic side of the house, but also the job skills, the training, all the ESL classes – we're into every segment of San Francisco, and that's an important aspect to try and maintain.

EdSource: When I spoke to (Compton Community College District special trustee) Tom Henry, he discussed a dissertation that compared the emotional impact of closing Compton Community College to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' stages of grief. Have you seen that happening at City College of San Francisco?

Bob Agrella: I don't recall all the stages, and can't name them, but I know it goes from, basically, anger through denial...until you finally get to acceptance, if I'm correct. I think we're a little more over the denial than we were. I think there's still a segment of anger that exists; but I think we're headed for – with a lot of the people here at CCSF – to the acceptance issue, which is that this institution must meet the accreditation standards, and that's what is really important at this point in time. We have to prove to ACCJC (Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges) that we meet those four standards within the accreditation area.

EdSource: One thing he said is he would urge you to help get folks past the anger stage as soon as possible.

Bob Agrella: I've participated in a lot of accreditation activities during my career, chairing a number of [evaluation] teams to different institutions, and being pretty critical of fellow institutions, understanding that they can be critical when they came to *my* institution, and quite often are.

And, you know, recommendations are just that. They're recommendations. But they're items that need to be looked at and studied and, if you disagree, you can say why you disagree, and so forth, in your response. This institution here, obviously, didn't do that, and that's why we're in the bit of a jam that we're in.

But, you know, you asked about the "angry," and there are some folks who are angry. I think there are some folks who, in *any* situation, can't get beyond the anger stage.

What we have to try to do is not let those angry folks dictate the agenda of this institution. And the agenda of this institution right now, and for the foreseeable future, is to meet those accreditation standards, to get busy, continue to work on our action plans that we're developing in our ["show cause" report](#), and do the best possible job we can so that we can show progress.

We've made considerable progress since last July 1. It's just that we didn't make sufficient progress. The way the commission looks at your progress is pretty simple. You either meet the standard or you don't. It's not one of those things where you're halfway there, 50-percent there, or 60-percent there. And also, when you institute a new planning process, or program-review process like we instituted in the institution, before you can actually say you meet that standard – it's actually a sub-standard – you must have gone through one complete cycle; and we will not have gone through one complete cycle on some of these activities until October, November, December, and January, and so forth. So we've got our job cut out for us.

EdSource: Have you had an opportunity to talk with [ACCJC President] Barbara Beno?

Bob Agrella: Yes, I've spoken with Barbara Beno. The interim chancellor and I, Thelma Scott-Skillman and I, had a rather lengthy conversation with Barbara about the [termination of accreditation] letter. And so we tried to go over the letter that we received in some detail with her, so that we understood clearly what the review process was, clearly what the appeals process is, what the time lines and dates on each one of those are.

EdSource: Was there anything in the letter, in going through it in such a detailed manner, that maybe you hadn't seen the first time, because of all publicity and emotion around it?

Bob Agrella: If I understand your question, the letter itself didn't say exactly what you have to do. The letter itself more spelled out why we were maintaining on "show cause," and we knew, if you were to raise an issue, we knew better inside the organization where we were on that particular issue. We knew that we had not completed all of those. That's why the action plans are what they are. They still have time lines and dates and critical occurrences that have to occur.

We wanted to be sure that we understood the process that we're in, though. We wanted to be sure that we understood that we could honestly say that this institution is fully accredited at this point in time. We will remain fully accredited through that review process. Once we get through that review process, if necessary, we'll get into the appeals process. We remain fully accredited throughout that appeals process. And ACCJC has policies on each one of those [and] we want to be sure that we follow *their* policy and time lines.

For example, we have until July 31 to submit that letter of review, requesting a review. Then we have, I believe, it's 28 days after that to actually assemble evidence of why we have asked for the review and why the commission might take a second look and either uphold or not uphold the decision that they made. There's a whole process that goes on in that, with the commission.

So all of these things are going to take some time. This isn't something that's going to likely unfold, you know, very, very quickly. And it's important to know that while that process goes on, this institution goes on. We continue to work on our action plans. We continue to take the necessary steps to retain that accreditation.

EdSource: What are the guidelines for seeking a review? What do you have to show the accrediting commission?

Bob Agrella: They're asking essentially for any additional information that would make the decision that *they* made, and based on the visitation report, that perhaps was not taken into account, okay? And we're going to probably put in some other activities. Of course, one of the major factors that has really changed this institution is that there is now a special trustee in me. The State of California has stepped in on this, and that's a major, major step.

Now that occurred subsequent to the visitation and everything, so whether they will take that into – into – whether they'll take that right now, or whether that will be a portion of an appeals process, we don't know. All we know at this point in time on that is we're going to follow precisely their rules and regulations.

EdSource: What are your days like now?

Bob Agrella: Hectic! I try to get here about seven in the morning. Leave whenever I can get out of here; sometimes rather late... They're 12-hour days no matter how you look at it, that's kind of the bottom line. They're pretty hectic; a lot of people wanting to meet with you, and not understanding that, you know, it's not a matter of trying to stay away from them, but it's a matter of there's a lot of work to be done, and my time is limited, and I want to be sure that my time is used in the best possible manner to work on accreditation, not necessarily always meeting with everyone.

EdSource: You're coming from Santa Rosa?

Bob Agrella: I'm coming from Santa Rosa.

EdSource: So you're getting up at five?

Bob Agrella: Oh, no! Oh, no. I get up earlier than that. (Laughs) I hit the road around 5:30. If I'm late, it's a quarter to six, because I have to get out ahead of the traffic; and so if I leave at 5:30, I can be here by 7:00. If I leave at six, I'm here much later. If I leave at 7:00, I'm not here, sometimes, until ten o'clock, you know, so I don't leave at seven in the morning.

And, to be really honest with you, I try to get out of here around 5:00. Evening schedules don't always make that possible. But that gets me home around seven-thirty, so my wife and I can have dinner, and then I can still do email, which is a habit that I got into, as being a college president. Your day doesn't end; it's not a normal day, where you go to work at eight, and you leave at five, and weekends, you just do gardening and play golf.

This past weekend was pretty much eight hours a day of CCSF business; reading stuff, responding to emails, I get a tremendous amount of email each day. But, as being the college president of a rather large institution – Santa Rosa has 35,000 students, big operation – that's just part of the life that you accept when you take on those roles, and some of it is fun, and some of it isn't so much fun.

EdSource: When Chancellor Harris asked you to stay on and move up to this other status, why did you say “yes”?

Bob Agrella: Well, I have a lot invested in the institution at this point in time. I think it was a very bold step for him to take. I know Brice from his days at Los Rios district. I respect him greatly. And I think I feel that probably, at this point in time, I’m maybe the best person that could do this, because somebody else stepping in cold at this point in time has got a real steep learning curve.

I’m still learning daily things about City College of San Francisco. I need to be really honest with you about that. But, because I came initially as a consultant, and then moved to that voluntary – what the board asked for, a voluntary trustee – I’ve learned a lot, and I have a considerable amount of background now in terms of the college. I know some of the problems and the pitfalls and strengths. And it has many, many strengths. There is no question about that.

EdSource: You’ve said this, and Tom Henry said it, as well, that the college doesn’t get into this situation overnight, and it can’t get out of it overnight. And, in this case, it’s taken maybe a few decades to get here. So, in that respect, is the accreditation process – I don’t want to say “fair,” but does it account for the fact that it could take a long time to turn a school around after it’s been so entrenched in bad governance and financing?

Bob Agrella: I think the accreditation process takes that into account. You know, their extension to June 30, 2014, was actually a very good step. They could have said, “You’re done right now.” They could have said it after a semester. They didn’t. They gave us the absolute maximum amount that they could get at this point in time.

Our job is to try and show the absolute best amount of progress in meeting those standards that we can. And, let’s say, in March or April of next year, 2014, ask them to bring a team in, take a look at what the institution has done and, hopefully, on that basis they might be able to find some way of extending, or whatever. What’s important is that, every step along the way, we show progress.

I do know that no accrediting body wants to remove the accreditation of an institution. I really believe that. Their job is to see that the institutions meet those standards, not take accreditation. And they will do everything in their power to try and help us do that, I believe. They are bound by some federal guidelines, obviously, but I think if we show significant progress while we go through that appeals process, I think we’ll be OK.

EdSource: Would you comment on the extreme criticism that the [accrediting] commission has faced? People saying that the move is political, that it’s not really based on what’s happening here, that it’s – You know, some of the things in the complaint that the union filed. And just this sense that it’s acting, not out of necessarily the best interests of the college, or what they saw, but rather this other agenda?

Bob Agrella: I don’t know what the “other agenda” is, other than getting, gaining, and maintaining accreditation, quite frankly. I’d just as soon not even comment on that, because that’s not a portion of *my* agenda. My agenda, and this institution’s agenda, is to follow the commission’s rules and guidelines. I know Brice Harris, the chancellor, has

instituted a task force. It's headed up, I believe, by Steven Bruckman (Executive Vice Chancellor of Internal Operations), to look at and work with the accrediting commission.

There are orderly ways that if policy is to be changed for the commission, or if standards are to be changed, [there are] orderly ways for that to be done. It's not good for this institution to be the lightning rod for the battleground of accreditation, whether ACCJC or other accrediting areas. That's not helpful to us. It drains energy. It brings the spotlight to the institution, not on what we're doing *well*, but on fighting, and that's not going to help us, okay? Our job is to meet those standards. That's my job.

EdSource: Thank you.

Bob Agrella: You're welcome.