Philosophers have long pondered whether a sound is emitted from a tree that’s fallen in the woods with no one around to hear it. Business professionals and politicians might easily conclude that the absence of an audience stems from a lack of advertising or self-promotion. Couldn’t the tree have sent a press release providing the date, time and location of its crash? The forest service might need a new PR agent.

Many organizations subscribe to the rule, “if it didn’t make the press, it didn’t happen.” My first employer out of law school, a major national civil rights organization, extended it to, “If it didn’t make the New York Times, it didn’t happen.” That’s quite a standard.

At a recent meeting of the FACCC Political Action Committee (FACCC PAC), a committee member raised the rather simple, and imminently logical question of whether the FACCC membership has any idea of how the PAC conducts its business or how successful it has been. Likely not.

In this case, it’s not a lone tree falling silently in the woods, but a whole forest that’s tumbled—without even a peep.

Did you know that the FACCC PAC scored a 97 percent on its endorsements from the Assembly in the last election (60 out of 62) and 93 percent for the Senate (13 out of 14)? Further, were you aware that the FACCC PAC has been cited by political consultants as having one of the best candidate interviews in the Sacramento political scene? How about that the FACCC PAC has been noted by candidates both earning and losing the committee’s endorsement as employing one of the most ethical processes in state politics?

The membership deserves to know what’s going on with its money, and the PAC will do its best to use FACCCCTS as the vehicle to tell its story. This article will lay the groundwork, with future installments focusing on past and future activity.

What is the FACCC PAC?

Let’s start with the basics. FACCC is a professional membership association whose essential mission is focused advocacy at the state level for community college faculty. The FACCC PAC is a “sponsored” committee of FACCC that oversees a voluntary pot of money for the express purposes of electing community college faculty-friendly candidates to the state Legislature, engaging FACCC members in political action and funding “issue advocacy” activities for the association.

FACCC PAC holds the moniker “sponsored committee” to distinguish it from all other committees of the FACCC Board of Governors. While the other FACCC committees lack the authority to make decisions for the association— their findings are expressed as recommendations to the FACCC Board of Governors – the PAC follows its own set of bylaws (posted at www.facc.org) to make decisions on who to endorse for state Assembly and Senate, and how to distribute its money.
FACCC’s Board of Governors retains the power to appoint and remove members of the PAC, and provides the PAC with a board liaison, staff and administrative support. The FACCC Board of Governors also retains the authority to take positions on ballot initiatives and endorse candidates for constitutional office, such as governor and attorney general.

While the first two missions of the PAC are self-explanatory—electing candidates to the Legislature and engaging members in political activity—the third, “issue advocacy,” is less understood.

Issue advocacy is that line between campaign activity, the domain of the PAC, and lobbying, the work of the association.

During the Gray Davis administration, FACCC and its coalition partners determined that no headway could be made for community colleges unless we could reshape our image—issue advocacy was needed. “Stop trying to be loved,” decried our Democratic and Republican consultants, “for when you’re loved, you’re harmed” (they actually used a four-letter word in place of “harmed”).

The consultants’ goal for us, which began with the 2003 Marches in March and continued throughout the Proposition 92 campaign, was, for community colleges to seek respect, not love.

FACCC PAC seeded the money for the political consultants, an effort which has paid off incalculable dividends.
The FACCC PAC bylaws specify bi-partisan representation of the trustees. Today’s committee is comprised of Chair Dean Murakami along with Rachel Winston, Martin Goldstein, John Jacobs, Marilyn Kennedy, Martin Goldstein, and Carrol Waymon. Former FACCC PAC Chair John McDowell serves as the liaison from the FACCC Board of Governors.

Picture this. You’re at a poker table playing hand after hand —winning a few, but mostly losing. Across the table, you notice your opponents influencing which cards are dealt. Hold on a minute. Don’t the rules specify that cards are dealt at random, with winning or losing dependent upon how you play the cards you’re given?

FACCC’s lobbying activity – the work we do regarding the budget, retirement and legislation—is like playing the cards that have already been dealt. This is not the work of FACCC PAC.

FACCC PAC’s campaign activity is like working to influence which cards are dealt. FACCC’s lobbyists cannot influence a pro-faculty vote from a legislator who campaigned on an anti-faculty platform. We must ensure that supportive candidates are elected and oppositional ones defeated.

In this era of term limits, FACCC PAC doesn’t wait until the campaign cycle to meet with candidates. The PAC works all the time, identifying candidates up to four years in advance to help produce the most faculty-friendly legislature.

Purists would argue that our lack of 75/25 (75 percent faculty goal) and chronic budget instability would suggest an overall failure of the PAC. Unfortunately, there’s little purity in politics.

FACCC approaches the legislative arena as seeking the art of the possible, and nothing is possible without established relationships. The FACCC PAC lays the groundwork for these relationships during campaign season, educating candidates and ultimately electing sympathetic Democrats and Republicans to state office.

Even knowing of our comparatively small size, candidates actively court the FACCC PAC’s endorsement, owing to its reputation for ethics and its standing as the lone political action committee exclusively run by and for community college faculty members.

It bears repeating that FACCC PAC’s track record in the last election was 97 percent in the Assembly, 93 percent in the Senate. Of the notable primary victories was FACCC member Paul Fong (D–Mountain View), who defeated an opponent who proudly declared not only his opposition to Proposition 92, but his financial contribution to the “No on 92” campaign.

The overwhelming majority of the FACCC PAC’s budget goes to the campaign coffers of incumbent state legislators and legislative candidates. A small amount funds a professional treasurer who ensures regulatory compliance with the Fair Political Practices Commission and Secretary of State.

While it may take several issues of FACCCTS to tell the story of the FACCC PAC, it’s time for faculty members to each consider adding a small monthly contribution to the PAC. Contributions are not tax deductible; they’re an investment in your future. Given the budgetary and fiscal realities of the day, a small contribution from members can ensure that community colleges remain in business, and ultimately thrive, in the next era. How?

Stay tuned to the next few issues of FACCCTS to learn about how the FACCC PAC conducts candidate interviews, establishes a presence at political conventions and has already begun planning for the 2010 gubernatorial race.

The falling trees are making noise; let’s make sure we’re listening.
“I’m going to talk to all parties and weigh issues carefully before making a decision. I currently do that on the city council where I serve and promise to do that in the Assembly.” This was an actual quote from an Assembly candidate in a FACCC Political Action Committee (FACCC PAC) endorsement interview during the last election cycle. It seemed like a fairly innocuous statement, one that might engender our endorsement.

Hold that thought.

In contrast to other PAC’s, the FACCC PAC conducts all of its interviews for Assembly and Senate in person or by phone, never by written questionnaire. Candidates seeking an endorsement need to engage us, learn about us, and share with us their knowledge of community college faculty concerns. It’s not an easy interview. Several of the most prominent political operators have indicated that FACCC PAC employs one of the hardest, and fairest, processes in Sacramento.

Our questions are developed every two years, with a regularly scheduled review process after each election cycle. The candidates’ answers are recorded on a comparison grid for the PAC’s review.

Here’s the punch line. Candidates are told up front that the PAC does not make its endorsement decisions on the basis of their interview answers. Instead, the PAC utilizes a set of criteria specially developed for each election period.

While the process of conducting candidate interviews might seem dull, it’s actually quite revealing. Through the interviews, it becomes clear which candidates are good listeners, have good people skills, are politically savvy, and have a defined policy orientation.

With most interviews running 30 minutes, some take only 10 and others up to an hour. The shortest interviews tend to be with unprepared, ill-informed candidates, with the extended ones divided between long talkers and those deeply interested in engaging us.

Two legislative sessions ago, one of the candidates asked a question during the interview about the “kids” we educate. He wanted to know a little about their profile. Our response to him was that, by and large, we educate adults, not “kids.” From that one exchange during a FACCC PAC interview, this winning candidate became one of our staunchest supporters in the Assembly Republican Caucus. He appreciated our candor and demonstrated a willingness to be educated. His three years in the Assembly have followed that pattern.

Recently, we met with a sitting Assemblymember who had just declared his candidacy for the State Senate. The FACCC PAC conducts a separate interview for current or former legislators looking to either regain their old office or move to a new one (although the endorsement criteria remains the same). Our intent is to review the candidate’s actual legislative record and examine whether he or she plans to tackle different priorities in the next office.

This legislator admitted that he really didn’t anticipate the hurdles associated with lowering community college student fees or providing universal health care—two of his top priorities—when he first ran for the Legislature three years ago. This candidate’s legislative trajectory follows a traditional pattern, a well-intentioned, but fairly unremarkable, Assembly career (likely) followed by a more thoughtful, more productive Senate tenure.

What’s essential here is that the FACCC PAC does not simply accept or reject candidates based upon their records, but insists upon the candidate participating in an evaluative session, discussing his or her contribution to the community colleges. Few interest groups require this kind of assessment.
In the end, FACCC PAC’s insistence on this thorough endorsement protocol solidifies FACCC as being a thoughtful, policy-oriented, and ultimately politically important player in the community colleges—even if it doesn’t have millions of dollars in campaign contributions at its disposal. These candid interpersonal exchanges begin the dialogue on essential policy matters that carry forward into the Capitol and beyond.

In pure political terms, there’s another value to listing FACCC PAC’s endorsement on campaign material. With the term, “California Community Colleges” statutorily copyrighted, FACCC PAC remains one of the few statewide organizations containing this in its name. We’re allowed to do so because FACCC has been in existence longer than the copyright and was grandparented in. As such, when the public sees “FACCC’s” name, it notes the presence of “California Community Colleges,” the educational segment that continues to poll the highest public favorability ratings. Hence, even without millions of dollars at stake, the “FACCC” name can ultimately be a strong asset during a campaign.

Remember the candidate who promised to speak to all sides before making a decision? At another point during the interview, he admitted to opposing Proposition 92, the initiative on last February’s ballot which would have opened up 115,000 slots for community college students while both lowering and capping student fees. When asked what deliberative process he followed to persuade him to oppose Proposition 92, he admitted that he spoke to the “No on 92” campaign but didn’t take the time to speak to Californians for Community Colleges, aka, the “Yes on 92” campaign.

This incident revealed how he would act toward us if elected to the Legislature. FACCC PAC endorsed his opponent, and our candidate won. Score another point for the process.

Next article: Why 2010 may be California’s most critical election and what you can do to make a difference.
Nine years ago, a colleague of mine tried to convince me that there was no real difference between Al Gore and George Bush. “It won’t matter who you support,” he implored. “They’re both the same.”

Oops. I bet he’d love that one back.

The problem is we’re already hearing the same thing about the gubernatorial candidates, Steve Poizner, Jerry Brown, Meg Whitman, Tom Campbell, Gavin Newsom – “they’re all the same” goes the all-too familiar refrain. Actually, they are quite different. Sitting this one out could be a big mistake. Scratch that, a colossal blunder.

Consider this. California, aka the “Golden State,” considered becoming the first entity in the Western world to completely eliminate its safety net. CalWORKs, Healthy Families and Cal Grants could have been wiped out if the governor had his way.

The carnage was still extensive. Over 250,000 student spots were eliminated in the community colleges, with 40,000 wiped out in the California State University system. Thousands of public employees are being laid off, with tens of thousands subject to furloughs.

Back in May, the Administration asked all Californians to “share” in the pain of the global recession. It soon became clear, however, that education, health and human services would experience the cutbacks while the oil industry, among others, would be exempt.

Plain and simple, the governor sets the tone for all budgetary and policy decisions. That’s why we can’t sit this one out.

The story of the 2010 elections has yet to be finished, but it has begun to be written. Against the backdrop of a society suffering from election fatigue and low levels of trust in our elected officials, our biggest challenge will be gearing up and staying motivated for the upcoming contest.

We have already begun fielding calls complaining about the field of candidates. The lead Democrat has a mixed track record on public service issues, with at least two Republican candidates following the mantra of lower taxes and fewer services. From our current vantage point, it doesn’t look good.

That’s why we need to start engaging the candidates about the value of community colleges as our participation can dramatically sway opinion. Recent examples include George Deukmejian signing the major community college reform bill, AB 1725, and Pete Wilson approving the largest CalSTRS increases in modern history. While Gray Davis opposed dedicated funding for full-time faculty hiring, he provided part-time faculty with a “compensation equity” program. Our current governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, infused hundreds of millions into equalization funding, and, until the current fiscal collapse, helped grow the community colleges.

The FACCC Board of Governors will interview the viable candidates and likely select one to endorse. At that point, the FACCC PAC will call upon the membership to do whatever it can to help him or her get elected. This is where our book gets written – when the faculty get engaged in political activity. Will we actively campaign or sit this one out? Will we influence our own future or have it determined for us?

The Greatest Story Never Told is about how faculty participation and engagement defeated futility and complacency. None of us can sit this one out. Our future depends upon it.