

The Fire Next Time, or What Comes Next?

By Richard Mahon, Allan Hancock College,
FACCC Communications Committee

Those of us within the California Community Colleges (CCCs) system are used to the roller coaster. We are “counter-cyclical.” If the economy improves, students get jobs, and we struggle for enrollment. If the economy tanks, students return to our colleges to up-skill, but there’s no budget to support their needs. Accustomed to this cycle, we may be slow to recognize existential threats. When I set out to draft this article, I intended to focus on threats to academic freedom in American higher education, but it became apparent that we face a broader threat. This article reflects on the Trump administration’s higher education policy priorities. It is likely that the landscape will have evolved significantly since this piece was drafted, so I will try to reflect on the current crisis and consider long-term challenges.

It helps to remember where we started. California’s community college history began with Fresno City College, but enrollments remained low until the 1950s. The GI Bill was first authorized in 1944 and provided educational funding to returning servicemen and women. This led to a substantial increase in community college enrollments across the country. That trend continued unabated and accelerated after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1957. Abruptly, the fear that the Soviet communists might beat the U.S. into space led to enormous investment in science education and research in American colleges and universities; a college education became

a necessity. The California Master Plan for Higher Education had as one of its primary goals the need to plan for the broad expansion of California public higher education. Until the second Trump administration, the inherent value of supporting higher education in general and federal investment in science and research were not seriously questioned. Are we now making America “great” again and putting America “first”? What does that look like for American higher education and California community colleges—and the students they serve?

Challenges to Diversity

Vats of ink have been used to discuss how the Trump administration seems to mean putting white Americans first and making America great for the 1%. Both the word and the concept of diversity have multiple meanings, but in the CCCs, serving diverse students means serving the students who live here. California was the first state in the nation to become a “majority-minority” state, with more residents identifying as non-white than white. Although levels of diversity vary across the state, very few community colleges resemble the narrow, traditional image of a college student implied by the administration’s rhetoric. If community colleges don’t serve diverse students, there will be so few students left that there will be no budget to serve white students. California has outlawed race-based admissions since Proposition 209 took effect in 1996, but the selective California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) systems

continued on page 6

include many diverse students whose grades, test scores, and extracurricular records earned them a seat in a selective classroom.

Under the Master Plan, the CSU admits the top third and the UC the top eighth of California high school graduates; 12.5% was the original goal, while the current UC guarantee seems to be 9%. The Trump administration tried to extort \$1.5 billion from UCLA, using federal grants as leverage. As has been the case with several of Trump's priorities, judges saw issues differently, and the attempt to extort UCLA, as part of the UC system, seems to be on the sidelines for the time being.

Challenges to Immigrants

Trump made demonizing immigrants central to his brand. Recent immigration actions near Bakersfield, in Camarillo, Los Angeles, and Santa Maria underscore the ongoing scope of these policies. While Trump campaigned on making America safer by evicting dangerous criminals, reporting continues to indicate that the majority of individuals detained, arrested, and even deported include very few persons convicted of criminal wrongdoing. Other reporting suggests that detaining and holding American citizens is not uncommon.

Meanwhile, the increasing use of masked federal agents and aggressive enforcement tactics has intensified concerns about transparency and civil liberties. Recent legal rulings strengthened federal enforcement authority in certain contexts, even as civil rights advocates question how those powers are exercised on the ground. Throwing a sandwich at a federal agent may become a chargeable felony; though, it's not yet a convictable felony.

Challenges to International Students

In its rush to put America "first," the Trump administration wants to severely curtail the number of international students. While many international students come for an undergraduate education, a

significant number enroll in graduate and professional programs. Some return to their home countries, but many remain in the U.S. and use the education they received to contribute to the knowledge and technology economy, which, in turn, contributes to continued American global economic dominance.

While both the federal financial aid policy and the higher education tuition funding structure keep costs lower for domestic students, international students do not benefit from either, and their fees subsidize the enrollment of native students. At the UC, for example, public support via the general fund has declined from over 70% to less than 15%. What happens to affordability (as though we had it) when that subsidy disappears?

Challenges to Research

While community colleges may not conduct extensive research, they play a critical role in preparing students for transfer to research institutions. What happens when we get students all dressed up, and they have nowhere to go?

We've already seen a sustained pattern of blaming community colleges when CSU campuses do not consistently comply with SB 1440 (Padilla), making student transfer preparation unnecessarily challenging. Meanwhile, CSU and UC campuses receive far greater per-student funding than CCCs, and our funding also lags behind K-12. The imbalance is real.

What happens to CCC budgets and our students if federal policies damage the CSU and UC systems and make a public four-year degree even less attainable?

When I attended the UC as a graduate student in the early 1980s, annual tuition and fees were \$891. In the fall of 2025, they were \$16,785. At the current inflation rate, that should only be \$3,503.19. Instead, current tuition is nearly five times that figure.

Trump policies will accelerate that trend.

What We Should Be Doing:

- Stay engaged with FACCC: every faculty member an advocate, every advocate informed.
- Pay attention to local governance; academic senates and boards of trustees are tools of democracy at its most immediate.
- Join and support your local union, even when disagreement is uncomfortable; that, too, is democracy.
- Consider joining and supporting the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). We all owe the AAUP a debt of thanks for its 1940 statement of Academic Freedom. The AAUP has, in the past, had a more robust relationship with both the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges and FACCC, but it has been a leader in pushing back. It is now affiliated with the national American Federation of Teachers.
- Stay informed through higher education journalism, even when issues don't yet affect your campus.
- Look for opportunities to share why education mattered to you and why you chose to serve in a community college.

Challenges to Accreditation

California community college faculty have had more than their share of complaints about accreditation processes. The number of CCCs placed in "show-cause", a final warning requiring a college to prove why it should not lose accreditation and face potential closure, is sobering. Accreditation is an imperfect process, as all human processes are. But the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) is led by colleagues who know and are committed to the community college mission; the ACCJC has retained 5 of its 21 seats for academic (faculty) commissioners. The short-term impact of Trump's policy was to remove regard for diversity and inclusion from accreditation standards, and the long-term goal seems to be to replace current accreditors and create new accreditors whose only concern is the bottom line. It's worth remembering that Trump himself ran a "university" that even Marco Rubio called an "absolute scam."

Academic Freedom for Me but Not for Thee...

The meaning of "free speech" has been highly contested over the past 75 years. The Free Speech movement at UC Berkeley quickly deteriorated into the filthy speech movement. This right has been rapidly jettisoned in states where legislators didn't like the speech reported to them secondhand. Both the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) and the ACCJC, accreditors for four- and two-year colleges in California, have accreditation standards that require colleges to respect free speech. Most community college districts subscribe to the service of the Community College League, which represents CEOs and trustees, and provides model board policy, including law, regulation, and accreditation standards. That means virtually all community colleges have policies that guarantee free speech rights, guarantees that should protect most full-time faculty, if not their contingent cousins.

continued on page 28

Are CCCs Vulnerable?

The threats facing higher education are much greater for four-year colleges, especially those reliant on international student tuition and research funding. Community colleges have largely flown below the radar, in part because most of our funding comes from California taxpayers, who continue to value their local community college. Still, community colleges are part of a broader ecosystem, and that educational ecosystem is under threat. First, they came for the UC and the CSU; when they came for me, my colleagues at the UC and the CSU were gone.

Community colleges have largely flown below the radar, in part because most of our funding comes from California taxpayers, who continue to value their local community college.

What Comes Next?

Some of you may be subscribers or supporters of Marc Elias's Democracy Docket. The Oct. 18 issue opens this way:

"Larry Tribe is the most accomplished constitutional lawyer of the last 50 years. He literally wrote the textbook that has been used to teach a generation of law students about constitutional law and interpretation. So, I was honored and surprised during an event I recently moderated that he asked a question from the audience: "How confident are you that we will rebuild our democratic institutions and norms in less than a decade after Trump leaves office?"

By contrast, the TV personality Jimmy Kimmel filmed an "alternate Christmas message" for British viewers. It skewered the Trump administration in ways that would be familiar to most viewers, but it ended with an appeal to our British cousins to be patient with us:

"...don't give up on us. We're going through a bit of a wobble right now, but we'll come around. ... No one knows better than you, we're always just a little bit late to the game, but do we come through in the end? Maybe. Give us about three years. Please."

I realized I had been assuming (or hoping) at some level that some things, perhaps many things, would revert to normal when the Trump era ends; all eras end. It hadn't occurred to me to wonder how much damage would be done by then and what repairing it would require. Rebuilding democratic norms will fall to all of us, but American higher education and the community college ecosystem, in particular, will largely fall to those of us in the system. ■