

A short take on the death of an institution

August Hoffman
Julie Wallach

Dr. Hoffman is a professor of Psychology at Compton College and California State University, Northridge.

Ms. Wallach is a student at California State University, Northridge.

Compton Community College was one of the oldest and most ethnically diverse community colleges in California. The campus sits on 87 acres in south Los Angeles and has recently opened a major league baseball training academy for youths in the area that it serves. The campus has recently completed a new multi-million dollar student center that adds to the beauty and available resources of the campus. First opening its doors in 1927, the college has served literally tens of thousands of students and has become a vital asset to the community. Within the last three to four years, however, the college has experienced several administrative and fiscal irregularities that gradually led to an independent investigation by outside auditing agencies (Fiscal Crisis and Management Team), warnings of accreditation problems, probation, and ultimately loss of accreditation all within two years time. The psychological experience of this process and how we are now adapting to these changes is the focus of the following commentary.

The old campus yearbooks during the 1940s and 1950s boast of first place championships in sports such as football and basketball. The campus was ranked among the top five community colleges in the state of California for academic excellence, teaching standards, and student enrollment. Compton Community College was perhaps the “crown jewel” of the state during its heyday of the 1940-1950s era. Unfortunately most of that has changed today.

The demise of an institution of higher learning has negatively affected not only the com-

mitted faculty that served it, but perhaps more importantly a community and students who have become displaced because of the closure. Compton Community College now holds the dubious distinction of being the only institution of higher education to have actually lost (*de facto*) its accreditation. Never before has this occurred. The statement itself is powerful. Certainly other schools have been placed on various lists such as “warning,” “probation,” or even “show cause”—but heretofore none had actually lost its accreditation. Until now.

The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) gives several warnings along with suggestions for improvements. Schools typically make the improvements and hopefully the school restores its full accreditation. Unfortunately, such was not the case with Compton College. Now when I meet colleagues at events such as conferences and seminars, when they see “Compton College” I get certain “looks”—you know the type. Call it pity, sympathy or contempt. I’m just not sure, but the look says, “Too bad... I wonder what they did to cause it to happen in the first place?” Or “Why don’t they just pick themselves up by the bootstraps

and fix the problem?” If it were only that easy—if it were only just one type of problem. Then of course there is the awkward silence—do you broach the topic or just ignore what our colleagues are probably thinking? “What is the school going to do now?” or “What are *they* going to do now?”

Here is our answer to the universal questions: a) We are going to work toward our re-accreditation and autonomy in the long run; and b) we remain committed to the students that we serve—whether we re-organize with another school (a likely scenario) remain open for one more day or one more year—the faculty will do whatever it takes to keep the institution running—period.

A community college is *designed* to serve the community it represents. Its purpose is multifaceted; community colleges have historically provided wide-ranging opportunities to members of the community and programs designed for learning and growth. For many students, the community college develops access to universities and professional schools. Quite literally, the community college is used as a stepping stone to success for many individuals who have faced tremendous adversity, as most of the students at Comp-

ton College have. For others, the community college is a valuable asset to reduce costs that are typically associated with higher education. Community colleges traditionally provide the individual with opportunities for success—economic, educational—and even spiritual growth.

So it is with a heavy heart that I bear witness to the first closure of a community college in the United States due to “administrative” problems. I feel a tremendous amount of loyalty to an institution that I am still proud of. The faculty has always worked together. When things got bad, really bad, at this campus, it wasn’t the administrators that corrected the problem but the faculty. The faculty still consider themselves *de facto* “family” and this sense of family transcends race, age, religion and gender. It is a powerful and attractive component that fuels my loyalty to the institution and helps faculty remain united in providing the best education possible ... united *despite* the friction, the frustration, and in spite of the negative publicity we have received in the last 18 months.

I am currently a professor at Compton Community College, soon to be referred to as El Camino College—Compton Center. As a psychology profes-

sor, I have observed an interesting psychological phenomenon that was originally introduced by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (*On Death and Dying*). Kübler-Ross noted that when people discover they have a terminal illness, they usually experience a sequence of five stages relative to the illness: denial, anger, negotiation, depression, and ultimately acceptance. Kübler-Ross described these psychological transformations in terms of *people* and terminal illnesses; I would like to describe similar psychological transformations among the faculty facing the impending demise of Compton College.

Denial: *Not Us!*

Nobody wants to believe that a school could actually close down—there are just too many potentially positive qualities about a school to allow anything like that to happen. That is what we *wanted* to believe. We were all in a state of numbness and profound denial. The five stages of accepting one’s own mortality offered by Kübler-Ross mirror the faculty reaction to the threatened closure of our own school. Individuals associated with the school simply didn’t *want* to believe that the school could (or would) eventually close. Concerned family

members of mine would assure me and offer their support: "They can't close down a school. ... What are they going to do with it? Turn it into a prison? (laughter)." Comments regarding the accreditation problems were strikingly similar to what a patient suffering from a terminal illness might say: "They (i.e., the state accreditation committee) would never close us down" or "It's a scare tactic ... a bluff." Such well-intentioned denials probably sound similar to a person's initial denial of a serious illness: "Get a second opinion! The doctor's diagnosis is *wrong*—don't you see?!"

We were all so busy grading papers, preparing lectures, and conferring—who has time for a school closing down? We wanted the problem simply to go away—but it unfortunately did not go away. It only became worse with denial. The anxiety deepened. Our ability to deny the possible closure became increasingly difficult to maintain. News media came to the campus, soliciting comments from the faculty and students. Articles would suddenly appear in the newspaper—we were becoming famous but unfortunately for the wrong reasons.

Registered and certified mail came to our homes—somehow usually just before a vacation

or holiday: "We regret to tell you that your teaching services will no longer be needed for the Spring 2006 Semester. P.S. *Happy Holidays!*" The fact of teaching at the institution for over 10, 15 or 20 years and being tenured, well, that was just irrelevant. We could no longer believe that the emperor wore clothes, and denial quickly transformed itself into anger. How *dare* they do this to us! We the faculty who have committed our professional services to the school and the community—being treated like this! We mobilized ourselves to try to save the school. Committees were formed, surveys taken, and politicians consulted—to no avail. Ironically, the committees formed to save the college soon imploded and became divisive themselves. They were not able to gather enough support from the community. We were running out of time.

Anger: Why Us?

As accreditation problems became increasingly more serious, the initial denial that the faculty experienced transformed itself into a very real and justified anger. "How can the state just come in here and arbitrarily take away our accreditation? It will never happen... the community won't allow it!" Other questions that were directed

to anybody that would listen included “Why us?! Why is the state picking on Compton College when there are many, many other schools with more serious administrative or curriculum discrepancies?”

The questions were valid, and they did help to vent frustration and anger, but unfortunately did little to correct the problem. As Kübler-Ross notes, the anger that is vented is a convenient excuse for not looking at the real issues creating accreditation problems. It was merely a way to commiserate.

The truth of the matter was that just as an individual who lies dying of terminal cancer feels helpless to control his or her destiny, so did we, the faculty, feel helpless in stopping the course of events that would end the life of the school we had loved and invested so much into. Students would lose a learning institution, staff would lose jobs, and the faculty would lose for reasons that still remain unclear. What was clear was the anger and frustration at feeling utterly impotent to prevent the termination of the accreditation process. Similar to the surveyor in Kafka’s novel *The Castle*, we wandered from state bureaucracy to various politicians searching for help, but were always told to “try the

room down the hall ... maybe they can help you.”

Negotiation: *Help Us!*

The negotiation phase of a terminal illness means seeking potential “quick fixes” or cures or making deals to try to provide for a few months more of life. We did that—and more. We negotiated with the ACCJC and WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges)—what, exactly, did they want? Student learning objectives? Done. Revised course curricula? Done. Improving course outlines? Done. Nothing worked. We tried making deals to at least return to “probationary” status—nothing doing. The clock was ticking as we frantically tried to resurrect our accreditation. Similar to a patient trying unorthodox or untested “cures”—we were willing to try anything to re-establish our accreditation. Some faculty began looking for other teaching positions. Some just continued to ignore the problem and hoped again that it would just go away. We wanted our comfortable academic lives back again; we wanted a routine, controllable and predictable environment—the way it was and had been for years. Now nothing seemed to work and nothing seemed to help.

Depression: *Poor Us!*

In Kübler-Ross' fourth stage of terminal illness, depression occurs when the individual realizes that no matter what he does to try to correct a problem, there is no solution. Unfortunately many people never seem to break out of this negative psychological state. Ultimately they perish not appreciating the things that they did accomplish in their lives. For many of the faculty at Compton College, depression does exist because we have tried to make corrective changes but to no avail. In psychological research, a concept referred to as "learned helplessness" (Seligman, 1975) describes people who simply stop trying to improve their condition because of repeated past failures. Potential solutions may exist, but because of repeated failure we simply stop trying to make things better in our lives. So it is with the case at Compton College. Many faculty have experienced psychological "burn out." They simply have given up trying—trying to change what appears now to be an "unfixable" problem.

Acceptance: *A New Us!*

On the final stage of death and dying, Kübler-Ross discusses the importance of acceptance—ac-

ceptance of what we control and things we do not control. I do believe that the faculty at Compton College has now accepted the fact that things as they once were can never exist again. That is probably a good thing. We have accepted our fate and are working to create a better institution. The faculty, I believe, will create a stronger institution for our community. We need to shape a new identity for ourselves with the assistance of a school with whom we will partner for the next several years. We are fortunate, I think, that El Camino College has extended its hand for the long run. We will work together as a united faculty in shaping a better educational institution so that some day in the future, we can re-establish Compton College with full accreditation.

The current state of affairs

*El Camino College—
Compton Center (ECC-CC)*

As of Fall Semester 2006, the enrollment of full time equivalency students (FTEs) has plummeted from peaks of approximately 6,500 to 7,000 students just five years ago to less than 2,000 now. The significant drop cannot be surprising—the negative media, the newspaper

write-ups about one scandal after another certainly has taken its toll. However, perhaps the biggest factor that has contributed to the loss of FTEs is the misperception that the campus has closed—it has not! We are a vibrant, accredited, and very much alive institution that is a critical element to the community of South Los Angeles.

We will survive the challenge to meet the needs of our students and the community. The faculty at ECC-CC remains committed to serve the students. With every crisis brings an opportunity for growth, renewed spirit, and motivation. We have weathered a severe crisis and are regaining momentum to move ahead.

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