



Save CCSF Coalition
www.saveccsf.org



An Open Letter to Guy Lease, Chancellor Lamb and the City College Board of Trustees

Stop Hemorrhaging Enrollment at City College: End the Racist Payment Policy

Activists with Save City College and the student Solidarity Committee (composed of Asian Student Union, Black Student Union, MECHA, P.E.A.C.E.--Pilipinos for Education, Arts, Culture and Empowerment) are writing to ask you to place an item on the Board of Trustees agenda ASAP: the current harsh payment policy that was initiated in October 2013, with the first wave of students being evicted from the college during enrollment for spring 2014.¹

This policy puts pressure on already-enrolled students to immediately pay fees and back debts, before financial aid arrives. Students who can't pay, are pressed to take out a loan from the predatory student loan company Nelnet.² Those who do not set up a loan, are robo-dropped from all their classes.³ Information about a waiver for people whose financial aid is pending is buried in the fine print of the college website.

Over only four semesters, 9124 enrolled students have been robo-dropped from all their classes, with less than half (4284, or 47%) ever managing to re-enroll, and 4840 (53%) simply gone missing—in the middle of an enrollment crisis at the college!

Our goal is that the Board would direct Chancellor Lamb to place a moratorium on the current harsh payment policy, and to push back deadlines *before* the next wave of robo-dropping students, which could happen as soon as mid to late December, for spring semester.

Student organizers from the Solidarity Committee at CCSF call this “the racist payment policy” because of the many reports they have gotten from Black, Pacific Islander, Latino, Asian and low-income students about the impact of the payment policy on pushing students out of City College. The impact is heaviest on non-AB 540 undocumented students and out of state students, who may find themselves pressured for immediate payment of thousands of dollars, with new charges piled on top regularly by Nelnet.

¹ The policy was also presented by VC Samuel Santos at the October, 2015 Board meeting, available on video at 3:24:00, http://ccsf.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=2&clip_id=557

² A US Department of Education audit revealed that from 1993 to 2007, student loan companies had set up an elaborate scam to over-bill the federal government for interest on student loans—to the tune of \$600 million in taxpayer dollars, \$278 million for Nelnet alone. Nelnet has made multiple court settlements for fraud, kickbacks, and improper inducements to colleges and universities (Sources: Washington Post and Collinge, *The Student Loan Scam*)

³ Oddly enough, the policy only applies to students who have planned ahead and enrolled in classes in advance. Once classes have started, state regulations prevent students from being dropped.

In October of 2013, the College’s announcement of the new policy featured a statement to the *SF Chronicle* from a vice chancellor:

“We are in a serious transition to right-size the college.”⁴

We believe that the current policy fits within a larger corporate agenda aimed at downsizing our college, worsening the already-devastating loss of one out of three students since 2008.⁵

Here is an example of how the policy works: Renata owed City College \$129. She was sent to wait in two long lines to see a financial aid specialist for help filling out her financial aid forms, and finally gave up. Next she received a threatening letter from City College saying that her tax refund might be intercepted. As she scrambled to pay the rent, BART, books and her debt, suddenly the college dropped Renata from all of her classes. Her carefully planned work schedule was thrown into chaos.

Every time a full-time student is pushed out, the college loses up to \$4676 in state appropriations. Yet the average debt to City College is only \$256, **so the college loses far more than it stands to collect.** The new policy only makes sense if the real goal is downsizing our public college, bringing in revenue for the for-profit colleges and student loan companies, and allowing asset stripping of College land by real estate developers. If the overarching goal is to rebuild enrollment, the policy is utterly counter productive.

We have confirmed with college attorney Steve Bruckman that the current payment policy was a local decision by the administration, so it can and should be immediately overturned. There was a Board resolution authorizing a contract with Nelnet on May 23, 2013 (Action V-F). Very briefly, Mr. Bruckman said that state law requires colleges to collect fees from students, but how that is done is up to the college administration.

City College’s previous policy was to allow students to continue adding, dropping and taking classes while they arranged payment—only transcripts were frozen. It is our understanding from other colleges, that a “pay up front” payment policy is very disruptive for low-income students if financial aid advising and accurate information are not readily available—for example, if students lack crucial information about the waiver for students who have financial aid pending. We know from the presentation at the October Board meeting, that financial aid advising is understaffed, mainly available at Ocean, and not available in multiple languages. We also know that the enrollment website gives exceptionally obscure instructions about the waiver for students who have financial aid pending.

⁴ October 25, 2013, statement by the then vice chancellor of student development. This was no doubt considered a communications slip, since the downsizing policy is mainly discussed off mike and obliquely.

⁵ The corporate agenda to downsize City College informs ongoing coverage by the *SF Chronicle*, which since the beginning of the crisis has repeated scores of times the message that City College is “a vast college,” “a behemoth,” and must change from being “a bloated, slow-thinking system of nine campuses into a lean, sharp-minded institution of higher learning” (translation: a much smaller college that will “no longer need all its campuses,” which may be better used for luxury condo development schemes such as those led by the Chronicle’s corporate owner, the Hearst Corporation, along with Forest City Enterprises. See *Supes OK big SoMa project, \$1 billion development planned at 5th and Mission, SF Chronicle* 11/18/2015. The huge multi-site development project is centered one block from Downtown Campus. Will Downtown Campus go the way of 33 Gough and Civic Center Tenderloin Campus?)

Before thousands more enrolled students are dropped, the administration should put a moratorium on the current payment policy and overhaul it in line with the principles below:

1. The BOT should ask Institutional Research to prepare an Equity Impact Report on the current payment policy. It should include the demographics of students who have been robo-dropped, including their ethnicities, ages, zip code and information that might highlight special impacts on undocumented students. How many of the pushed-out students were actually eligible for fee waivers if they had been provided with proper advising? How many students have been pressured into signing up with Nelnet?

2. Information on the current payment options must be *immediately* changed so that the **payment policy waiver for students who have financial aid pending, is *clear and prominent*.** On the enrollment website, for example, Option 2 is now buried in fine print, and presented in bureaucratic gobbledegook as “Third Party Payer/Self Exemption.” Very clear and prominent notices should be posted wherever students enroll and throughout college communications, and of course on the enrollment web page.

3. A moratorium should be placed on the current policy at least until City College has enough financial aid advising at all sites in in multiple languages, making it possible for students to get timely assistance in obtaining BOG, Pell, Cal Grants and other real assistance (versus loans), shielding them from being robo-dropped. The College must follow financial aid professional association guidelines on the recommended ratio of students to advisors.

4. The administration can and should adjust deadlines so that payment is due AFTER financial aid arrives, not before. If deadlines are pushed out, far fewer loans will be required.

5. The tone of over-the-top hostility and threats in correspondence from the college to students, and on the college website, must be corrected immediately. Again, this tone is self-defeating if the goal is to re-build enrollment.

6. The administration or Board should contact Mayor Ed Lee and get **swift follow-up on the fund to assist undocumented students,** discussed by the Mayor over a year ago with zero concrete progress. The Board should set a deadline and make a back-up plan. We quote from a letter sent by Supervisor David Campos to Ed Lee on 2.7.14:

- 1) “Undocumented students that were dropped because of the current payment policy should be able to register while a more equitable solution is created;
- 2) The emergency relief fund to be created by the Mayor’s office must support all undocumented students, including both AB540 and non AB540 students;⁶
- 3) Provide in-state tuition for undocumented students that have graduated from a high school in the US and have lived in California for a year and one day. (CCSF currently grants in-state tuition to out-of-state students so long as they can prove they have lived in California for a year and one day);
- 4) Engage both AB540 and other undocumented students in the discussion on how best to address this problem.”

⁶ Under the California Dream Act, AB540 students must have graduated from a California high school or GED program, and have attended high school in California for three or more years.

7. Un-freeze accounts: If students have accounts in arrears, they must still be able to add and drop classes, with only transcripts put on hold. The policy of totally freezing accounts sets students up to run afoul of the Academic Progress policy if they need to drop, but cannot.

8. End the contract with predatory Nelnet Business Solutions and develop an equitable payment plan based on student income. An in-house payment plan, run by the financial aid office, should emphasize retention and support for low-income students. If financing can't be handled in-house, an arrangement could be made with a local credit union.

December 8, 2015

On behalf of the Save City College Coalition and the Solidarity Committee (Asian Student Union, Black Student Union, MECHA, P.E.A.C.E.--Pilipinos for Education, Arts, Culture and Empowerment), as of today's date, with other organizational endorsements in progress:

Michael Adams (Save City College, community member)

Tarik Farrar (Save City College, *AFT 2121 and the *Department Chairs Council)

Allan Fisher (Save City College and *AFT 2121)

Jon Gausman (Black Student Union)

Lalo Gonzalez (MECHA)

Wendy Kaufmyn (Save City College and *AFT 2121)

Win-Mon Kyi (Asian Student Union)

Claire Warren (P.E.A.C.E., Pilipinos for Education, Arts, Culture and Empowerment)

* Asterisk indicates other affiliations for identification purposes only

