

The California State Auditor released the following report today:

## California Community College Accreditation

*Colleges Are Treated Inconsistently and Opportunities Exist for Improvement in the Accreditation Process*

### BACKGROUND

Overseen by the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges, the California's community college system provides higher education to 2.4 million students in its 112 community colleges. Each college must be accredited by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (commission)—one of seven regional accreditors formally recognized by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) as a reliable authority regarding the quality of education offered by the institutions that it accredits. In June 2013 the commission decided to terminate the City College of San Francisco's (CCSF) accreditation.

### KEY FINDINGS

During our review of the accreditation process of California's community colleges, we noted the following:

- The commission inconsistently applied its accreditation process.
  - ✓ Although federal regulations allow accreditors to grant colleges up to two years to comply with accreditation standards, the commission allowed the CCSF only one year after placing it on sanction to address issues of noncompliance, even though it was making progress in meeting standards.
  - ✓ Between January 2009 and January 2014, the commission allowed 15 colleges to take two years to resolve their sanctions and allowed six others up to five years to resolve theirs.
- The commission's policies regarding its most critical decision-making lack transparency—it conducts deliberations on accreditation status in closed sessions. Further, its appeal process needs to be improved.
  - ✓ Thirty-eight percent of college executives we surveyed felt the commission's decision-making process was not appropriately transparent.
  - ✓ The commission's appeal process does not provide institutions with a definitive right to introduce new evidence when they appeal the decision to terminate their accreditation.
- The commission sanctions California community colleges at a significantly higher rate compared to other regional accreditors. Between 2009 and 2013, the commission issued 126 sanctions out of a total of 231 actions—a sanction rate of 54.5 percent—while the cumulative sanction rate for the other six regional accreditors in the United States was only 12.4 percent.
- USDE has identified concerns with the composition of the commission's evaluation teams—the commission included the spouse of its president on the team that conducted the comprehensive evaluation of CCSF in 2012.
- Options exist that may allow community colleges to choose an accreditor other than the commission.
- The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (chancellor's office) only conducts limited monitoring of community colleges to proactively identify problems that could arise during an accreditation review.

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

We made several recommendations to the chancellor's office including the following:

- Work with the colleges and request clearer guidance from the commission to ensure that colleges receive consistent and fair treatment and are able to address deficiencies.
- Assist colleges in communicating their concerns to the commission regarding transparency, and work with colleges to advocate that the commission change certain aspects of its appeal process.
- Collaborate with colleges to encourage the commission to develop formal opportunities for communication and feedback before a comprehensive accreditation evaluation takes place.
- Explore the feasibility of allowing colleges flexibility in choosing an accreditor and identifying other potential accreditors.
- Monitor community colleges for issues that may jeopardize accreditation.