

Cuesta president abandoning ship?



Cuesta College President Dave Pelham

By KAREN VELIE

Cuesta College President Dave Pelham, who came to San Luis Obispo last year to take over running the community college campus, is looking for work elsewhere at a time when Cuesta faces a tough fight to retain its accreditation.

CalCoastNews has learned that Pelham is one of 11 applicants vying to become the next chancellor of Alabama's two-year community college system. Along with seven additional out-of-state applicants,

Pelham is scheduled for an interview in Alabama on Thursday, according to IT.TMCNET.com, a technology and communications Web site.

Since the report surfaced on that site last week, several newspapers in Alabama have also reported that Pelham is a candidate for the chancellor's job there.

"It's a unique opportunity, so he jumped at it," said Cuesta media relations coordinator Jill Ivie. "He [Pelham] has family in that area."

News of Pelham's search for a new job comes at a time when Cuesta is undergoing another audit to keep its accreditation. According to the Accreditation Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, which oversees education in California's two-year colleges, a warning was issued to Cuesta administrators on the basis of a progress report from an Oct. 13, 2008 on-site visit.

In an action letter sent to the college in January, the ACCJC listed nine recommendations that focus on issues about student learning outcomes, technology resources, financial planning, and leadership. Failure to comply with these issues could result in the campus losing its accreditation.

"To meet standards, the team recommends that the Board of Trustees delegate full responsibility and authority to the superintendent/president to implement and administer board policies and the effective operation of the institution," according to a 42 page letter from the commission to Cuesta on Feb. 3, 2009.

Accreditation is an established process for evaluation and quality assurance

for education used by the American higher education community. If accreditation were to be lost, course credits would no longer be transferable to other two-year colleges and four-year institutions. Also, students would be unable to collect financial aid.

Pelham took the helm at Cuesta in March 2008. His appointment followed the ACCJC's warning to the college that it had several deficiencies, including staffing shortages, which imperiled its accreditation. At that time, seven administrative staffing positions, including the president and vice president positions, were either vacant or filled with interim appointments.

Prior to Pelham's appointment, the top position was held for a year by an interim appointment following the 2006 departure of former Cuesta president Marie Rosenwasser.

Currently, campus officials are assembling a compliance report that is required to be submitted to the ACCJC by mid-October.

Forewarned in 2002 that issues regarding program reviews and unit-planning processes could result in the loss of the college's accreditation, Cuesta College officials admit they fell short in properly addressing the commission's recommendations.

In early 2008, following the passing of federal laws that require the commission to take action against colleges that fail to comply with recommendations within two years, the Commission placed Cuesta on warning status.

For six months, at the end of 2008, Cuesta was able to shed its warning status and fully reaffirm its accreditation, though by early 2009, the commission had again placed Cuesta on warning status because of a new list of inadequacies.

"There is the two year rule," said Barbara Beno, president of the accrediting commission. "Colleges out of compliance must come into compliance within two years or we must terminate their accreditation."

In January, the commission is slated to meet to evaluate the college's progress which could lead to a variety of actions including removal of accreditation.

"We have been working to address all the issues," Ivie said. "I think a lot of it is related to the budget.

"And another part is process and planning because before Pelham came, we had a lot of interim positions. A permanent president and top tier of administration in place contributes to process and planning which will address

these issues.”

When asked how the campus accreditation issues would be affected if Pelham left, Ivie said, “I think that’s a bridge we will have to cross when we come to it.”

Cuesta has 13,000 enrolled students. Another 30,000 people attend community education classes, short courses, and continuing education courses.