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# State Center Community College District

## Strategic Conversation Report

November 10, 2011

Report prepared by Diane Clerou and Dr. Jothany Blackwood for:

Dr. Deborah G. Blue, Chancellor



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## Executive Summary

A Strategic Conversation is an informal, but structured, discussion on a strategic policy issue that results in a clearer understanding of that issue or issues. A Strategic Conversation helps an organization or board thoughtfully examine why it is making the policy decisions it makes, while connecting and involving all internal stakeholders affected by those decisions in a positive and meaningful way. Topics reflect policy issues facing the Board of Trustees, rather than operational issues.

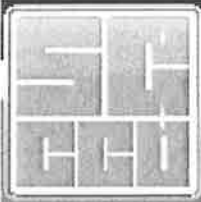
To observe this process and make a recommendation regarding its applicability to SCCCCD, Dr. Deborah G. Blue requested that Dr. Jothany Blackwood and Diane Clerou attend a Strategic Conversation at North Orange Community College District. It took place on the Cypress College campus in Cypress, California on October 25, 2011 and this report identifies the process, the timelines, the committee that organized it, participants, outcomes and a recommendation for integrating Strategic Conversation into the culture of SCCCCD with some modifications from the observed process.

## Strategic Conversation Process

The North Orange Community College District conducts Strategic Conversation in the fall of every academic year, however, when it began in 1999, it was held twice each year. This was the District's 13<sup>th</sup> conversation and is now typically held before the second Board meeting in October.

The Strategic Conversation Committee meets 3-4 times during the preceding Spring semester to plan the subsequent Fall Strategic Conversation. They also meet in the Fall as frequently as necessary to ensure the planning is complete. The district then sends out an invitation to all internal employees and students identifying the topic of the Strategic Conversation and they can self-select to participate by RSVP with the Committee (Appendix A).

Prior to attending the Strategic Conversation, participants were sent a white paper explaining the process (Appendix B). A copy of this document, Strategic Conversation: Just the Facts", is attached to this report. Participants also received a second document Strategic Conversation 13: Background that was prepared by the Strategic Conversation Committee and provides an in-depth analysis of the situation or issues under discussion (Appendix C). This background paper is also used to frame the discussions at the actual Strategic Conversation session.



The event begins with a social hour that allows participants to mingle and enjoy refreshments. That is followed by the two hour conversation on the identified topic: The Student's Road to Success at NOCCCD: Expressway, Detour, or Gridlock? "Participants sit at pre-designated tables to ensure a balance of board members, students, classified, faculty and management at each table. A facilitator was pre-designated for each table, a recorder and presenter were then designated by the participants at each table.

The session was opened by the President of the Cypress College, who was hosting this event and welcomed everyone. A member of the Board, who is also the Chair of the Strategic Conversation Committee, gave opening remarks which provided a framework for the entire session and set out the protocols for the first part of the exercise.

The first part of the session began with each table responding to the same question that asked participants to identify barriers to student success. Participants were given 30 minutes to discuss the question at their tables. Each table then shared what it believed to be barriers to student success. During a 15 minute break, staff synthesized the responses and came up with the top 12 topics based on all of the reports.

The Board member opened the second half of the session by providing additional context to the framework. For instance, the board member indicated that once remedies were identified, it was up to the participants to carry the information back to their departments/constituent groups, etc. at the campus level to ensure the remedies were operationalized and fed into a planning process.

The next step was innovative. Participants self-selected the table they wished to work at for the second portion of the meeting based on their area of interest. For instance, a barrier to student success was "lack of partnerships with the area high schools". Anyone interested in further discussion of this barrier, and more importantly, how to fix it, went to that table. The outcome was that experts and/or those with a passion for that topic were at the same table. This appeared to contribute to a marked increase in enthusiasm and synergy for the second portion of the event.

At the end of the meeting, Chancellor Ned Doffoney provided closing comments. His comments were intended to motivate people to make "root changes" by taking the "opportunity to include many of your suggestions in our strategic plan" and in "your objectives".

It is the norm that the ideas generated and recorded during the Strategic Conversation are forwarded to all members of the organization and become part of the official



minutes of the Board of Trustees. It was interesting to note that the history of Strategic Conversation in this district primarily focused on providing an opportunity for employees and students to engage in conversation with Board members on a key issue. But it was clear that the district is moving beyond it being conversation, but that an expected outcome is that the synthesized information/data will now feed into a planning process.

### **Timeline**

The Strategic Conversation occurs every fall of the academic year and is held prior to the second Board meeting of the year. The social hour with refreshments went from 4-to 5pm, followed by the Strategic Conversation from 5-7:10pm. The Board Business meeting immediately followed this event.

### **Strategic Conversation Committee**

The Strategic Conversation Committee is chaired by a member of the Board of Trustees, Donna Miller, who brought this concept from Maricopa CCD. Other members of the Strategic Conversation Committee are the Chancellor, the College Presidents, the Provosts, the Staff Development Coordinator from each site, the Chancellor's Executive Administrative Aide, and resource personnel at the site where the Strategic Conversation will be held.

### **Strategic Conversation Participants**

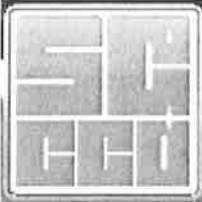
NOCCD limits its invitation to internal participants including board members, students, and classified, faculty and management employees of the district. While the process shares common components as a charette, a significant deviation is its exclusion of external stakeholders.

### **Strategic Conversation Location**

The two colleges and the continuing education center rotate hosting this annual meeting.

### **Recommendations for integrating process into SCCC**

- Inform internal stakeholders on the purpose and outcomes of a Strategic Conversation through presentations at Chancellor's Cabinet, Communications Council and district-wide email.



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- As this process is driven by the Board, involve at least one Board member and selected members from Chancellor's Cabinet to assist in the planning for the Strategic Conversation to be held February 7, 2012. Strategic Planning Workgroup can also be invited to support the process and be tasked with responsibilities.
- Implement the Strategic Conversation process used at North Orange Community College District with modified outcomes, which are identified below.
- Utilize the findings from the Board of Trustees visioning process to identify the topic for the Strategic Conversation. The information from the Strategic Conversation will then be integrated into the charette process on March 1, 2012 for the District's 2012-2016 Strategic Plan.

### Outcomes

1. Engage Board members and internal constituent groups in discussion of a specific district-wide strategic issue.
2. Identify strategies in response to the findings from the strategic conversation which can be vetted through district and college governance processes.
3. Integrate comprehensive strategies identified in the Strategic Conversation into district-wide and/or college planning processes.
4. Revise goals and objectives of the District-wide Strategic Plan, during the annual review, based on findings from the Strategic Conversation, if applicable.

### Review Team

Dr. Jothany Blackwood

Diane Clerou

# A

**North Orange County Community College District**

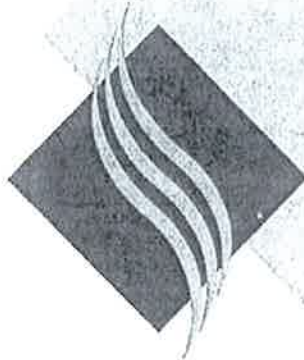
## **Strategic Conversation #13**

***"The Student's Road to Success at NOCCCD:  
Expressway, Detour, or Gridlock?"***

**Tuesday, October 25, 2011**

Social Hour with Refreshments – 4 to 5 pm  
Three-Part Conversation – 5 to 7:10 pm  
(Board Business Meeting Immediately Following)

Cypress College Theatre Lobby  
9200 Valley View Street, Cypress



Please RSVP to the District Public Affairs Office:  
Anaheim Campus or [publicaffairs@nocccd.edu](mailto:publicaffairs@nocccd.edu)

## **Strategic Conversations: Just the Facts**

### **What is a Strategic Conversation?**

A Strategic Conversation is an informal, but structured, discussion on a strategic policy issue that results in a clearer understanding of that issue or issues.

### **Who attends?**

Anyone who is interested attends and participates—staff to decision-makers to constituents. Because everyone is considered “equal” in Strategic Conversation—regardless of rank, expertise or experience—everyone’s opinion is valued.

### **Is there an optimum size for a Strategic Conversation?**

No. The process works with all sizes of groups—small to large.

### **Are formal decisions reached?**

No. The meeting focuses on examining directions and assumptions that underlie strategic policy issues. It does not directly establish new policy, nor result in formal decisions or recommendations.

### **How is this different from a brainstorming session?**

Because a Strategic Conversation is directed dialogue, it is more focused than a brainstorming session.

### **How is this different from a study session?**

Largely because no distinction is made between staff and other participants, the dialogue is more free-flowing than a study session.

### **How does it work?**

A Strategic Conversation begins with an in-depth analysis of the situation or issues under discussion. This is presented in both a background paper and, briefly, at the Conversation session. Participants then form groups to discuss structured questions. They reconvene to hear the groups report out. The ideas generated are forwarded to all members of the organization and become part of the official minutes of the governing board of the organization.

### **Who should use this process?**

It is designed for use by policy-making governing boards of governmental and nonprofit organizations.

### **When is this used?**

Strategic Conversations do not replace regular board or staff meetings. They supplement those regular business sessions.



**What topics are discussed?**

Topics reflect the issues facing the board—policy issues, not operational issues.

**What is the end product?**

A Strategic Conversation helps an organization or board thoughtfully examine why it is making the policy decisions it makes, while connecting and involving all players affected by those decisions in a positive and meaningful way. As a result, the organization or board is better equipped to anticipate challenges and develop successful strategies on policy issues. Finally, since everyone has been involved in this thoughtful process of discussion, subsequent board decisions will be received with a greater degree of support. Ultimately, Strategic Conversations help an organization remain flexible and open to change, by positioning it to learn from its experiences.

**Who developed this process?**

The concept of Strategic Conversation was developed by the Maricopa Community College District Governing Board and staff in 1994. It has been used successfully to explore subject including diversity, finance, nontraditional education, marketing, quantum mechanics, employee issues, leadership, and student issues.

## The Student's Road to Success at NOCCCD: Expressway, Detour or Gridlock?

*"A Strategic Conversation is an informal, but structured, discussion on a strategic policy issue that results in a clearer understanding of that issue or issues. The meeting focuses on examining directions and assumptions that underlie those issues. It does not directly establish new policy, nor result in formal decisions or recommendations." (Rosenthal & Schober, 1997)*

*The purpose of a Strategic Conversation is to facilitate open dialogue among all members of the District community including students, record the major findings of the discussions, and perhaps serve as a catalyst for future District dialogues and actions critical to the success of our students.*

### Student Voices

*I am a first-time freshman at Fullerton College. I want to go to college, but I was only able to register in one class. It is going to take me forever to complete the courses I need to transfer.*

*I am a basic skills math student and education major at Cypress College. I tested into Math 20 last semester, but I failed the first time. It will take me at least three years to progress through the math sequence, if I can get the courses I need.*

*This fall I am enrolled in a career technical class, but the math and the vocabulary is very difficult for me. It is only the first half of the semester and though I study every chance I get, I am failing.*

*Last year, I was put into the lowest English class at Cypress College. I failed. I went to SCE lab at Cypress to work on my reading & writing. I want to try to take English classes at Cypress College again. What do I do?*

*Last October, I applied to the CSU of my choice as well as many other CSUs as a major in engineering, planning to live at home and commute. I was denied admission to the university that is closest to me, but accepted at Bakersfield and Humboldt. No one told me about CSU 'service areas' and that I would need a high GPA to be accepted into the CSU of my choice.*

As we all know, California is a severe budget crisis and experts tell us the worst is yet to come. Deep budget cuts to the UC, CSU, and CCC systems have greatly reduced the number of students California can educate, just at the time Barack Obama has called upon community colleges nationwide to increase degree and certificate completions by 5 million by 2020. (White House, 2010)

- According to the Public Policy Institute of California, "In 2006, California ranked 23<sup>rd</sup> among states in its share of 25- to 34-year olds holding at least a bachelor's degree, down from eighth position in 1960. California colleges and universities, both public and private, award relatively few baccalaureates, given the size of the state's youth population: California ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> among states in the ratio of bachelor's degrees awarded in 2006 to high school diplomas awarded five years earlier." (Johnson & Sengupta, 2009)
- California black and Latino residents are less likely than the rest of the population to complete college degrees and certificates. (Moore & Shulock, 2010)
- The Public Policy Institute has predicted that California will need one million more baccalaureate degree holders above the state's baseline estimate to meet the needs of employers. (Johnson & Sengupta, 2009)

The 2020 Vision: A Report of the Commission on the Future of the Community College League of California presents several recommendations related to Leadership & Accountability, some of which will be addressed at the state governance and system level and some at the district and college level, specifically institutional research focused on issues of teaching, learning, and student success and a "reinvented professional

development efforts for community college trustees, administrator, faculty, and staff.” (2020 Vision: A Report of the Commission on the Future, 2010)

**As a district, we need to take steps to achieve our mission of providing Orange County and California with educated citizens capable of contributing to the economic and cultural well-being of our county and state.**

### **Diamond Lanes: What Works for Community College Students**

Research has shown that if first-time community college students can successfully complete the first 30 units of coursework, they are much more likely to complete degrees or certificates. (Moore & Shulock, 2010) In fact, the first eight weeks of a student’s career are the most crucial. Research conducted at the community college and university levels across the nation have identified policies and strategies that have been proven to help community college students succeed. Included is a list of some of most effective best practices with a reference to each source. This list is not meant to be all inclusive, but a starting point for Strategic Conversation #13.

- Require students to participate in integrated student support, assessment, counseling and orientation, and enroll in courses according to well publicized and strictly-enforced registration guidelines. (2020 Vision: A Report of the Commission on the Future, 2010)
- Relay clear community college expectations early in each student’s K-12 career. (2020 Vision)
- Develop alternatives to traditional curriculum sequences using linked or contextualized curriculum across curricular areas. (2020 Vision)
- Schedule classes in inter-departmental manner with the goal of meeting the needs of first-time students, promoting full-time enrollment, and enhancing program completion. (2020 Vision)
- Expand the awarding of credit for demonstrated competency and knowledge using multiple assessment instruments as determined by the faculty. (2020 Vision)
- Strengthen classroom engagement by raising expectations, promoting active, engaged learning, emphasizing deep learning (thinking, reasoning, and judgment skills as opposed to rote memorization), building and encouraging relationships, and ensuring the students know where they stand. (2010 CCCSE National Report, The Heart of Student Success: Teaching, Learning, and College Completion , 2010)
- Integrate student support (academic advising/planning, supplemental instruction, exploration of student services) into learning experiences. (2010 CCCSE National Report).
- Conduct honest and open conversations about difficult issues. (2010 CCCSE National Report)
- Maintain standards while affirming that all students can learn. (2010 CCCSE National Report)
- Provide frequent formative and summative assessment opportunities. (Boylan, 2002)
- Provide frequent and timely feedback. (Boylan, 2002)
- Link developmental course content to college-level requirements. (Boylan, 2002)

### **A Look in the Rearview Mirror**

The Accountability Reporting for Community Colleges (ARCC) provides MIS data for each college and the School of Education to analyze how well they are meeting performance indicators, a type of report card. Colleges can provide opportunities for an open and honest dialogue among departments and divisions to evaluate results and suggest action plans for improvement.

- By using trend analysis (comparison of college data from one time period to another), the two colleges can determine whether or not they have improved performance in these areas: student performance and achievement, percent of students who earned at least 30 units, fall to fall persistence rate, annual

successful vocational course completion rate, annual successful basic skills course completion rate, ESL improvement rate, and basic skills improvement rate. (Focus on Results: ARCC, 2011)

- By using comparative analysis with “Peer Institutions,” the colleges can determine if they are above or below average in their peer group. Research could identify colleges attaining the “peer group high” and lead to an examination of the best practices that college employs. (Focus on Results: ARCC, 2011)
- The performance indicator for the School of Continuing Education is the Career Development and College Preparation progress and achievement rate.

### **Roadblocks & Dead-end Streets: Current Barriers to Student Success**

**October 25 Strategic Conversation Session 1:** All participants will have a chance to identify barriers that prevent students from reaching their goal. Prior to the conversation, please jot down barriers at the District, your college, department, division, and/or work area that you think needs to be addressed. Bring the list with you for group discussion and dialogue.

### **Promising Practices and Proven Strategies: What Is Our Road Map for the Future?**

**October 25 Strategic Conversation Session 2:** Participants will work together to discuss and identify promising policies, practices, and strategies to overcome the barriers identified in the first session. Each group will develop and submit a list of actions that they feel will be most effective in improving the success of each student. These lists will be published and available to the District, to the colleges and SCE, to divisions, departments, and work areas as we engage in future discussions and decision-making processes. Your voice will be heard.

The task of assisting our students’ reaching their goals and thus providing the educated workforce that Orange County and California will need to regain its economic health seems overwhelming, given the budget constraints. We *may not have the financial resources this year or next year* to implement strategies and programs that have been proven to be effective. However, in fall 2011 we *have two most important resources* – if we decide to use them: the collective ability to *analyze and replicate or adapt promising practices* for our own student populations and the belief that we as individuals and as a District community can make *a positive difference* in the lives of our students.

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