

EDUCATION

Alamo Colleges: A House Divided



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The Moody Learning Center at San Antonio College.

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On May 6, [Alamo Colleges](http://www.alamo.edu/) (<http://www.alamo.edu/>) will ask voters to approve a \$450 million bond. In addition to badly needed repairs at [St. Philip's College](https://www.alamo.edu/spc/) (<https://www.alamo.edu/spc/>), parking facilities at [Northwest Vista College](https://www.alamo.edu/hvc/) (<https://www.alamo.edu/hvc/>) and [San Antonio College](http://www.alamo.edu/sac/) (<http://www.alamo.edu/sac/>), and technological infrastructure district-wide, the bond would include property purchases and building projects to accommodate projected growth.

With three colleges under sanction from their accreditor, full-time faculty have spoken out against the bond and the continued leadership of Chancellor Bruce Leslie. Ultimately, however, voters will decide if Alamo Colleges needs to get its house in order.

Leadership vs. Faculty

In February 2017, after 42 years as a history professor at San Antonio College, Mike Settles resigned his position. He had been called in for the second time, after failing to meet the productive grade rate required by his "win-win contract," which set a goal for the number of

students passed with As, Bs, and Cs.

"I'm not going to pass students that don't deserve a passing grade," Settles said.

Settles is himself a San Antonio College success story. After graduating in the lower half of his class from Jefferson High School, Settles attended SAC and fell in love with learning. He went on to earn his bachelor's degree at the University of Texas, a master's at Trinity University, and a doctorate at Texas Christian University. He had job offers from several universities when he chose to return to San Antonio College. He wanted to help students like himself find the same intellectual awakening.

But after Chancellor Bruce Leslie took leadership of the district in 2006, Settles became a vocal opponent of the Alamo Colleges' administration.

Charged with improving student outcomes and streamlining operations across the district, Leslie came to Alamo Colleges with a strong résumé. He previously served as chancellor of the Houston Community College System and the Connecticut Community-Technical Colleges, and as president of Onondaga Community College in Syracuse, N.Y.

However, Leslie left his previous two posts before his contract was up amid reports of conflicts with board trustees and faculty. As chancellor of Alamo Colleges, Leslie enjoys support from the trustees, but he has had a contentious relationship with faculty at the district's five colleges. [No-confidence votes \(https://therivardreport.com/northwest-vista-professors-sign-no-confidence-petition-amid-accreditation-fears/\)](https://therivardreport.com/northwest-vista-professors-sign-no-confidence-petition-amid-accreditation-fears/) and protests at board meetings have characterized his 11 years as chancellor.



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Alamo Colleges Chancellor Bruce Leslie

"In the four decades I've been there, I'd never seen morale so low," Settles said.

Hired as a change agent, Leslie sees the faculty discontent as the inevitable cost of culture change.

This "vocal minority" at the various colleges, which serve 58,321 students, represents the old guard of professors who resent losing control, Leslie said.

"They think it should be all about the faculty," Leslie told the *Rivard Report*.

However, recent sanctions by the colleges' accreditation body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (<http://www.sacscoc.org/>) (SACSCOC), have given credence to faculty concerns over administrative interference in curriculum. Faculty at San Antonio College, Northwest Vista College, and Palo Alto College say the issues raised by SACSCOC spotlight destructive shifts happening outside of the public eye.

Tenured faculty members have long voiced concerns that they are being circumvented, sidelined, and targeted for removal. Jeff Hunt, then-chair of San Antonio College's faculty senate, presented a 2009 resolution of no-confidence in Leslie to trustees, saying the chancellor had "overextended his role by ignoring faculty."

Most faculty, Leslie and Alamo Colleges board members say, are happy with the direction the college is heading. If it were not the case, student outcomes would not be on the rise, Trustee Roberto Zárate said, referring to the district's reported 224% increase (<https://therivardreport.com/alamo-colleges-touts-record-breaking-student-achievements/>) in degrees conferred since 2006.

Faculty question the significance of that statistic. Growing pressure from government entities to raise graduation rates has led some colleges to find ways to increase the number of certificates granted without a corresponding rise in the number of actual new graduates or students served.

Retroactive degrees figure into Alamo Colleges' improving numbers. A memorandum of understanding with Texas Tech University includes the stipulation that Texas Tech provide information for students who transferred into Texas Tech prior to obtaining an associate degree from one of the Alamo Colleges to "facilitate Alamo [College's] ability to offer retroactive or reverse transfer associate's (sic) degrees."

Alamo Colleges currently awards multiple certificates to graduates, each counting toward the total "degrees conferred" calculation. When a student receives a diploma, as many as five certifications can be listed on that diploma.

Palo Alto American Association of University (AAUP) President Tony Villanueva maintains that enrollment trends tell a more accurate story.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) reports that from 2010-2015 enrollment at Alamo Colleges decreased from 62,295 to 60,495. The largest losses came from San Antonio College. According to THECB projections, San Antonio College enrollment will be almost 5,000 students lower in 2030 than it was in 2010.

In March 2015, to counter claims that faculty morale was at an all-time low, Leslie presented the results of a September 2014 survey of 6,312 district employees. The 1,933 responses indicated a healthy campus climate, scoring 3.76 on a 1-4 scale. However, the survey was taken by all staff, not just faculty.

In response to that survey, the San Antonio College Faculty Senate surveyed 316 full-time faculty members in the spring of 2015. Of the 159 who replied, 84% reported that their morale was lower than five years before. Only 10% rated their morale "high" or "very high."

In a further indication of faculty unrest, 107 full-time faculty members at Northwest Vista signed in September 2016 to renew the 2009 no-confidence vote. The original no-confidence vote was part of an widespread faculty movement against Leslie, with similar resolutions signed by 90% or more of all full-time faculty at St. Philip's, Palo Alto, and San Antonio College.



https://therivardreport.com/scottball_alamo_colleges_san_antonio_college_sac_parking_lot_school_education_community_2-28-2017-8/

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Students walk to class at San Antonio College.

Even the bond package has proven contentious. The Palo Alto College chapter of the AAUP argued instead of being a part of the bond package, the money to repair St. Philip's should have come from the regular budget funds which are going toward construction of a [\\$45 million administrative building](https://therivardreport.com/gills-grove-remaking-playland-park-for-the-alamo-colleges/). Faculty refer to the building, on which construction began last month, as the "Crystal Palace."

"St Phillip's College needs new buildings only because they have been neglected so much," wrote Villanueva, the chapter president, in an email to its members. He argued that the repairs could have been made for roughly the same cost as the new administrative building.

In 2009, faculty was concerned by the increasing power of the district's central administration, and what it saw as encroachment on faculty purview. Today, those concerns are largely unchanged but more specifically embodied in Alamo Colleges' move toward a "guided pathways" model of education.

With this approach, students are closely advised to choose particular classes with their end goal in mind. For students aiming to move on to a four-year university, the focus is on transferable core classes. For students seeking to enter the workforce, the emphasis is on skills-based classes.

The pathways are designed to prevent the accumulation of non-transferable credits amassed by community college students, many of whom do not have time or money to waste, and to facilitate matriculation to four-year universities.

Alamo Colleges has created a robust advising system, AlamoADVISE, that aims for a 350:1 student-advisor ratio and a more tailored approach to helping students set and achieve goals.

Davis Jenkins, senior researcher with Columbia College's [Community College Research Center](http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/), said a liberal arts core is critical to the guided pathways model. Robust liberal arts are included at community colleges where the guided pathways approach has been successfully implemented. The research center and the [Aspen Institute](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/) highlight the importance of faculty input to make this possible.

Transition to a guided pathways model is slow and challenging. Difficult questions must be addressed, such as what to do about courses that don't naturally fit into a pathway, but that enrich student experience or broaden thinking.

"It takes years to lay the ground work for change," Jenkins said. "These colleges are being asked to do something they weren't asked to do originally."

While adding advising positions and greater workforce alignment has gone relatively smoothly under Leslie's leadership, his efforts to reshape Alamo Colleges to fit the guided pathway model hit a roadblock when it came time to work with faculty.

Coming tomorrow, the Rivard Report will further explore the tension between liberal arts education and technical training at Alamo Colleges in the second installment of this two-part series.
