

Seeking to Mend Relations, Pasadena City President Offers Coffee to Faculty Critics



H. Lorren Au Jr., KRT, Newscom

Mark W. Rocha, president of Pasadena City College, acknowledged in a recent memo that the campus climate was so unhealthy that, "as a teacher, I'd be asking, 'What on earth is really going on around here?'"

By Jack Stripling

The leader of Pasadena City College has a freshly brewed tactic to deal with his critics.

Mark W. Rocha, the California college's president and superintendent, has taken his share of lumps lately from professors and students. After months of complaints about his leadership, and escalating concerns that he may be punishing the student newspaper for its hard-hitting coverage, Mr. Rocha suggested last week that professors join him for a cup of coffee and a nice chat.

The java summit, which took place on Thursday, would be free of "lectures or posturing," the president promised in a conciliatory memorandum to the faculty.

Mr. Rocha, an English professor whose scholarship centers on American theater, wrote the memo with a whimsy uncommon in the staid world of presidential missives. He readily acknowledged that the campus climate was so unhealthy that, "as a teacher, I'd be asking, 'What on earth is really going on around here?'"

"There are colleagues who may have made up their minds that the path to healing is to make a change in the administration," Mr. Rocha continued. "It may come as a surprise to you to hear that I completely agree with this view!"

The president quickly clarified that he did not think he should be fired but rather wanted to change "the very nature of the administration" by opening a dialogue with professors. First coffee, he suggested, then meeting "two by two by two," with pairings of the roughly 350 full-time professors.

And he'll take notes. Lots of notes.

A Deterioration of Relations

The president's charm offensive came amid a push by some professors to hold a no-confidence vote on Mr. Rocha's leadership in the Academic Senate on Monday. That vote would occur on the heels of several other formal rebukes of Mr. Rocha that have taken place in the last couple of months.

In late February the executive board of the college's student government, the Associated Students, voted to express no confidence in Mr. Rocha. A week later, a poll of professors showed that 92 percent of participants had no confidence in the president. About 60 percent of full-time professors participated, the ad hoc group of faculty members who organized the vote said.

Mr. Rocha's relations with the faculty and students began to deteriorate last summer, when critics say he unilaterally pushed through a plan to cancel the public community college's winter session. Students argued that the cost-cutting measure would complicate their efforts to transfer to four-year institutions and would make it more difficult for students with jobs to take manageable course loads.

While most of the disagreements at Pasadena City are parochial, Mr. Rocha's clashes with critics drew some national attention last month, when the faculty adviser to the *Pasadena City College Courier*, the student newspaper, was abruptly placed on paid administrative leave. College officials say they are investigating a complaint against the adviser, Warren I. Swil, but the president's past criticisms of the paper have invited the suspicion of retaliation against Mr. Swil.

"This is a horrendous attack on a faculty adviser in effect to stifle the dissent of the student journalists," said Roger C. Marheine, an English professor and president of the Pasadena City College Faculty Association, a union that represents professors. "Warren Swil is going through hell, but it's not just him. It's the students."

Mr. Rocha declined an interview request.

College officials will not disclose the nature of the complaint against Mr. Swil, and Mr. Swil said he had been told by administrators not to discuss the community college at all while on leave. With that said, the professor's case has become something of a cause célèbre. Former students and working journalists have flocked to his Facebook page to express support.

"I'm getting about 10 new friends an hour," said Mr. Swil, an assistant professor of journalism.

Mr. Swil was placed on leave on March 28, just a few days after the president met with *Courier* reporters and expressed his dismay at their coverage.

"The whole time he was condescending to us, saying how we're not real journalists," said Nicholas D. Saul, the newspaper's editor in chief.

Strong Support on the Board

Mr. Rocha maintains strong support from leaders of the college's governing board, who say there is no truth to the contention that the president is out to punish the newspaper.

"From the information I've been presented, it has nothing to do with retaliation," said Anthony R. Fellow, vice president of the Pasadena Area Community College District's Board of Trustees. "It's a very different issue, and it's not something I can get into."

Mr. Fellow, a professor of communications at California State University at Fullerton, is a former city editor and reporter for the *San Gabriel Valley Tribune*. He has cautioned his colleagues at Fullerton not to rush to judgment about Mr. Swil's case.

"This is not a First Amendment issue," he said. "Stay calm, or else you'll be embarrassed" when the full facts come out.

John H. Martin, president of the board, said the trustees were "thrilled" with Mr. Rocha's performance. The president's critics, he said, seem far more concerned with tearing down Mr. Rocha than productively resolving their differences in protracted contract negotiations between the union and college officials.

"There is a very small, organized effort to deliberately discredit Dr. Rocha because he is actually a very strong leader," Mr. Martin said. "I don't know why it's taking this form. I'm disappointed. I believe this organized group has made it very personal. That troubles me. I don't think it is professional or academic."

Melissa M. Michelson, an assistant professor of languages and a member of the Academic Senate, is among Mr. Rocha's toughest critics. She is pushing for a no-confidence vote in the Senate on Monday, and said she was unimpressed by the president's recent overtures.

"Why, for the first time, is he offering coffee and doughnuts to teachers?" Ms. Michelson said. "To have a little talk?"

"What's that going to accomplish?" she continued. "I don't mind socializing with him, but that's not the way to run a college."

University officials did not respond to inquiries about the turnout at Mr. Rocha's "Faculty Coffee Hour" on Thursday. Photographs taken by some passers-by showed three people in attendance. One of them was an acting dean who serves at the pleasure of the president.