

An Open Letter to PCC Chancellor and Members of the Board: “Hope” is not enough.

Dear PCC Chancellor and Members of the Board of Directors,

I am a dedicated student at Pima Community College (PCC), currently attending classes at the PCC Aviation Technology Center (ATC). I am one of the twenty-one students that joined an outstanding program in November 2015 under the instruction of knowledgeable and experienced faculty, and enthusiastic administrative staff. The program is in a top-notch educational institution location, with three Boeing 727s and small regional planes for hands-on training. I am among 100+ students at ATC pursuing an Associate of Applied Science in Aviation Technology degree and certificates in Airframe and Powerplant, Structural Repair, and/or Avionics. As students, we undergo a rigorous schedule at a demanding pace. The major setback we have encountered in the duration of this program, is a lack of transparency and timely notice of important events. As part of this setback, I would like to highlight the errors uncovered by the administration, and the fact, as we came to discover, that the Aviation Technology Center site at Pima Community College had no approval by the Higher Learning Commission or the U.S. Department of Education. Lack of approval which later affected disbursement of financial aid to students. Both students and staff at the Aviation Technology Center of Pima Community College were affected and left in the shadows throughout the situation.

During the course of the program around May of 2016 the energy in the campus changed. A few classmates were impacted by Federal Financial Aid errors discovered by the administration. As it was mentioned on an e-mail sent by Chancellor Lee Lambert to PCC

personnel on May 12th, “As of January 2016, PCC identified 26 programs that were not appropriately coded...as having selective admission requirements,...” (Review of May 5 Financial Aid Training). Our classes are scheduled for every month of the year and the program is mentally and financially challenging. My classmates and I were midway a 5 week course of Electricity and at that time it became known to a couple of them that “As a result, some students were listed as admitted to a program even though they had not met all the program admission requirements.” (Review of May 5 Financial Aid Training).

A fellow former student was particularly affected by the news. I personally admired her given she is a single mother, drove to class five days a week from out of city limits, and had quit her full time job to dedicate her energy to a promising career in aviation, all in effort to improve her life and that of her child’s. As she related it, she resigned her job having a false security of a Federal Financial Aid loan available to her, to the extent that part of the loan was deposited to her bank account. As it was stated by Mr. Lee on May 12th “Students have been notified to either fulfill program admissions requirements or change their majors by 5-13-16” (Review of May 5 Financial Aid Training). Within a week her only financial income resource was no longer available. Had the administration not committed that error, or informed her promptly as the information was found, perhaps she could had kept her job, or had a financial plan in place. That month she dropped out of the college, broken and stressed; The aftermath of the manner in which the issue was handled by PCC administration.

The day of May 4th 2016 classes were interrupted to hold a meeting with Mr. Ted Roush, Campus Vice President. All students and staff met at the hangar and were handed a sheet titled “Aviation Program Site Approval Fact Sheet” (Available to view on *AZ Daily Star* article). It

was at that moment that all students became aware of the situation, the air in that space had never felt so heavy. We were told that anything that could be done was being done. As stated by Mr. Roush and the Fact Sheet “PCC applied for site approval of the ATC in February 2016, shortly after the discrepancy was discovered.” When asked by students why we were not made aware sooner, the answer, just like the one given to the *AZ Daily Star*, was that school officials were waiting until they “had more concrete and useful details we could share with them.” (Alaimo) Students were assured that the events would have no effect on the current term of Spring 2016.

Mr. Roush said that school officials were “hopeful” that they could reposition 50% of instruction to Desert Vista Campus in order to have financial aid reinstated. However if the FAA did not approve, financial aid could not be authorized for Summer 2016. But not to worry, said Mr. Roush, PCC would make up the difference and cover tuition for those who would ordinarily receive financial aid. And that the college expects to receive Department of Education site approval to reinstate Federal Financial Aid for Fall 2016. The word “hopeful” in this case applied as if I were to say “I’m hopeful I’ll pass the test” meaning I doubted how much I studied. I, like many other ATC students quit my job to dedicate time to school. We are scheduled eight hours a day, five days a week, and our courses run from 7:30 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. Many of us rely on financial aid to cover transportation and living expenses and were expecting a Federal Financial Aid Loan to be deposited to our account a couple days later during the Spring semester. Unlike Mr. Roush promised, spring semester was indeed affected when all Federal Financial Aid was frozen and many of us were left stranded out of money, with no back-up plan in place to cover for transportation, food, rent and utilities. Within a week, several students’ only

financial income resource no longer available. As of today, the Fall 2016 semester started 3 weeks ago, financial aid funds distribution is in a few days and the word “hopeful” still applies.

As the Chancellor, or by sitting on the Board of Directors, it is your job to ensure compliance and transparency among the students that rely on your accountability. There needs to be clarity and urgency in the issues that directly affect the student’s ability to continue their education at the college. I would like for you Chancellor, and members of the Board, to understand the direct effect that these discrepancies have generated in students’ lives. I speak for all Aviation Technology students when I say that we would like future communications to be done in a timely fashion to allow those affected to take necessary precautions and preparation. Your concern will rebuild the trust that was lost.

Sincerely,

Dennise Ponce

Works Cited

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