



Legislative White Paper

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Breaking the Cycle: Why City Colleges of Chicago Needs an Elected Board for Accountability, Stability, and Student Success

Lack of Democratic Accountability

City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) is uniquely governed by a board of trustees that is **appointed** by the Mayor of Chicago, rather than elected by local voters (southsideweekly.com). This structure stands in stark contrast to every other community college district in Illinois – all of which elect their boards in local elections (typically to six-year terms) (ibhe.org). In effect, Chicago's 2.6 million residents have **no direct vote** in who oversees their community college system, whereas residents of suburbs and downstate Illinois routinely choose trustees at the ballot box. The result is a **deficit of democratic accountability**: CCC's board is accountable primarily to the mayor who appoints them, not to the students, faculty, or taxpayers. As union leader Tony Johnston put it, under the current system the trustees are "accountable to no one but the mayor, because the mayor appoints them" (southsideweekly.com). This lack of voter oversight eliminates a fundamental check-and-balance present elsewhere. For instance, when other Illinois community colleges faced mismanagement or poor performance, voters could replace board members at the next election; by contrast, Chicagoans dissatisfied with City Colleges' direction have no recourse short of lobbying the mayor or electing a new mayor – an indirect and blunt tool. The **analogy to Chicago Public Schools (CPS)** is apt: CPS was long the only Illinois K-12 district without an elected board, a situation the state is now correcting with a new elected school board by 2027. City Colleges is now the **only** education system in Illinois still lacking that basic democratic mechanism (southsideweekly.com). An appointed board inherently reduces public accountability and transparency, as decisions are made by political appointees not directly answerable to the community. Restoring democracy to City Colleges governance is not just a matter of principle – it is a practical step to ensure the board's priorities align with the needs of Chicagoans, as is the norm statewide and nationally in higher education governance.

Political Influence Over Governance

Mayoral control of CCC has led to governance driven by City Hall's **political agenda**, often at the expense of students' and faculty's needs. Because trustees owe their positions to the mayor, they may feel pressure to advance the mayor's initiatives or produce statistics that bolster political narratives. A striking example occurred under former Mayor Rahm Emanuel's tenure (2011–2019), when City Colleges undertook a "Reinvention" campaign to tout improved graduation numbers. A joint investigative report by the Better Government Association and *Crain's* found that CCC **retroactively conferred thousands of degrees** to pump up completion figures – giving Emanuel "a great success story to sell (bettergov.org). The investigation exposed a culture of data manipulation "to score political points on the backs of our students," as a faculty council president lamented (projects.bettergov.org). This suggests that City Colleges' leadership prioritized **optics and mayoral directives** over sustainable educational quality. Decisions about program offerings and budgets likewise have reflected City Hall priorities. Under Emanuel, CCC reorganized its seven colleges into specialized "centers of excellence" tied to workforce sectors (manufacturing, healthcare, etc.), explicitly to align with the mayor's economic competitiveness. While workforce development is important, this top-down reorganization was implemented without robust input and often appeared driven by the mayor's desire for a legacy program. Even routine governance matters can be politicized. For example, as a sister-agency to the city, CCC has occasionally been drawn into electoral politics – one glaring incident occurred in 2022 when Mayor Lori Lightfoot's campaign controversially solicited City Colleges employees (via their work emails) to recruit students to her re-election campaign, blurring ethical lines (news.wttw.com). (Lightfoot ultimately apologized and ceased the effort, but the episode underscored the risk of political entanglement under mayoral control.) In short, **mayoral influence permeates CCC's governance**, creating pressure to meet political targets (like higher graduation stats or budget cuts) that may not always serve student interests.

Lack of Transparency and Community Input

The appointed board structure has fostered a culture of **closed-door decision-making** at City Colleges, often marginalizing the voices of faculty, students, and community stakeholders. With no voters to answer to, the CCC Board and administration have at times rolled out major policy changes with minimal consultation or transparency. A notable example was the Reinvention/"College to Careers" initiative in the 2010s: Chancellor Hyman and the board implemented dramatic changes – from consolidating programs to altering tuition and advising – largely **from the top down**. Faculty leaders complained of a "lack of communication from Hyman's office and a lack of shared governance" in these decisions (insidehighered.com). In fact, frustration over the opaque, unilateral decision-making reached a point where, in early

2016, representatives of the Cook County College Teachers Union and other employee unions organized a town hall to demand more transparency. They highlighted that Hyman had made “large changes to CCC **without input from students and staff**,” and this was a key factor that led to the no-confidence vote in her leadership (southsideweekly.com). Specific governance processes have also lacked openness. For instance, budgeting and resource allocation at CCC have often been decided behind closed doors at the central district office, with scant community participation beyond the formal board meeting votes. The board does hold public meetings (as required by the Open Meetings Act), but critics note these often function as perfunctory sessions where decisions hashed out beforehand are simply ratified. Public comment is allowed, yet there is little evidence that community feedback substantively influences board actions under the current setup.

Potential for Privatization and Outsourcing

Another risk of the current governance model is its susceptibility to **privatization and outsourcing trends** that may not be in the best interest of students or staff. An appointed board, not answerable to voters, can more easily pursue cost-cutting measures like contracting out services or embracing “public-private partnerships” that shift the focus from academic quality to narrow efficiency. Under Mayor Emanuel, City Colleges increasingly talked about “running like a business,” and indeed some moves mirrored corporate-style outsourcing. For example, CCC’s Board outsourced some non-academic functions (such as some custodial and security services) to private contractors during budget crunches, a strategy common in city agencies at the time. Each such outsourcing might save money, but often at the cost of lower-paid workers, less community hiring, or reduced service quality – and these decisions were made with little public input. More subtly, **core educational functions** have been at risk of partial privatization. The “College to Careers” initiative involved partnerships with industry – which is positive – but in some cases started to blur into outsourcing training to corporate partners or tailoring programs too tightly to immediate employer needs, potentially at the expense of broader education. Faculty expressed concern that the board was prioritizing what outside employers want (narrow job training) over the broader academic preparation students need for long-term career growth. This orientation can lead to a kind of privatization of the curriculum, where corporate sponsors influence what is taught. Without public oversight, who ensures that the curriculum serves the students’ and community’s interests first, not just a pipeline of workers for companies? Union representatives likened this to a “Walmart model” – maximize flexibility and minimize cost, but potentially **sacrifice quality and professionalism** (chicagomag.com). An elected board, subject to public scrutiny, might have been far more hesitant to try such measures. The appointed board, on the other hand, did not have to fear direct backlash from voters or students at the polls, so it could entertain such ideas primarily on a financial calculus. The “public” in public education is safeguarded when governance itself is public (through elections). By instituting an elected board, Illinois can ensure that CCC’s resources and programs remain **firmly in public hands** and oriented toward educational excellence rather than outsourcing for expedience. Especially in a city with Chicago’s economic disparities, guarding against backdoor

privatization of community education is critical – we must keep City Colleges a public good, governed by the people.

Challenges for Faculty & Staff in Negotiations

The lack of voter accountability on CCC's board also affects the dynamics of labor relations – **how faculty and staff negotiate contracts and advocate for working conditions**. In a healthy educational institution, the interests of educators and students align: professors with fair workloads and support can provide better instruction; staff with stable jobs offer better services to students. However, when a governing board feels insulated from public pressure, it may adopt a harder line in negotiations, prolong disputes and undervalue faculty/staff concerns. City Colleges has seen this play out repeatedly. Most recently, in 2021–2022, CCC's unions (led by the Cook County College Teachers Union, CCCTU) had to fight protracted negotiations for a new contract. The faculty and professional staff contract expired in July 2022, and after **over a year of talks** with little progress, the union voted 92% to authorize a strike (news.wttw.com). They set a strike date for November 2, 2022 – a drastic step that had not occurred at City Colleges in recent memory. What issues brought them to the brink? Not just salary, but **class sizes, student support, and fairness**. The union's rallying cry was that "Chicago's working-class students deserve" smaller classes, more wraparound services, and investment in instruction (news.wttw.com). In other words, faculty were pushing for conditions that directly impact educational quality. The administration (board) initially resisted many of these demands – perhaps viewing them as costly – and talks stalled for months. It's telling that only at the eleventh hour, just days before the strike, did the board come around and a tentative agreement was reached, narrowly averting the walkout (news.wttw.com). Throughout that bargaining process, the Board of Trustees operated with minimal public scrutiny – negotiations happened behind closed doors, and **unlike a city council or legislature, the trustees did not have to worry about explaining themselves to voters**. This dynamic has appeared before. In 2016, tensions between faculty and Chancellor Hyman's administration boiled over, leading to that no-confidence vote and public protests. Faculty cited "lack of shared governance" – essentially that their voices were ignored in decision-making (insidehighered.com). The 2022 near-strike demonstrated that CCC's employees are deeply committed to their students – their demands were explicitly about "ensuring...students have real opportunities to succeed" (news.wttw.com). A governance system that forces such commitment to escalate to strike threats indicates a **misalignment in priorities**. It shouldn't require brinkmanship to secure smaller class sizes or adequate student services. Aligning the board with the community via elections would naturally better align it with the **educators** as well, since educators enjoy broad community respect. In practical terms, an elected board could also foster more collaborative labor relations through transparency – contract negotiations could have more public observers or input, and trustees might engage directly with faculty forums to understand issues. All of this would contribute to a healthier working environment at City Colleges, which in turn helps recruitment of high-quality faculty and staff and improves the educational experience..

Solution: An Elected Board for City Colleges – A Path to Accountability and Improvement.

Transitioning City Colleges of Chicago to an elected board of trustees is a pivotal reform that would address the systemic issues outlined above and unlock the institution's potential to better serve students and the city. An elected board offers **multiple concrete benefits**:

Accountability to Voters

Trustees would have to campaign and earn the support of the community, meaning they must listen to constituents (students, parents, employers, educators) and be transparent about their vision. If they make decisions that harm educational quality or ignore community input, voters can replace them. This direct accountability creates a powerful incentive for good governance. As State Rep. (now Sen.) Robert Martwick, the champion of this reform, said: an elected board is essentially about making the colleges **“a right that is supposed to be guaranteed under our system of democracy”** ([southsideweekly.com](https://www.southsideweekly.com)) In practical terms, this means no more unilateral, mayor-driven policies without community buy-in; trustees would need to hold town halls, consult stakeholders, and explain their decisions publicly.

Better Representation of Chicago's Diversity

A well-designed elected board would ensure representation from across the city's various regions and demographic groups. Legislation introduced in Illinois (e.g. SB1693 in 2025) proposed subdividing the city into 20 community college districts, each electing one trustee, plus one at-large trustee as board president. This structure mirrors the model chosen for the new Chicago Board of Education. The effect would be that neighborhoods from Rogers Park to Roseland, Austin to Little Village, would each have a voice at the table advocating for their local campus and community needs. Such representation would vastly improve CCC's responsiveness – trustees from underserved areas would push for resources and programs benefiting their constituents (for instance, more English-as-second-language classes on the Northwest Side, or expanded trade programs on the South Side), which the entire board would have to consider. The board would no longer be a homogenous group of mayoral appointees, but rather a mosaic of community voices, making decisions more attuned to on-the-ground realities.

Transparency and Public Engagement

Election campaigns for board seats would bring City Colleges issues into the public discourse. Candidates would debate and publish platforms on topics like tuition, campus facilities, curriculum, and partnerships. This sunlight is healthy – it educates the public about City

Colleges and forces dialogue on policy options. Once in office, elected trustees are generally more open with information (since they have a political interest in communicating accomplishments and justifying decisions). We would expect more vigorous public discussion in board meetings, less rubber-stamping. Additionally, an elected board would likely implement more robust community advisory councils and committees (because elected officials often seek to broaden their support by including community voices). All this means decisions about budgets, programs, and contracts would be deliberated with far more transparency, reducing the suspicion and frustration that have plagued CCC under an appointed regime.

Focus on Educational Policy, Not Politics

Freed from the need to serve mayoral priorities, an elected board could squarely focus on **evidence-based educational policies**. Decisions about academic programs, student services, and staffing would be evaluated on their merits – what does research say, what do students need – rather than on political expediency. The board could work more collegially with faculty and experts. For instance, if enrollment is declining, an elected board might commission a study or hold hearings with students to identify barriers, then implement a plan (maybe extending course offerings, increasing financial aid, etc.) without waiting for permission from City Hall. The overall governance culture would likely shift to one of a public educational steward rather than a politically-managed agency. Importantly, the board’s accountability would be aligned *directly* with educational success: if City Colleges improve graduation rates authentically, increase enrollment from Chicago communities, and earn public praise, trustees will win re-election. If they fail on those counts, they won’t. This alignment of incentives is a powerful engine for policy that genuinely improves educational quality and equity.

Guarding the Public Interest and Equity

As noted, an elected board would be a watchdog against any drift toward privatization or neglect of vulnerable populations. Chicago’s community college students are predominantly people of color, many low-income or first-generation college-goers. These students deserve a board of trustees that is *their* advocate. Elected officials from the community are naturally more likely to take up that mantle – pushing for things like freeze or reduction of tuition and fees (as has happened in some suburban districts when surpluses allow), greater wraparound services (childcare, transport assistance, counseling) because their constituents demand it, and policies that ensure resources are distributed equitably among the campuses. We could expect, for example, more robust attention to the needs of adult learners and neighborhood-based programs, since trustees from areas with many adult learners would bring those concerns forward. The outcome should be improved student success across the board: higher completion rates *with integrity*, higher transfer rates, and narrowing gaps between campuses. Indeed, the mere existence of direct accountability might spur innovation – trustees could campaign on bold ideas (say, “free community college for all Chicago Public Schools graduates” or “an apprenticeship guarantee program in partnership with unions”) and, if elected, work to implement them. This kind of vision has been missing under the appointed board, which has been cautious and reactive.

Commonsense Reform

An elected board for City Colleges of Chicago is a commonsense reform whose time has come. The current appointed structure, a vestige of an earlier era, has resulted in insufficient accountability, politicized decision-making, leadership churn, opaque processes, community disconnect, and contentious labor relations – all of which ultimately hinder City Colleges' mission to provide excellent, equitable education. By enacting legislation to create an elected Board of Trustees for CCC, Illinois can ensure that the largest community college system in the state is governed with the same democratic principles as its peers. This change would empower communities, improve policy stability, and refocus the institution on student success and community advancement. In short, an elected board would give City Colleges **new life as a truly public, people's college** – one that can innovate and excel while remaining accountable to those it serves. It is a policy solution that addresses root causes, not just symptoms, and we urge Illinois legislators to adopt it for the benefit of Chicago's students and the city's future.

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