

VIEWPOINTS

Editorials • Opinions • Letters to the Editor



The mission of the Southwestern College Sun is to serve its campuses and their communities by providing information, insights and stimulating discussions of news, activities and topics relevant to our readers. The staff strives to produce a newspaper that is timely, accurate, fair, interesting, visual and accessible to readers. Though The Sun is a student publication, staff members ascribe to the ethical and moral guidelines of professional journalists.

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College Media Association National College Newspaper of the Year 2020, 22	
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ONGOING CORRUPTION POISONS OUR COLLEGE

Southwestern College never seems to learn its lesson. Crime doesn't pay nor does covering up crime. When a crime is committed, the perpetrator must be brought to justice, not protected, even if that person is an administrator. Especially if the person is an administrator. Yet our college's never-ending cycle of corruption tromps on, crushing our reputation under its jackboots.

This institution's woeful history of unethical and often criminal behavior in its top ranks is sickening. The ATM scandal is not an anomaly. It is business as usual, the latest in a long series of sleazy activity that seems to be handed down from administration to administration.

The brazen theft of an ATM machine by three employees of the SC Grounds Department – including manager Juan Chavez – is the kind of jaw dropping story no one would believe if it was not real. Chavez, Efrain Correa and Abdon Hernandez-Jimenez used a fork lift to pry an ATM machine loaded with money for FAFSA students from the floor of the Student Center building. It was carted to the Grounds shop, forced open and emptied of \$9,600.

Hernandez-Jimenez, the expendable hourly employee, was immediately terminated, the sacrificial lamb of the trio. The penalty for Correa, a full-time college employee, was five months paid leave and his resignation.

The penalty for Chavez? A free pass to a full retirement. Seriously.

It gets worse. College administrators kept the ATM incident tightly under wraps since September and might have gotten away with it had it not been for a laudatory governing board proclamation honoring the disgraced manager.

"...BE IT PROCLAIMED, that Juan Chavez is deserving of recognition for their dedicated years and services, and deserves the commendation of the Governing Board, administrators, faculty, staff and students of the Southwestern Community College District..."

A pat on the back to Chavez and a slap in the face to Southwestern's faculty and staff.

Sadly, reading through past issues of The Sun is a virtual crime log of venality and corruption. Southwestern College is a publically-funded feeding trough for piggish vagabond college administrators hired willy-nilly with scant (or no) background checks. A few examples:

1999: College President Tom Conte is forced to fire his friend, the VP of Academic Affairs, after the VP swats a female student on the butt at a meeting. It was not his first example of hands-on management. Conte secretly paid the VP a \$450,000 "severance package" equal to three years pay. Conte almost got away with this gift of taxpayer funds until The Sun broke the story. He was forced to retire early.

2002: President Serafin Zasueta faced 20 years in prison and a \$1 million fine for spending college funds on a political campaign. He was forced to resign.

2006: The college president and two administrator pals are fired or forced to resign for sexual harassment, a case that cost the taxpayers a small future.

2013: In a case the San Diego County District Attorney called the "worst corruption scandal in San Diego County history," 12 SC administrators, governing board members and contractors they were taking "gifts" from were charged with 165 felonies for corruption, bribery, extortion, perjury and blackmail. All pleaded guilty to avoid prison. Former college president Raj Kumar Chopra and VP of Fiscal Services Nicholas Alioto led the way. Both had been charged with criminal activity at prior jobs. Eventually 22 SC administrators were fired or forced to resign.

2011-22: A series of administrators in the Human Resources department are charged with criminal or unethical behavior and fired or forced to resign.

We could go on and on and on, but the question is, when does it stop?

Southwestern College has a corruption problem that is baked into the culture. It simmers like flickering embers and bursts periodically into a raging inferno. It may subside, but it never goes away. It cannot be extinguished. It decays our reputation and our spirit. It diminishes us.

Corruption at our college reinforces the reputation we minorities face every day in the South County. Corruption and dishonesty is a social stigma we seem to drag from our countries of origin and cannot shake off no matter how honest and ethically we try to lead our lives. It is not a good look for those who look up to us south of our border and it is certainly not a good look for those who already look down on the South County region.

College President Mark Sanchez and former VP of HR Janene McIntyre failed us big time and so did any governing board members and administrators who went along with the disgraceful ATM episode. Heads would roll at a more ethical college.

Good leaders are supposed to make us feel safe to be ethical, contributing members of the organization. While reporting this story we have had more than a dozen employees share other stories of theft and malfeasance, but all declined to go on the record out of fear. When employees fear retaliation for speaking the truth that is clear evidence of poor leadership and a toxic culture. College employees should not be forced to protect corrupt co-workers. We remain hopeful that a few brave employees will bring forth their evidence for the record so we can see once and for all how deeply this problem goes.

We are hopeful new trustees Robert Moreno and Corina Soto will raise the ethical standards of our college leadership. It is time to end the quarter century of wagon circling by college administrators who protect each other no matter what. It is time to fiercely stamp out corruption at Southwestern College and it has to start from the top.

Our community deserves better. Voters in the Southwestern Community College District have passed a series of construction bonds to tax themselves nearly \$1 billion so far in the 21st century. Our community loves us and needs us, but our leadership routinely betrays and defiles us with cheap venality and sleaziness.

Our leaders are supposed to be role models and people we can look up to. Our leaders are supposed to be people who show us the way forward. Right now, though, we are ashamed of our college leaders for allowing this kind of low grade corruption to roll on.

Our leadership is officially on notice. We are watching and so is our community.

Norma Hernandez in 2011 famously declared "the pay for play days at Southwestern College are over!" It is time for a new leader to declare that corruption in all of its ugly forms is over at Southwestern College and to really mean it.

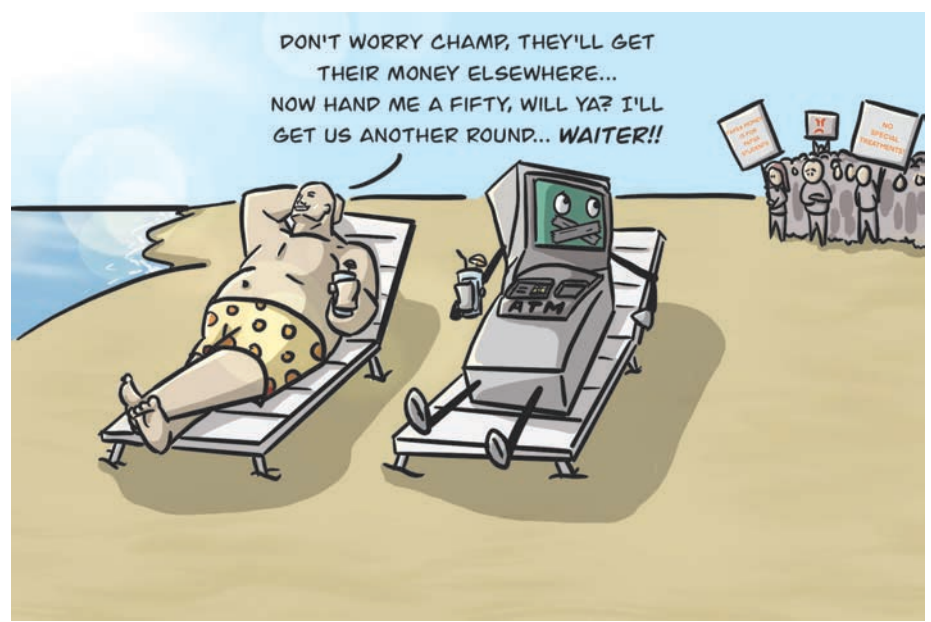


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