

Bakersfield College students rally for president

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Felix Adamo / The Californian

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This is part of the small crowd that gathered at Bakersfield College for an informational rally on the decision to push back a board vote on a contract extension for Bakersfield College President Sonya Christian.

Students wandered in and out of an outdoor campus rally held Wednesday in support of Bakersfield College's embattled president, Sonya Christian.

The rally grew out of community concern over the Kern Community College District board's decision last Thursday to table its vote on a three-year contract and 10.5 percent raise for Christian. But that concern hadn't seemed to trickle down to many of the students walking around campus Wednesday afternoon.

Only a few dozen students, faculty and community members attended the rally. And only two of the 24 students The Californian polled on campus said they had heard about Christian's contract issue. But those at the rally said many of her supporters are students — including many of the 1,100 who signed a petition asking the local oversight board to extend her contract.

One of them is Fitzgerald Graves, who's been a BC student since 2010.

He said part of the reason he's been at the school so long is because before Christian got there, resolving issues in his class schedule took months; financial aid services were subpar; and counselors weren't helpful.

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But mainly Graves said he didn't feel he belonged on campus as a black student.

"You deal with professors telling you, 'if you have to drop this class because it's too hard, that's OK,'" Graves said.

Christian's leadership has helped create a support structure for him, Graves said. She supports organizations specifically established to retain black students and has streamlined student support services.

"She is the president for the student body," Graves said.

Still, district and board leaders say not everyone supports a contract extension for Christian.

Kyle Carter, one of four KCCD trustees who voted to table board consideration of Christian's contract, said in an email Monday he's gotten several calls and emails on the contract issue, and not all from just one side on the contract debate.

"I know that for myself, I've spent a good amount of time trying to understand all the issues at hand, pray about them and act wisely," Carter said.

The Kern Community College District board plans to meet in closed session on Christian's contract Thursday. Leaders of the Bakersfield College Student Government Association, which held the rally, said they are asking droves of students to attend the meeting and show their support for Christian.

Arvin Mayor Pro Tem Jose Gurrola said he'll be there.

The Arvin City Council unanimously approved a resolution thanking Christian Tuesday at special council meeting for her effort to improve access to higher education in Kern County, and Arvin specifically.

Gurrola, who attended the BC rally, said the resolution will be mailed to the chancellor and board members of the Kern Community College District.

He clarified at the rally Wednesday he was not speaking for the city council, but for himself.

He took the stance that Christian should be given a fair contract, and he focused on Christian's leadership in partnering with other schools to invest nearly \$1 million in rural education that benefits Arvin students.

Gurrola called her contract delay "back-room politics."

KCCD Chancellor Sandra Serrano earlier described the delay as having resulted from Christian sharing her employee evaluation with friends. (The Californian later obtained a copy.)

“I offered a new employment agreement for a short duration to urge rapid improvement,” Serrano said in an email to KCCD employees that she made available to The Californian, which published it Wednesday. “The terms of the employment agreement were influenced by, among other things, job performance and evaluation, and ultimately her intentional undermining of the evaluation process.”

Serrano went on to say that by disclosing her confidential job evaluation, Christian “encouraged the KCCD stakeholders to become personally involved in her contract negotiations.”

It was a decision that divided the board and community, Serrano said in her message to employees.

But students who spoke at the rally Wednesday said that division doesn’t extend to students.

Student Government Association President Clayton Fowler said quite the opposite has happened — students are unifying and rallying around their president.

He plans to attend Thursday’s meeting, which begins at 8:30 a.m. and will be held in the Mono Conference Room of the Weill Institute at 2100 Chester Ave.

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