1111412008

Atlantic City Press

Pleasantville.NJ.
Daily 75951

Sund~_ GARDEN STATE97845

PRESS CUPPING Phone:732-942-1616

111111I11111111111111111I111111111111

Panel: Candidates respon~ible

for negative attacks in campaigns • Panel discussion at Richard

Stockton College explores ways to

restore civility in politics.

By JOHN FRQONJIAN Political editor, 609-272-7213

A little more than a year ago, Democrat
Jim Whelan had just beaten former
Republican Sen. James "Sonny" McCullough in a bitter campaign for state Senate. Both needed to get away. And two days after the election, both were sur-pnsedto discover they were sitting across from one another on a plane to Florida. They talked about their campaign, in which they had alternately accused the other of being tax-lovers, a patronage hack, a machine boss puppet, a backs tab-her, a mob associate, and other bad things.

"IfI had done the dirty tricks my advis- ers wanted me to do, I would have beaten
you by 5,000 votes," McCullough recalled saying to Whelan.
McCullough, mayor of Egg Harbor Tovvnship, said his consultant proposed doing robo-calls in which voters would be

asked to get five friends to vote for then-Assemblyman Whelan. A second call would say the same thing. A third call would thank voters for telling friends to vote for Whelan.

"That's not so bad," Whelan reportedly said.
"Yeah, but the first call would have been made at 2 a.m.," McCullough said. "The second call would be at 3.a.m. And the third would beat 5 a.m."

McCullough relayed the story at Richard StocktQJl College on Thursday at a panel discussion on civility in politics-or the lack of it - to say campaign con-sultants often push candidates to attack more harsWy than they want. Five pan-elists agreed the harsh tone of election campaigns is turning the public - and public servants - away from politics.
"Sonny and 1 were both guilty," said Whelan, a former mayor of Atlantic City

who said he and McCullough have long been friends.
The answer, panelists said, is account-ability. Candidates must take charge of their own campaigns, and independent groups and the news media should fact-check allegations to hold candidates

accountable.

Most of the group said factual criti-cisms of an opponent's record are fail game. But character assassinations and phony charges are not.
The hour-long forum was sponsored by Stockton's William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy.
Richard Mroz, former counsel to Gov. Christie Whitman, said consultants pro-posed attacking Democrat Jim Mc-Greevey when Whitman ran for re-elec-tion in 1997.'

"They said, "We can filet this guy like a fish,'" said Mroz, who coordinated John McCain's New Jersey campaign.
They weren't even talking about his homosexuality, just his legislative record. But Whitman refused to campaign that way, Mroz said.
The panelists said they wished big money could legally be removed from politics because its effect is corrosive.
"The public gets such a negative view of politics," said Stockton professor Alan Arcuri. "I can't get

Staff photo by Edward Lea

e.gg Ha'rbor Township Mayor James ~SGnnY'McCullough Ustens to.stateSen. Jim Whetan, O-Atlantic, speak