

A Unified Faculty Model

The Remedy for Decades of Failed Education “Reform” in the California Community Colleges¹

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The California Community Colleges (CCC) system plays a pivotal role as an engine for economic and social mobility in California and as a driver for the fifth largest economy in the world.

The system’s 116 colleges provide high-quality, accessible, and affordable higher education for the largest and most diverse student population in the United States. In the past two decades, the CCC system has undergone significant “reform,”¹ narrowing students’ educational opportunities and shrinking the student body by over one million students.² During this period, the CCC system’s student outcomes have declined, stagnated, or only slightly improved despite decades of “reform” efforts.³ Furthermore, the system has not successfully met its transfer, employment, or equity goals over the past five years.⁴ After decades of narrowing the student experience, defunding instructional programs and curriculum, and deprofessionalizing the faculty, the CCC system “reform” has failed the California public.

It is time for the California Community Colleges to address the hypocrisy at the heart of its institutions: decades of disinvestment from the faculty and thus, students. Transitioning from a two-tiered to a nontiered—unified faculty—model will better serve the students, colleges, and state of California. The concept

of a unified faculty emphasizes the elimination of the two employment tiers—part- and full-time faculty⁵—to create a nontiered structure. This model is based on faculty and collegewide unity as opposed to the current structure that has produced a divided faculty, inequitable service to students, and stagnant or diminishing student outcomes. Presently, the K–12 system and Vancouver Model are structured around a unified, nontiered faculty model. See Appendix A for a brief history of the two-tiered model and Appendix B for a discussion of the Vancouver model.

The over-reliance on an under-supported part-time faculty in the community colleges dates back to the 1970s during the era of neoliberal reform and the beginning of the corporatization of higher education in the United States. Research shows that the systemic over-reliance on part-time faculty correlates closely with declining rates of student success. Furthermore, when faculty are equitably compensated (as full-time faculty in the current model) and thus able to provide high-quality student-faculty engagement in and out of the classroom, students succeed at significantly higher rates (Astin, 1999; Burgess & Samuels, 2010; Ernst, 1997, 2002; Fain, 2014; Fichtenbaum, 2013; Fischer, 2005; Freeland, 1998; Gilbert, 2019; Heath et al., 2022; Jacoby, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Pilati, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1982; Tinto, 1987, 1989).

1 “Reform” appears in quotations due to the fact that reform is often a misnomer when applied to higher education (Ravitch, 2020). Since the 1970s, neoliberal policies of deregulation, privatization, and defunding have not reformed but rather, have disrupted and disinvested from public education. (Isserles, 2021; MacLean, 2017; Mettler, 2014; Ravitch, 2020; Rein et al., 2021).

2 Since 2008, California’s population has increased by 2.5 million people. In this context, the CCC system’s student body should have increased. According to the system’s record of annual student headcount, the headcount for the system was 2,772,141 in the 2007–2008 academic year and 1,833,568 in the 2021–2022 academic year. See the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office Data Mart.

3 Over the past two decades, the statewide retention rate has decreased by 3% for remedial courses, increased by 1% for credit courses, and increased by 1% for vocational courses. The statewide course-level success rate has decreased by 2% for remedial courses, increased by 0.5% for credit courses, and increased by 2% for vocational courses. The rate of degree and certificate completion by ethnicity fell significantly short of the Vision’s ten-year completion goal. For student outcomes data, see the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office Data Mart. See Schlueter (2024) for a discussion of the need for student support to address the stagnation of success rates.

4 The Chancellor’s Office Vision for Success (2017–2022) set out to increase (by certain percentages) certificate and degree attainment, the number of transfer students, and the percent of career education students employed in their field. The Vision also aimed to close equity gaps by 40% within five years and 100% in ten years. The system did not meet its equity gap reduction goals for African American, Native American, Latinx, or Pacific Islander students, nor did it meet its transfer or career education student goals. While the system did meet its certificate and degree attainment goal, this metric is deceiving in the context of the system’s loss of over one million of its most vulnerable students. The majority of students who were able to persist and achieve degrees and certificates were the most college prepared and economically advantaged.

5 There has been much debate about the appropriate terminology for the category of faculty who teach off the tenure track. See Hoeller (2014) and Fure-Slocum and Goldstene (2024) for discussions of the problematic assumptions inherent in the terms part-time, adjunct, contingent, lecturer, and non-tenure track. This paper uses “part-time” to remain consistent with the terminology used by most of the faculty organizations and unions of the California Community Colleges.

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Over the past 40 years, only 30% of the CCC faculty have been hired as full-time employees, while the remaining 70% have been hired as part-time employees who teach the majority of the system's courses.⁶ Part-and full-time faculty have the same qualifications and teach the same courses

and students. Nonetheless, part-time faculty do not have job security, often teach at several different colleges, and are not compensated equally for the same work as their full-time counterparts (Fure-Slocum & Goldstene, 2024; Gilbert, 2019; Hoeller, 2014). This inherently inequitable two-tiered structure was never meant to be permanent; has deprived students and colleges of having a fully supported faculty; and has mostly remained hidden from the public (Simpson, 2014).

In 1988, AB 1725 (Vasconcellos), the landmark community college bill, codified in California Education Code the goal to have 75% of its credit instruction taught by full-time faculty. Given its over-reliance on an under-supported part-time faculty, the system has never come close to achieving this goal. The fact that the state has established such a goal, however, signifies California's long-standing awareness of the problem and interest in addressing the inequities of the two-tiered model.

A unified faculty model will ensure that all faculty are paid on the same compensation scale, receive proportional benefits, and have the opportunity to earn job security. This model will enable and compensate all faculty to engage with their students in and out of the classroom and actively participate in the life of their college and community.

⁶ For faculty headcount data, see the Chancellor's Office Data Mart.

A unified faculty model will vastly improve student success rates and the efficiency of the California Community Colleges by: 1) prioritizing student-faculty engagement in and out of the classroom; 2) ensuring a culture of academic freedom; 3) increasing the amount of faculty who participate in college governance and institutional effectiveness processes; 4) fulfilling the system's civic engagement mission to prepare the residents of California to participate in the state's democratic processes; and 5) increasing college and systemwide fiscal stability.

A Unified Faculty Will Revitalize California's Community Colleges

For millions of Californians, community colleges remain the only pathway toward economic survival, skills building and retraining, transfer to four-year institutions, English learning, connection with community, participation in democracy, and the formation and pursuit of dreams. The "reform" era has chipped away at the mission of the California Community Colleges without giving the public a chance to deliberate over the repurposing of its colleges. Remedial instruction, English as a second language programs, and lifelong learning courses have been cut or severely reduced without public debate.

A unified faculty will revitalize the quality and purpose of a community college education by providing equitable student access to all faculty, a culture of academic freedom, and a renewed commitment to civic engagement. A unified faculty will take collective responsibility for participating in the system's governance at college and statewide levels. Finally, this model will promote fiscal stability by streamlining processes around hiring, evaluation, and budget planning.

High-quality, ongoing student-faculty engagement in and out of the classroom is the key ingredient for student success in college and beyond (Astin, 1999; Burgess & Samuels, 2010; Fain, 2014; Gilbert, 2019; Heath et al., 2022; Jacoby, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Terenzini et al., 1982; Tinto, 1987).⁷

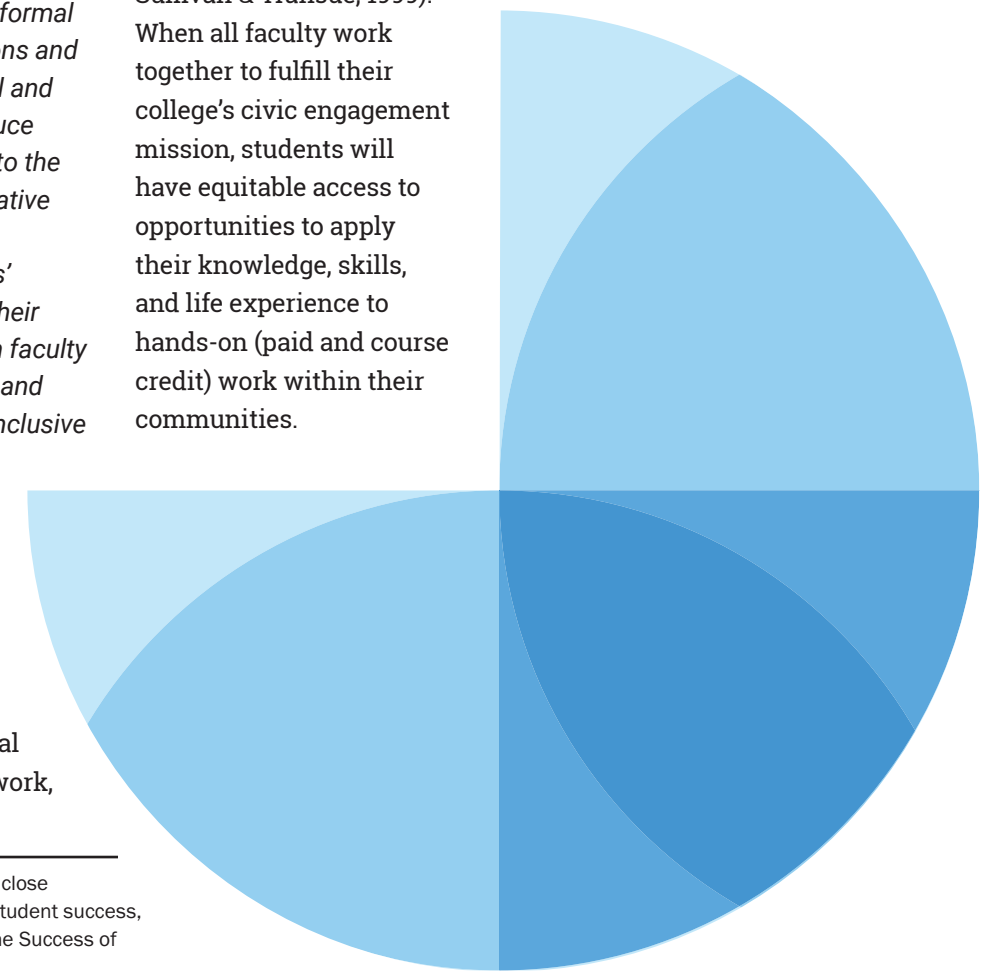
The overwhelming evidence indicates that a diverse, often underprepared, and economically challenged student population requires personal mentoring, counseling, and ongoing guidance in support of courses of study and personal aspirations. Persistent informal and collegial interactions with faculty provide students with necessary levels of support and personal mentoring. In addition to intellectual engagement with the subject matter both in and outside the classroom, such interactions—from formal sponsorships of student organizations and letters of recommendation to casual and spontaneous conversations—introduce an inspirational support structure into the lives of students during a transformative phase in their lives...[S]uch student/faculty interactions enrich educators' understanding and appreciation of their students, and by extension, heighten faculty involvement within their institutions and profession, thus contributing to an inclusive and interactive college culture for everyone—students, faculty, and staff. (Gilbert, 2019, p. iii)

A unified faculty model prioritizes student-faculty engagement, reducing disparities in student access to academic support, office hours, mentorship opportunities, supplemental instruction, independent studies, fieldwork,

and engaged civic and community learning. A unified faculty will be able to participate in activities that are critical for student persistence and goal completion, including student orientations, student governance, student clubs, research teams, joint conference presentations, campus receptions and celebrations, and community events.

California's community colleges play an essential role preparing the residents of California to become active participants in the state's democratic processes at all levels—community engagement, civic engagement, and leadership development in the workplace, communities, and local and state governance. Colleges' commitment to civic engagement is one of the core tenets for democracy to function (Colby et al., 2003; Ehrlich, 2000; Sullivan & Transue, 1999).

When all faculty work together to fulfill their college's civic engagement mission, students will have equitable access to opportunities to apply their knowledge, skills, and life experience to hands-on (paid and course credit) work within their communities.

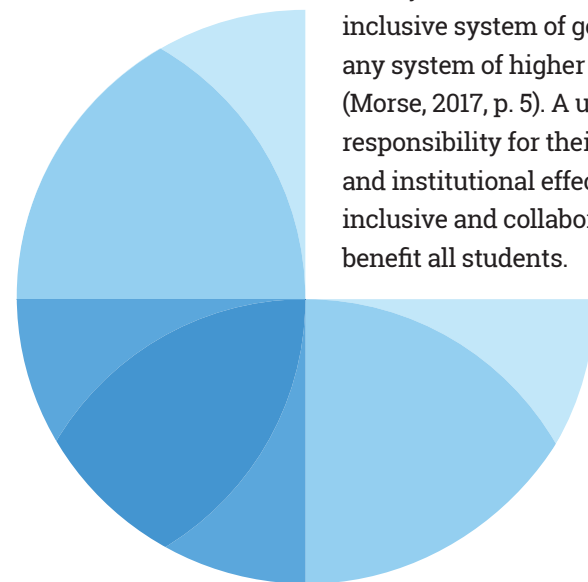


⁷ For a thorough review of the literature about the close correlation of student-faculty engagement with student success, see Why Faculty Matter: The Role of Faculty in the Success of Community College Students (p. 26–49).

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In today’s political climate, the CCC system must actively protect its core value of academic freedom so that students and faculty are free to express and explore ideas without risk of interference or punishment. A unified faculty model will ensure that academic freedom remains a cornerstone of students’ educational experience. Under the current model, part-time faculty do not have job security protecting them from administrative interference. A unified faculty will be empowered to explore diverse perspectives, challenging students to think critically and engage in thoughtful discourse. Academic freedom enables students to be exposed to a wide range of ideas, beliefs, and cultures, creating a rich, inclusive, and democratic learning environment.

Faculty leadership is necessary to ensure the CCC system’s high-quality education and future growth. California’s community colleges rely on faculty leadership and participation for their governance, strategic planning, and assessment at student, curricular, program, and institutional levels. Since the signing of AB 1725 (Vasconcellos, 1988) into law, the CCC system has become “perhaps the most inclusive system of governance enjoyed by any system of higher education in the world” (Morse, 2017, p. 5). A unified faculty will share responsibility for their college’s governance and institutional effectiveness, fostering an inclusive and collaborative culture that will benefit all students.



8 For student demographic data, see California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office. (2023). Senate Budget Committee 1 On Education Finance.

...[F]ull-time tenured faculty dedicate increasing hours to the institutional needs of the college, such as serving on governance committees, preparing program review reports, writing and updating curriculum, compiling accreditation documentation, participating on hiring committees, observing and assessing classes..., and reviewing tenure candidates, all in conjunction with their need to maintain currency in both pedagogical approaches and subject matter content. While all of these requirements constitute important and essential work, on most community college campuses, there are simply not enough full-time tenured faculty to address so many needs, and thus, faculty interaction time with students suffers. (Gilbert, 2019, p. iii)

A unified faculty is increasingly necessary to provide institutional memory, governance, assessment work, and leadership in addition to their vital work with students. While college administrators and trustees frequently come and go, the faculty and staff form the heart of every college.

Since 2020, the global pandemic and its ongoing effects have severely impacted the lives of the students and employees of the CCC system. “[T]he effects of illness, economic turmoil, and institutional restructuring widened existing inequities along racial, class, and gender lines on campuses, in communities, and globally, compounding longer-standing trends that the Great Recession already had accelerated” (Fure-Slocum & Goldstene, 2024, p. 12). The majority of California’s community college students are part-time (74%), students of color (70%), economically disadvantaged (66%), and working learners (64%) while many of its students are first-generation (35%) and noncitizens (14%).⁸ In a recent statewide survey asking previously enrolled

students why they dropped classes, they said they had to prioritize work (33%) and their mental health (30%); could not keep up with the pace of classes (29%); needed to care for dependents (23%); could not afford course materials (19%); and could not learn in an online environment (19%).⁹ The majority of CCC students are working and caring for family while pursuing their college education.¹⁰

Now more than ever, an equitably compensated, unified faculty is needed to spend more time engaging with students in and out of the classroom, offering students the support they need to succeed in their courses and beyond. During this era of existential social, economic, and environmental crises, a unified faculty is the key to bringing back California’s community college students and revitalizing the nation’s largest system of higher education.

A Unified Faculty Will Remedy Decades of Failed Education “Reform”

Community college education is a transformative process that nurtures critical thinking, creativity, empathy, civic engagement, personal growth, and a desire for lifelong learning, equipping students with the skills and mindset necessary to navigate the complex and rapidly changing world. Not only do CCC students gain the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed as individuals; they become inspired to contribute to the progress and prosperity of their larger communities.

[W]hen the United States was founded, public officials promoted higher education because it mattered for the broader public. They strongly believed that by encouraging and subsidizing advanced learning, the nation would foster the knowledge, creativity, dynamism, leadership, and skills that would spur economic growth, technological innovation, and social advances. (Mettler, 2014, p. 191)

Because education matters for the broader public now more than ever, it is time for California to embrace a new approach to ensure all Californians have access to higher education—for themselves and the survival of our communities during these precarious times.

Imagine how a unified faculty will transform college campuses into equitable and efficient teaching and learning environments in service to the students, community colleges, and state of California. Investing in a nontiered, unified faculty model will remedy the CCC system that is currently struggling to bring back the millions of students who have been pushed out of their colleges. Prioritizing the faculty’s vital role in students’ lives, California will set a precedent for a truly inclusive and equitable educational system that will empower millions of students to positively impact the economy and democracy of California, the nation, and the world.

For a comprehensive list of resources and appendices related to this article, please visit www.FACCC.org/UnifiedFaculty. ■

9 For an analysis of statewide college attendance, see California Community Colleges in Partnership with the RP Group. (2022). Statewide College Attendance Survey.

10 For a discussion of the meaning of a college education from the perspective of community college students, see Isserles’ Chapter 5 (2021) based on interviews with students and her extensive classroom experience.

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