

# The One-Tier Concept for Advancing Student Success and Achieving Faculty Equality

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## The Problem

**There's a fundamental weakness in our California Community College system that impairs student success. Fortunately, there's also a prospective solution. At the core of these harms is student success.**

The problem is the two-tier division of faculty in the California Community Colleges. It harms students, the faculty, the public, and the prosperity of the state. Student success and faculty equality are intertwined in a symbiotic sense. Ongoing reform efforts by the State Chancellor's Office and legislators, however, are almost exclusively focused on students. Extending these reforms to eliminate the two-tier faculty structure would significantly advance the legislative goal of student success by providing students with consistent access to—and assistance from—all of their instructors.

California's 116 community colleges fulfill a critical function in generating the state's economic prosperity and enabling social mobility for its residents. For decades, the colleges have provided access to affordable, top-notch higher education and career technical training for the country's largest and most diverse student population. Beneficiaries of our community colleges include state legislators, judges, civic leaders, nurses and other medical technicians, police officers, and firefighters—the full span of professionals.

What makes the benefits for students and the state possible is the unequal two-tier faculty structure in our community colleges, and the resulting exploitation of the majority of community college instructors. Despite their decades of teaching experience, about 70% of community college faculty members are classified as “temporary,” at-will employees. They receive lower compensation, no job security, and minimal (if any) benefits in contrast to their full-time counterparts. Further, their work hours are often capped at 67% of full-time equivalency, forcing many lower-tier instructors to teach at multiple community colleges to earn a livable wage.

Consequently, community college students have limited access to these equally qualified instructors and counselors, hindering their academic success. Both students and second-tier faculty deserve better.

## The Benefits of a One-Tier Faculty for Students

### The Importance Of Student-Faculty Interaction

A California community college student's mother, happy that her daughter was transferring to a university of her choice, wrote in an opinion essay (San Francisco Chronicle, May 6, 2024): “[O]ur daughter had classes as small as 20 students taught by a professor. Her peers in the UC system had the same class, with over 100 students, taught by a teaching assistant. Sophia's teachers were available during office hours, and her community college counselor was amazing. She met with her counselor multiple times each year to make sure the courses she signed up for were transferable to the four-year colleges she hoped to attend.”

College student DuShane noted in a student opinion study, “I'm not just another student on [my professor's] class roster; I feel humanized as a student.” He explained that he felt “seen” by the professor who had shared with the class her history as a first-generation college student, adding, “I want to applaud every student here who's BIPOC, queer, first gen. I am here for you as a resource, or if you just want to chat or talk about the course material” (Ezarik, 2022).

The interactions of faculty with these two students correspond with the consensus among several researchers—that consistent student-faculty engagement, both within and outside of the classroom in sustained intellectual and career mentorship, is a sound predictor of student and institutional success (Cox et al., 2010; Hagler, 2023; Kezar and Maxey, 2014; Kuh et al., 2006; Micari and Pazos, 2012; Ott et al., 2019; Sparks, 2019). The availability of professors enables students to get to know them as guides, to feel comfortable in asking for individual academic support,

and for professors to provide useful feedback as they come to understand students' strengths and weaknesses.

Analysts at the Review of Educational Research examined data from 46 studies and found that strong teacher-student relationships strengthened almost all the measurable aspects of student academic success, reflected in both short- and long-term improvements. These relationships led to more student academic engagement, increased class attendance, better grades, fewer disruptive behaviors and suspensions, and lower school dropout rates. These effects remained strong even after the researchers controlled for differences in students' individual, family, and school backgrounds (Sparks, 2019).

Furthermore, Hagler (2023) concluded from his study that closeness, frequency of contact, the degree of college-related support extended to students, and presence of mentors with high educational attainment provided the most support for students with college-related issues, even with relatively infrequent contact. He also found that in making the transition to higher education, first-generation college students in his study received more active mentoring from adults with educational capital. These findings reflect the needs of our ethnically, racially, and economically diverse and large first-generation student population, and underscore the significance of creating a one-tier system conducive to student-faculty engagement.



>> continued on page 10



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### Critical Thinking and Academic Freedom

Critical thinking is widely accepted as an essential skill for student learning and social development as citizens. Academic freedom enables students to engage in intellectual debate and critical thinking without fear of censorship or retaliation. Instructors initiate and moderate such debates in the classroom to enhance students' critical thinking. This encouragement to articulate their ideas can boost their ability to advance academically, professionally, and civically in our messy, complicated world. However, second-tier instructors are typically denied full academic freedom as untenured instructors. They lack the job security necessary to guarantee protection from reducing the opportunities for students to inquire into—and explore—unpopular ideas with all of their instructors.

## Faculty

### Second-Tier, Part-Time Faculty

The headline of a student-written article at DeAnza College read, “Part-time faculty treated as second-class citizens. Fewer resources make it more difficult for part-timers to serve students” (Salam, March 24, 2024). It captures the core of the two-tier story.

California State Auditor Grant Parks highlighted several important facts about the differences between full-time and part-time faculty positions in a 2023 report (State Auditor, 2023).

- Instructors are hired as either “full-time” or “part-time” employees. However, these employment statuses are not exclusively determined by teaching hours.
- Part-time instructors are classified as “temporary” employees and receive fewer employee benefits despite long durations of employment. In 2021, the Chancellor’s Office estimated that the average cost for compensating and providing benefits to a full-time faculty member was around \$131,000. In contrast, the average cost for a part-time faculty member teaching a full load of 15 credits, who typically would not receive benefits, was approximately \$45,000—a staggering \$86,000 difference.
- Full-time faculty members are hired with the expectation that they will gain tenure and permanent employment within about four years.

- Employing part-time faculty gives college administrators more flexibility to adapt to changing educational demands in specific fields, but creates significant impediments for part-time faculty, reducing their ability to offer the support their students need.

The state auditor also noted: “Part-time faculty members have less support from the college than full-time faculty members and are given fewer responsibilities. For example, part-time faculty members are not required to hold office hours or make themselves available to students outside class time. Many part-time faculty members teach at multiple colleges during the same academic period and thus are less likely to be involved in the activities of a single campus.”

The state auditor cited several conditions that impede the ability of part-time faculty to adequately support students academically:

- Compared to full-time faculty members, part-time instructors may not know their instructional assignments until shortly before the term begins, which may limit their time to prepare course materials.
- Part-time instructors are less able to dedicate the same amount of time to advising students as full-time faculty.
- Part-time instructors are less likely to have a designated office space, making it more difficult to meet with students outside of class.
- Students who take an introductory course taught by a part-time instructor are less likely to sign up for a second course in the same field.
- Part-time instructors are less likely than full-time counterparts to use high-impact educational practices that are likely to engage students, such as referrals to tutoring services (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014).

Faculty working conditions are student learning conditions. These disparities, created by the two-tier system, constitute a disadvantage to students.

### Full-Time Faculty

Full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty members who occupy the first tier of the faculty structure, as noted in the State Auditor’s Report, are granted job security as permanent employees, proportionately high levels of compensation and benefits in comparison to their “temporary” second-tier counterparts, and, as academic tenure-track instructors, bear a disproportionately high burden in shared governance duties. They are also denied the opportunity to reduce this burden by including the shared governance skills and ideas that part-time counterparts can contribute to enrich a college’s educational environment.

## The Inequality

### Ethical Considerations

Both full-time and part-time faculty members typically have master’s degrees. However, while full-time instructors are paid for 40-hour weeks that include work outside the courses they teach, part-time instructors are “compensated almost exclusively for the hours they are in the classroom,” noted Wendy Brill-Wynkoop, president of the Faculty Association of California Community Colleges (Peele, 2021). The damaging consequences of the inequality for part-time faculty are financial, professional, emotional, and moral (Curtis et al., 2016).

### The Solution

Seventy percent of California community college faculty members are bottom-tier, at-will, “temporary” employees who collectively teach most of the courses. They frequently flit among two or more colleges to earn enough to live, while lacking the time and resources they need to guide students on each campus to the best of their abilities. A brave new approach is required to end the inequality in the faculty structure, one that will vastly improve our colleges’ teaching and learning conditions (Hoeller, 2014). The Vancouver Community College (VCC) Faculty System in British Columbia, Canada, offers an example of a framework with a series of tested guidelines to consider for inclusion in a California Community Colleges one-tier faculty structure.

From their first day of employment, VCC’s faculty members benefit from these key one-tier provisions:

- One faculty job classification
- One pay scale
- Pro-rata workload with scheduling by seniority
- Fair step placement
- Absolute pay equality for part-time faculty, fully pro-rata
- One hiring process per career, with detailed and grievable evaluation procedures
- One academic freedom provision for all
- Harassment and human rights protection
- All union rights and membership rights
- Accrual of right of first refusal (ROFR) after 120 cumulative days
- Seniority with the first contract, with a mandatory contract after three days
- Accrual of pension vesting, mandatory after earning more than \$34,000
- Status and seniority maintenance during maternity or paternity leave
- Automatic incorporation of individual faculty members into “regular” status, ensuring job security and seniority (Cosco, 2024)

This model measures student success by tracking post-college employment rates, which stand at 90%, and student satisfaction with their education, which stands at 93% (Colleges and Institutes Canada, n.d.).

### How to Get There

“Program for Change” by Jack Longmate and Frank Cosco (2016) is a broad prospectus with critical, theoretical and practical ideas to improve the academic work lives of part-time and contingent faculty, higher education as a whole, the success of students, and our future as a society. Longmate and Cosco state: “The Program for Change is not meant for employers or those who would resist change; it is meant to provide ideas to all those working to reform the academic workplace into one that truly embodies the values of equity, justice, and commitment to providing the highest possible quality of education to all students.”

Longmate and Cosco suggest a strategy they call regularization to implement the reforms. This approach involves elevating the lower-tier faculty’s rights, salary, and job security to a level of normal equity. The authors distinguish this method from the commonly proposed conversions of a limited number of contingent positions into new tenure-track roles, which they argue neglects the majority of faculty by leaving their working conditions unaltered. Instead, their strategy of regularization aims to create a path for educators to have fulfilling careers without necessarily obtaining tenure. Longmate and Cosco envision this process occurring in stages, with either no additional costs or only minor, one-time expenses spread over time.

Longmate and Cosco emphasize that the “Program for Change” is not a prescriptive document but a broad, detailed prospectus based on their vision of achieving an equitable workplace. The Vancouver Community College System reflects this vision (Longmate & Cosco, 2016).

### Conclusion

The one-tier faculty system we envision for the California Community Colleges will create a fair and equitable educational environment for students and faculty. It will strengthen teaching and learning conditions, restore respect and professionalism to the faculty as a whole, and enable our student population—in all its diversity—to thrive, while establishing a precedent for other community college systems throughout the country to adopt. ■