

FADING *Guardians*

DECLINING FACULTY LEADERSHIP

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A LONG TIME AGO, IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY...

...my undergraduate institution, the University of St. Andrews, was founded in 1413 as a corporation of masters and students. Historian R.G. Cant writes in “The University of St. Andrews - A Short History”: “All were partners in the craft of scholarship” and “All this was essentially under the control of the faculties.”

Some might argue that the recent Trump “Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education” is merely the latest manifestation of a 600-year, worldwide decline in faculty authority and leadership in higher education. In our much younger California Community Colleges system, there are many examples of how the faculty leadership role has eroded over recent years. Three of those areas were the subject of 2025 FACCC Policy Committee papers: “Protecting the 50% Law,” “The Evolving Mission of the California Community Colleges”, and “The Role of the CCCCCO in Upholding Education as a Public Good.” This article examines these and other related developments and explores how many seemingly unconnected changes have contributed to the decline of the faculty leadership role.

BACKGROUND

The high point for faculty leadership in our system came in the years following the passage of AB 1725 (Vasconcellos.) This landmark legislation sought to remake the California Community Colleges from an afterthought of K-12 to one of three partners in California’s higher education landscape. It gave local academic senates primary responsibility for making recommendations to local college governing boards on matters concerning curriculum and academic standards. The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges played a corresponding role at the state policy level by advising the system’s Board of Governors and participated, along with other statewide faculty groups, including FACCC, in the Consultation Council. In its best years, the Consultation Council was a forum where informed discussion led to thoughtful, effective implementation of solutions that respected faculty leadership and benefited students and the public good.

PUBLIC GOOD

In “The Role of the CCCCCO in Upholding Education as a Public Good,” FACCC’s Policy Committee described how the Chancellor’s Office is risking failure in its role of protecting the wider public good and how the Consultation Council has, at times, prioritized initiatives aligned with external stakeholders, including the technology and student loan industries. Donors to the Foundation for California Community Colleges exert excessive and undocumented influence on governance and policy discussions, and private foundations and corporations set the system agenda by funding nonprofit advocacy groups. FACCC has called on the Chancellor’s Office to immediately implement transparent consultation processes that prioritize the voices of faculty, students, and system stakeholders over external corporate interests, to demonstrate accountability for public funds and protect the open access that originally defined the system and its multiple missions. Discredited corporate efficiency measures are used to attack open access.

NARROWING MISSION

One dramatic effect of the failure to uphold the general public good is the significant narrowing of the mission as described in the FACCC Policy Committee’s “The Evolving Mission of California Community Colleges.” The 1960s Master Plan for Higher Education intended that the “California Community Colleges were to admit any student capable of benefiting from instruction.” Over the intervening years, heroic efforts were made to improve access and inclusion, diversity and equity and resultant success for all students. According to the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office Data Mart, in 2007, the system served 2.7 million students.

However, recent changes, spearheaded by outside special-interest foundations, have focused on graduation and transfer as the only worthwhile goals, resulting in a narrowed curriculum that neglects the diverse needs of the broader student body. In

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particular, the reduction of basic skills development in English and math limits students' options. As a result, many students have been turned away, and enrollment figures have decreased dramatically. Other students have enrolled in classes for which they were underprepared, failed and gave up. Other fundamental missions, such as workforce education and lifelong learning, have been severely compromised.

For more details on how education-philanthropist foundations created decades of policy designed to shrink and disinvest from California's community colleges, see former FACCC President Debbie Klein's paper, "How the Austerity Agenda Disappeared Over a Million California Community College Students: A Faculty Perspective."

“IN ADDITION TO DEVALUING THE FACULTY ROLE IN CURRICULUM DESIGN AND STUDENT EVALUATION, THE USE OF DUBIOUS METRICS FROM OUTSIDE GRANT-FUNDED SOURCES PRODUCED AN ADDITIONAL PROBLEM.

INAPPROPRIATE METRICS

Another development, clearly evident in the basic skills restructuring, is the creation of spurious metrics tailored to demonstrate preordained success in selected policy implementations. The "throughput metric" developed for AB 705 (2017) and AB 1705 (2022), both authored by Assemblymember Jacqui Irwin, is a notable example. By design, it was unlikely to show anything other than increased throughput, as overall student enrollment rose dramatically. At the same time, no metric was created to capture the large number of students who dropped out or never enrolled because the courses they needed were no longer offered. Instead, as reflected in testimony to the AB 1705 Oversight Committee, some students were effectively told they did not belong in college.

This pattern of relying on inappropriate or incomplete metrics was evident earlier in the student outcomes measures mandated by the U.S. Department of Education and implemented by accrediting agencies, with varying degrees of enthusiasm. A narrowly defined full-time graduation rate, for example, was proposed as a benchmark for ranking and identifying "unsuccessful" colleges, despite having little practical relevance to the diverse missions of community colleges.

The latest such trendsetter metric is "Return on Investment," which treats education as a purely financial transaction and is heavily skewed toward colleges located in wealthy neighborhoods with wealthy local scholarship donors.

THE 50% LAW

In addition to devaluing the faculty role in curriculum design and student evaluation, the use of dubious metrics from outside grant-funded sources produced an additional problem. To compete for a rotating cast of new grants and to meet the exponentially increasing demand for data and so-called accountability, colleges hired legions of junior administrators who make no direct contribution to students or learning. This bloated the administrative budget and correspondingly reduced the percentage of the budget that actually provides high-quality, faculty-student interactions—the very thing that has consistently been shown to improve student success.

Administrator groups repeatedly seek to overturn the California Community Colleges' 50% law designed to protect colleges' core instructional mission. The FACCC Policy Committee's paper "Protecting the 50% Law" noted that only 37% of the statewide community college budget is currently spent on instruction. And some of those colleges claiming a lack of budget flexibility actually show a 35% increase in unused reserve funds. Recent data reveal that student enrollment decreased by 20% between 2012 and 2022, while administrators increased by 40%.

California's community colleges are supposed to be teaching institutions—not for-profit companies.

The current situation ought to worry any taxpayer who might reasonably anticipate even worse steps to come. For a more complete analysis, see the FACCC paper "The 50% Law: A Critical Protection for Quality Education." For many years, FACCC and other faculty groups have urged changes to the 50% law to improve its effectiveness.

CORPORATIZATION AND RESPONSES

Two decades ago, there were many articles about the "corporatization" of American higher education, where market values were relentlessly replacing academic values. See, for example, the entire June 2004 issue of *American Academic*, in which Editor Mitchell Vogel writes that the growing influence of market forces and commercial considerations are shaping what happens in our colleges and universities. He cites the replacement of full-time, tenured faculty positions with low-paid contingent faculty with little or no job security and questionable academic freedom. In retrospect, these components are just one part of the puzzle of long-term declining faculty leadership. Many of the forces causing this decline are beyond faculty control or influence. Under the current regime, any opposition to federal policy changes could result in financial retaliation that worsens the on-the-ground experience for students and faculty alike. College attorneys and accrediting agencies are, understandably but depressingly, cautious in their advice, aiming to stay below the radar. Nevertheless, an obvious faculty response is to persuade every faculty member to increase the time and effort they invest in governance activities: personally, with their local academic senate and union, their statewide organizations and their political representatives. It's too easy as a new faculty member to retreat and say, "I'm only interested in my students and my classroom." But all the examples above constrain the teaching environment and devalue the Academy until, at some point, nothing remains of the founding vision to support, whether that vision started in 1413 or in 1988.

At that point, what's left for the students? ■

READING LIST

Core FACCC Policy Papers

- FACCC Policy Committee (2025) *Protecting the 50% Law: Upholding Quality Education in California Community Colleges*
- FACCC Legislative and Budget Committee (2024) *FACCC Position Paper on California's Community Colleges Funding Models*
- Brill-Wynkoop, Wendy (2024) *The 50% Law: A Critical Protection for Quality Education* (FACCTS, Spring 2024)
- FACCC (2023) *FACCC Supports a One-Tier Faculty System (Unified Faculty Model)*

FACCC Research / Faculty Impact

- Gilbert, G. (2019) *Why Faculty Matter: The Role of Faculty in the Success of Community College Students*
FACCC Education Institute

Enrollment, Access, and Austerity

- California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office *Data Mart (Enrollment Headcount Data, 2007–2022)*
- Klein, Debbie (2024) *How the Austerity Agenda Disappeared Over a Million California Community College Students: A Faculty Perspective*

Corporatization of Higher Education

- American Federation of Teachers (2004) *American Academic, Volume 1, Number 1 (June 2004)*
Academic Values, Market Values: The Shifting Balance
(Edited by Mitchell Vogel)