

Academe Online

The Casualties of the Twenty-First-Century Community College

From eliminating tenure and stifling academic freedom to relying on a corporate curriculum, recent developments at community colleges have taken their toll.

By David McKay Wilson

Brush fires over academic freedom can flare up in the most unexpected places. Southwestern College journalism professor Max Branscomb was handing out programs for a May 2009 awards assembly at the community college's suburban San Diego campus when Raj Chopra, the college's president, strode into the lobby of Mayan Hall. Chopra was apparently fuming over Branscomb's performance as adviser to Southwestern's award-winning student newspaper.

A student editorial had just called for Chopra's resignation, citing a litany of alleged transgressions, including the usurpation of faculty power, financial mismanagement, and disrespect of students.

"After I shook his hand and offered him a program, he grabbed my hand really tight and pulled me close to his body," recalls Branscomb. Chopra, he recounted, told him he was on "a very destructive path" that was bringing shame to Southwestern and would ruin Branscomb's career. He says Chopra suggested they meet off campus to discuss how Branscomb could improve his behavior. He declined. A few months later, shortly after the Society of Professional Journalists had honored him with the Distinguished Teaching in Journalism Award for 2009—the latest in a series of awards over the years from various organizations for his distinguished contributions to teaching and journalism—Branscomb lost his "reassignment" duties, which paid him to serve as newspaper adviser in place of teaching a fifth course.

Chopra, in an e-mail, acknowledged inviting Branscomb to lunch but denied warning Branscomb that he was on a destructive path that would ruin his career.

Whether a job or a lunch invitation, that incident presaged Chopra's haymaker last October, when he suspended three tenured Southwestern faculty members after they joined a student protest against budget cuts that included eliminating hundreds of classes. Two weeks later, the suspensions were rescinded, following an outcry from students, the National Education Association, the American Civil Liberties Union, and Southwestern faculty, the latter of whom received advice from the AAUP's West Coast office in Berkeley and from the staff of Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure in Washington.

Community Colleges in the Spotlight

The contretemps at Southwestern College comes as community colleges across the country take the national stage, coping with surging enrollments in the face of financial constraints caused by our nation's economic downturn.

Academic freedom is currently under threat at many of these public two-year schools, which serve almost one-half of the nation's first-year college students. The growing reliance on part-time faculty exacerbates the problem, with many adjuncts feeling muzzled for fear of losing their jobs. In 1987, 54 percent of community college faculty worked part time. Twenty years later, 69 percent worked part time, compared to 32 percent at four-year colleges, according to a 2007 U.S. Department of Education report. Only 17 percent of community college faculty are in tenure-track positions, with 14 percent in full-time nontenure-track positions.

The problem of academic freedom at community colleges in the twenty-first century is much more than the structural limitations placed on the adjunct faculty. At some of the nation's community colleges, faculty control over curriculum design is threatened by corporations that dictate course material for degree-granting training programs. These programs have become increasingly common tools for local workforce development initiatives. Elsewhere, faculty face growing demands by accrediting agencies to design protocols to test student outcomes, which some fear will lead to a more standardized curriculum. In other institutions, faculty members are asked to adopt a "customer service" approach to teaching, with instructors pressured to make students satisfied

purchasers of their educational product.

Community colleges have become such a central part of the nation's education network—with 1,269 colleges serving close to seven million students, or 43 percent of the nation's undergraduates—that NBC last fall created a prime-time situation comedy called *Community* that is set on a fictional campus, Greendale Community College. President Barack Obama last summer traveled to Macomb Community College, thirty-five miles north of Detroit, to announce his administration's proposal to invest \$12 billion in community colleges over the next decade through its American Graduation Initiative. That money would have been used to upgrade college facilities, develop plans to boost graduation rates, and support the creation of interactive computer software for online learning, but only \$2 billion remained in the bill for community colleges after it passed and emerged from reconciliation.

In the meantime, community college enrollments have been soaring, with many reporting double-digit gains in 2009. Affordability is a major factor. The annual average for tuition and fees at a community college is \$2,544, compared to \$7,020 for four-year public colleges, according to the College Board.

But that affordability is based, in part, on the work of the hundreds of thousands of adjunct faculty members, who live semester by semester teaching for as little as \$1,500 a course. These teachers serve at the pleasure of their administrative superiors, with little recourse. They can lose a teaching assignment without stated cause and are the least visible victims in battles over academic freedom. They don't get fired. They just don't get rehired.

Academic freedom gives faculty members the right to discuss their subject area, including controversial topics, in the classroom. It supports their right to carry out research and publish their findings, even if the subject matter is controversial. And it allows them, as citizens, to speak out on controversial issues, free from institutional censorship or discipline, though recent court rulings have found that public employees, including faculty members, can be disciplined for communications made while carrying out their professional duties. The rights of faculty to determine curriculum and decide what's taught in the classroom are also protected by academic freedom.

Those principles are lovely, but they mean little to a community college adjunct looking for a toehold in the academic world, where a slight misstep could mean no job the next semester. With adjunct faculty predominating at community colleges, course material there has a tendency to become tame, says AAUP president Cary Nelson.

"The most chilling stories I get are from faculty who withhold controversial material from their syllabi," says Nelson. "They don't want students or the administration to get upset."

Student complaints can indeed prove damaging to an instructor's academic career, says Mike Van Meter, an untenured instructor of English at Central Oregon Community College in Bend. He says some adjuncts don't challenge students because they fear negative student evaluations and resulting loss of the courses they teach.

"I recognize some students will hate me if I'm as tough as I need to be," says Van Meter. "A single student complaint can be very scary for some adjuncts. Part-timers don't know if they will work the next term, and they have to pay medical bills, like everyone else. And what would happen if I were to speak up about a college bond measure? The reality is, it could affect the way the college would view my employment."

The 2006 Supreme Court decision in [Garcetti v. Ceballos](#), a case involving the Los Angeles district attorney's office, left open the possibility that faculty speech in the classroom could be subject to a college's or university's internal rules if that speech was made within the scope of a faculty member's official duties. Subsequent lower-court rulings come down on both sides of free-speech rights for faculty. A December 2009 ruling in federal court dismissed the First Amendment claim of a fired Idaho State University professor, Habib Sadid.

And Sadid was tenured. Fears of dismissal are even greater for those without the protections of tenure.

"The notion of academic freedom is a nonissue for most contingent and adjunct faculty," says Earl Yarrington, a tenure-track associate professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland. "They are seen as disposable. They can be thrown away at will by the community college administration and recycled out with the garbage if need arises. The unjust and unequal treatment makes academic freedom an empty term for them."

Charlene Dukes, the president of PGCC, has taught courses as an adjunct professor and maintains that the adjuncts at Prince George's have freedom in their classrooms, within the framework of the college's regulations. Dukes says that contingent faculty, who comprise 57 percent of Prince George's teachers, have representation in

the faculty senate and are considered for full-time tenure-track posts when they open up.

“Adjuncts have a voice and I hope they use it to push for improvements,” says Dukes.

The Battle Rages in Kentucky

But the growing reliance on contingent faculty is a clear threat to academic freedom in U.S. community colleges.

Tenure provides the kind of job security that gives professors like Max Branscomb the general protection to teach his student journalists at Southwestern College how to become fair, aggressive reporters, even if he is punished with a higher teaching load. Those faculty members without tenure are at risk of not being reappointed the following semester.

That’s what happened in 1998 to adjunct instructor Ken Hardy, who wasn’t reappointed at Jefferson Community College in Louisville following student complaints over offensive words spoken in his Introduction to Interpersonal Communications class. One day, his students analyzed words that were used to marginalize minorities and other oppressed groups, which included crude slurs for African Americans and women.

A student complained that using the words violated college policy of prohibiting offensive language in class. Hardy argued the words were illustrations of offensive language but were not used abusively. Before the controversy, the administration had told Hardy he would teach three classes that fall. Following the flap, he was informed that no classes existed for him to teach.

Hardy charged that the refusal of university officials to offer him another class violated his First Amendment rights. A federal appeals panel in 2001 [ruled](#) that Hardy could sue college officials over his claims that they had retaliated against him for the comments made in his classroom. Hardy, forty-five, died of lung cancer in 2002, before the case was reheard by the federal district court. In the ruling it quoted from the Supreme Court’s 1967 decision in *Keyishian v. Board of Regents*, which overturned New York City’s requirement that teachers sign an oath that they were not Communists.

“Our nation is deeply committed to safeguarding academic freedom, which is of transcendent value to all of us, and not merely to the teachers concerned,” the *Keyishian* decision said. “That freedom is therefore a special concern of the First Amendment, which does not tolerate laws that cast a pall of orthodoxy over the classroom.”

The Hardy ruling was in the minds of faculty activists when the Kentucky Community and Technical College System Board of Regents met in March 2009 to consider eliminating tenure for newly appointed faculty members at its sixteen two-year colleges. (The system’s 890 tenured faculty members and an additional 168 on the tenure track would have been grandfathered in under the plan.)

The faculty, affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Local 6010, had mobilized to oppose the measure and arrived at the regents meeting dressed in their AFT T-shirts and holding multicolored placards. The AFT and the AAUP had drafted a joint statement opposing the proposal. The regents were braced for their critics, with fifteen extra security guards on hand and instructions for the faculty to address the media in the “freespeech zone,” a cordoned-off basketball court behind the administration building.

The sixty faculty activists who attended the meeting were told to leave their placards outside. Instead, they were allowed only to hold up 8 1/2 by 11-inch pieces of paper with their “Support Tenure” message, says Barbara Ashley, professor of sociology at Jefferson Community and Technical College and executive director of the Kentucky Community College Faculty and Staff Alliance.

The regents favoring the elimination of tenure argued it would save money and give administrators more flexibility to hire faculty to address the changing needs of the college-age population and Kentucky’s business community.

Paul Callan Jr., an electrical technology professor and board of regents member, told the panel that day that eliminating tenure would lead to fewer discussions on controversial topics. Putting faculty on annual contracts would open up the door for their dismissal without any due process. “Faculty are less likely to enter into discussions and debates on issues that may be deemed sensitive to a college or the system and therefore seen as a liability instead of an asset contributing to constructive criticism,” said Callan, who voted against the proposal. “Due process is thrown out the door and nonrenewal of contract becomes the overhanging threat to faculty input—and that’s wrong.”

Board chair Thomas Zawacki, however, says such fears are outdated. "I think that's old-fashioned thinking," Zawacki says. "In today's environment, with a more enlightened management system in place, I don't believe faculty need to be preoccupied with losing their jobs unless they aren't doing their jobs." The faculty outcry did little to sway the board, which voted ten to four to eliminate tenure. Faculty responded on fifteen of sixteen Kentucky community college campuses by approving resolutions stating that they had "no confidence" in the board of regents. In addition, AFT Local 6010 questioned the vote's legality and asked a state legislator to request an opinion from state attorney general Jack Conway.

The faculty union contended that the 1997 law approving the merger of the state's community colleges with its technical colleges protected tenure rights. In an opinion issued on September 21, Conway agreed. Four days later, the board of regents rescinded its antitenure resolution. The board also asked its Finance, Technology, and Resource Committee to study the standards for granting tenure. Zawacki says the issue is not scheduled for discussion by the committee "in the foreseeable future."

Ashley says faculty leaders continue to be concerned. "We are watching very, very closely," says Ashley. "People here are nervous about academic freedom."

Speaking Out in California

Speaking out as a contingent faculty member also carried risk for Pamela Hanford, who until 2008 was among an estimated four hundred part-time faculty members at Shasta College in Redding, California, where she had taught English composition for eleven years. For her first three years, she had kept a low profile.

Finally, after an issue arose involving delayed paychecks, she decided to become active in the Shasta College Faculty Association, affiliated with the California Teachers Association (CTA). She also became a statewide leader for part-time faculty, serving on CTA's Community College Association board from 2007 to 2009.

She advocated for higher pay for adjunct office hours at Shasta, where the college, unlike most others, has provided extra pay to adjuncts for the time spent meeting with students. That campaign brought increases in the Shasta budget for office-hour payments from \$10,000 to more than \$100,000.

At the state level, she fought a regulation that limited adjuncts to teaching no more than 60 percent of what full-time faculty taught. The battle eventually led to a victory at the state legislature, which increased the adjunct course load to 67 percent of full-time status, allowing some adjuncts to take on an additional course.

As her teaching and activism intensified, however, Hanford was diagnosed with fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome, which left her exhausted and in constant pain.

By 2008, she was teaching one composition class on campus and another through the district's distance-learning program. Citing her medical condition, she asked the district to let her teach two courses online, noting that she had forty students on a waiting list for her most recent course. That fall, she taught one online class. Administrators asked her if she would teach on campus the following spring. She said that she couldn't as a result of physical and psychological stress caused by the disease. She was then informed that she wouldn't be teaching her online course either.

No longer teaching, Hanford also lost her standing as an advocate within the California community college system for the rights of contingent faculty. "They told me they didn't have to make an accommodation, that they had the right to hire and fire," says Hanford. "Well, if you have no job security, you have no academic freedom. And it casts a pall over the classroom and the behavior of all faculty in the community college system." Hanford subsequently filed a complaint with the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing.

The college's decision not to offer her online teaching assignments was unrelated to her union activism, says Patricia Demo, Shasta College's associate vice president for human resources.

"There's no way we would retaliate against anyone for participating in shared governance," says Demo. "We encourage academic freedom at Shasta."

Making Nice in Maryland

At a community college in Maryland, many faculty members have ignored an administrative initiative that one professor says puts him in a position similar to that of a sales clerk in a department store.

Over the past year, Prince George's Community College has issued name badges to every college employee that ask, "Have you been served well?" President Charlene Dukes says the badges are part of a campuswide campaign for "quality service" that focuses on providing students with the information and support they need to reach their academic goals.

For faculty, she says, that might include helping students find referrals for services outside the classroom or assistance with financial aid. "We expect our faculty to get to know their students by name and the types of academic need they have," says Dukes. "We don't mandate that faculty wear them, but we encourage them to do it, and some do."

Faculty members have been cool to the badge campaign. Associate professor Earl Yarrington says very few wear the badges. The badges put faculty in the position of delivering a product, preferably with a smile; the student is buying the course and the prized higher education credits.

"The problem is—I'm not selling them shoes," says Yarrington. "It's the Walmartization of higher education and it's a disturbing trend."

A New York State of Mind

In New York City, questions of academic freedom swirl around the creation of the City University of New York's newest community college, the first in thirty years (see [Lenore A. Beaky's story in this issue](#)). Scheduled to open in 2012, it would be the seventh community college in a system now serving approximately eighty-one thousand students.

The new school would require full-time enrollment during the first year and limit majors only to fields with strong employment opportunities. The curriculum, with a heavy emphasis on math and literacy skills, would be intended to prepare students for the jobs in the changing New York City labor market.

Under current CUNY policies, the curriculum for community colleges is developed from the ground up by faculty, within academic departments. Unlike many other community college systems across the country, faculty governance bodies in CUNY have had considerable control over curriculum, instruction, degree requirements, hiring, firing, tenure, promotion, and peer review. But that degree of involvement may be changing.

So far, curriculum development for the new college has come from the top down, with CUNY administrators leading the effort, says Lenore Beaky, a tenured professor of English at LaGuardia Community College in Queens and a member of the AAUP's Executive Committee.

"There's heavy direction from the top," says Beaky. "What is the role of the individual faculty member who comes in to teach the courses? Will there be any decision making possible in this overdesigned, overdetermined framework?"

Anne Friedman, a tenured professor of development skills at the Borough of Manhattan Community College who serves on a panel helping to establish the new college, is also concerned that the administration has yet to determine how the college will be governed— whether there will be a faculty senate, academic departments, and faculty-elected department chairs, rather than appointed department heads. The CUNY administration also has yet to say whether the college will be staffed by full-time tenure-track faculty, contingent faculty, or faculty from other CUNY campuses. This leaves faculty members such as Friedman wondering what role they will have in 2012. "The only thing said is that things will be different," says Friedman.

John Mogulescu, CUNY senior university dean, says that faculty concerns are premature. Faculty, he says, are deeply involved with developing the new college. Six faculty members from campus senates as well as the university faculty senate chair serve as advisers to the full-time planning team. Twenty-eight faculty members serve on working committees that were convened in October. A second round of committee meetings in which faculty will be represented will be convened this spring to develop models for the summer program, an office of partnerships, governance, and majors.

The governance plans, says Mogulescu, will be developed in consultation with the leadership of the university

faculty senate.

“We are still relatively early in the planning stages of a community college scheduled to open in the summer of 2012,” he says. “This is, and will continue to be, an inclusive and consultative process.”

But Beaky says 2012 will be here very soon. “[Mogulescu] has been attempting to reassure us that everything will be fine, but the original concept was drawn up with no faculty participation, and that’s what they have been following,” Beaky says.

Remember the Alamo

Curriculum battles have sprung up as well in south Texas at the Alamo Community College District, a system of five independently accredited institutions that serve about a hundred thousand students (see [Robert J. Pohl’s article in this issue](#)). The colleges range from the historically black St. Philip’s College in downtown San Antonio to the recently opened Northeast Lakeview College in the city’s northeast suburbs.

The district’s board of trustees and its chancellor, Bruce H. Leslie, are considering the possibility of pursuing accreditation as a single institution. They’ve already begun to move forward on developing a unified curriculum for all five colleges. That curriculum, says board chair Denver McClendon, makes it easier for students to take courses at campuses across the system.

Most faculty members aren’t sure these changes are improvements. They maintain that their input was rejected on portions of the core curriculum. For example, the faculty and the administration differed over whether a three-credit class in computer literacy should be part of the new curriculum. Faculty sat on the Computer Literacy Task Force, which recommended it be included as a three-credit class. But that recommendation was rejected by Vice Chancellor Robert Aguero, who decided that instruction in computer skills should be embedded in other course offerings and did not require a stand-alone class. Nonetheless, Mary-Ellen Jacobs, president of Palo Alto College’s faculty senate, says she has many students who lack basic technology skills, such as how to send an e-mail attachment.

The curriculum controversy is part of a broader dispute over the direction of the community college system there. Faculty at four Alamo colleges this summer passed resolutions declaring they had “no confidence” in Chancellor Leslie. Faculty say Leslie has created a top-heavy administration, botched two accreditation efforts for Northeast Lakeview College, and failed to encourage dialogue with college employees, students, and the community.

At Palo Alto, the faculty’s eight-point no-confidence resolution charged that Leslie has undermined academic freedom by mandating a uniform curriculum and taking away the faculty’s role in determining how to identify and assess student learning outcomes. Board chair McClendon referred questions to Aguero, who did not return calls seeking comment.

“Sure, the faculty has a voice, but they don’t listen to it,” says Jacobs, who teaches English at Palo Alto, which serves a largely Latino population. “It’s all window dressing, and we are getting tired of it.”

Community College, Inc.

Community colleges are by definition the institutions of higher education that are closest to the communities. They serve a diverse student body, from students right out of high school to older adults returning to college after years in the workforce. They have open enrollments and provide developmental learning support for students whose academic skills need to be raised to collegiate standards. Many colleges have elected boards and derive significant revenue from local taxes, including levies specifically directed for college funding. And most retain close ties with local corporations, which look to community colleges to train workers for jobs in their companies.

The involvement of corporations in the design of community college courses has diminished the faculty’s role in curriculum development and narrowed what is taught in the classroom, says Craig Flanery, a senior program officer based in the AAUP’s West Coast office and staff liaison to the Association’s Committee on Community Colleges.

“Corporate interests are typically looking for a more narrow skill set,” says Flanery.

Community colleges play a crucial role in what is now termed “workforce development,” as companies look for

skilled workers and the unemployed go back to school for training. In Oregon, for example, the state's seventeen community colleges are administered by the Department of Community Colleges and Workforce Development. There, community colleges work closely with industry to develop training courses that may feed into degree-granting programs. The wind-energy industry in 2006 turned to Columbia Gorge Community College, in The Dalles, when national and international companies began to erect massive wind turbines there. They needed technicians to run the 280-foot-high windmills, with their turbines and complex hydraulic, mechanical, and electronic systems. The windmills went up as the Oregon aluminum industry declined and the state's hydropower industry wasn't hiring.

"We sat down with the wind companies, and they really directed what the course content should be," said Susan Wolff, Columbia Gorge's chief academic officer. "They knew what knowledge, skills, and abilities the technicians needed."

The coursework was developed with a faculty member from the college's electronics program and a millwright from the timber industry. A federal grant funded two engineering faculty positions, and the wind industry provided equipment and financial support. By 2009, the program had two cohorts of students— forty each semester—who could earn a one-year certificate. If they came back a second year and took community college courses, they would obtain an associate's degree. An estimated 65 percent did just that.

"Industry is on campus quite often, and there's a real symbiotic relationship," says Wolff.

When Wake Technical Community College in Raleigh, North Carolina, wanted to establish an academic program to train students to work in the region's growing video-game industry, representatives from ten companies and college faculty came together for a two-day meeting to develop the program.

College president Stephen Scott says the company representatives spoke about what the students needed to be able to do, and the faculty then built a curriculum around those needs. Wake Technical now has four hundred students in the program.

"The employers come up with the baseline—what they want students to do— and the faculty takes that and develops the curriculum," Scott says. "The beauty of it is that the companies have bought into the process, they have ownership in this, and they support the program."

That process, however, diminishes the faculty's role, says David Ayers, associate professor of higher education administration at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and a [contributor](#) to this issue.

"When industry comes in and tells faculty what to teach, then faculty are no longer experts in the field; they are educational technicians who translate the needs of industry into curriculum and learning strategies," he says.

While the classes at Wake Technical are part of a degree-granting program, other community colleges develop noncredit classes for industry, and those courses later migrate into a degree-granting program.

That's what has happened, for example, with some computer classes developed with community colleges over the past twelve years by computer networking giant Cisco Systems. The Cisco Networking Academy, a nonprofit arm of the corporation, has developed an online interactive curriculum that's now in use at many U.S. high schools and hundreds of community college campuses, with the material integrated into degree or certificate programs.

Cisco continues to work with community colleges to develop courses. When President Obama announced his community college initiative in July at Macomb Community College, Cisco was working with Macomb on developing a course on health information networking.

"We use the technology to create a community of practitioners," says Carroll McGillin, national initiatives manager for Cisco Networking Academy. "This allows the colleges to be on the cutting edge, and it makes sure that what they are teaching is relevant to industry and within the context of the academic program."

College officials say they welcome Cisco's initiative, noting that any training course that becomes credit bearing must first pass muster with college faculty. Students can earn credits in four Cisco courses at Westchester Community College in New York.

“We would not have taken on the program unless the faculty members had reviewed it carefully and aligned it with what WCC should be doing,” says Ann Rubenzahl, an assistant dean. “The faculty designs the curriculum here.”

Nevertheless, educators warn that corporate involvement in developing curricula may have a negative impact on what is taught in the classroom.

“As federal and state governments increasingly focus on community colleges as job training centers, the curriculum is being driven by economic and political interests and not by the faculty members and academic professionals who understand education,” says John Curtis, the AAUP’s director of research and public policy. “It’s sometimes difficult to convince students—and their parents, and legislators—that it’s more important for them to get an education than to find the quickest route to a job. But if students can learn to think for themselves and confront new ideas critically, they won’t have to go back and get retrained for a new job every four years—and they’ll be better prepared as citizens in the process.”

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