

# Academe Online

## How to Climb Down from Top-Down Leadership

*The challenging work to improve on the bureaucratic model of governance at community colleges requires both cooperation from administrators and commitment from faculty members.*

By Rob Jenkins and Beth Jensen

Let's start with the proposition that community colleges are, after all, colleges. Not glorified high schools, not "junior" colleges, but actual colleges that offer courses students need in order to earn bachelor's degrees. True, many community colleges offer other programs, too, like auto mechanics and cosmetology, but that's beside the point. Community college students take first-year composition and college algebra and political science and world history and biology with a lab and so forth. Anywhere from a quarter to half of them (depending on which study you believe) move on to four-year colleges, which accept their credit hours and place them accordingly. At that point, what students learned in those core courses—that is, how well prepared they are for further academic work—becomes just as important to the receiving institutions as to the community colleges that sent them.

For this reason, the term "community college" is probably as outdated as "junior college." What we're really talking about is the two-year campus, where students can, if they choose, complete essentially the same (and, in many state systems, exactly the same) liberal arts core curriculum as at a four-year college. In addition, many four-year colleges (if not most) court community college transfers as a way to bolster their own enrollments. This symbiotic relationship between transferring and receiving institutions suggests that the way two-year colleges are governed is just as important as the way four-year colleges are governed. And if the preferred model on four-year campuses is shared governance, then that should be the norm on two-year campuses as well.

### Current Reality

Unfortunately, shared governance isn't always the norm. At community colleges, just as at four-year institutions, a wide range of governance models exists, including those that claim to be shared governance but aren't, those that don't even pretend to be shared governance, and, occasionally, truly shared governance.

In California, for example, shared governance at the state's community colleges was codified into law back in the late 1980s. But even that historic achievement has not been a panacea, as Linda Collins, a past president of the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, relates in her excellent 2002 *Academe* article, "[Shared Governance in the California Community Colleges](#)." She concludes, "A decade after passage of AB1725, we have yet to create structures and cultures that support and nurture the practice of shared governance throughout the state's community colleges."

Our own institution, Georgia Perimeter College, has been struggling with the concept of shared governance for years. Just in the last decade, the college has tried at least three different models, each called "shared governance" but each falling short in some critical way. We're currently in the process of instituting yet another model that we believe has great promise. At the very least, we're trying.

Not everyone is. One of us, Rob Jenkins, served on the faculty senate at a community college where the vice president of academic affairs not only sat in on every meeting but frequently interrupted deliberations when she thought they weren't headed in the direction the administration preferred. As senators discussed a resolution regarding budget cuts, she lectured them that they were all lucky to have jobs and insinuated that, if they wanted to keep those jobs, they wouldn't pass the resolution.

Forgive us for belaboring the obvious, but that's not shared governance.

True shared governance at community colleges, just as at their four-year counterparts, is based on four key principles: faculty authority, inclusiveness, a commitment to tenure, and a commitment to the process. Of course, these principles are familiar to anyone who has advocated for shared governance or who already enjoys it—but not, we fear, to many community college faculty members or administrators.

### Faculty Authority

The first principle of shared governance requires that “primary authority” be “ceded to the faculty in such areas as hiring and curriculum,” as AAUP President Cary Nelson notes in his new book, *No University Is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom*. This fundamental principle, which the AAUP has affirmed since its founding in 1915, is one to which many institutions pay lip service but which few apply—and that’s especially true of two-year colleges, for a couple of reasons.

One reason is the high school mentality so pervasive on two-year campuses—what R. C. Richardson, a professor of higher education at New York University, describes as the “bureaucratic model” of governance usually found in K–12 schools. This is hardly surprising, given that so many community colleges grew out of local school systems. (For example, the nation’s first community college, Joliet Junior College, was originally an extension of Joliet High School, while our own institution was operated by the DeKalb County schools before being absorbed into the University System of Georgia in the 1980s.) Under the bureaucratic model, authority is delegated from the top down, with faculty and staff occupying lower levels of the hierarchy. [According to Lisa Marie McCauley](#), a vice president for business affairs at King’s College in London, a significant drawback of this model is its potential to limit faculty participation in the decision-making process, even in academic matters. Yet leaders steeped in the public school culture may find the bureaucratic model difficult to reject.

The second reason is what Collins identifies as “the rise of new managerial ideologies that devalue the academy and promote corporate models.” McCauley calls this a “corporate top-down approach,” in which authority is again delegated downward through a “chain of command,” with each level controlling the one beneath it—and with faculty, naturally, at the bottom. Sadly, this approach is becoming all too common throughout academe, as Nelson observes. It’s especially prevalent at two-year schools, where many administrators come not from the faculty ranks but from secondary schools, from “higher education leadership” programs (where, apparently, the “corporate top-down approach” is regarded as the norm), or from the private sector.

In other words, because of the nature of community colleges, two-year campus administrators seem especially susceptible to what Estela Bensimon, a professor of higher education at the University of Southern California, terms “[administrative dominance](#).” But for shared governance to work, they must be willing to cede some of their authority to faculty members, who after all are the experts when it comes to academic matters.

Giving faculty authority over hiring and curriculum development also helps to depoliticize those decisions. For upper-level administrators, in particular, the “chain of command” extends upward to someone or some group that is either elected or appointed—at which point politics enters the picture. An administrator who owes his or her job to politicians may feel pressure to make personnel and other decisions that negatively affect the institution and the educational enterprise. Recently, for example, the chancellor of the Alabama Community College System—where Rob worked for several years—[resigned](#) amid charges that several members of his family had been hired at two-year campuses across the state. Meanwhile, LaGuardia Community College of the City University of New York has been embroiled for nearly two decades in [controversy](#) surrounding politically charged promotion, tenure, and curriculum decisions.

Tenured faculty members may individually have their own agendas, but collectively they are apolitical, in the sense that they don’t owe their jobs to politicians. They may disagree vehemently over hiring decisions or academic policy matters, but together they are more likely than any individual—including a dean or president—to do what’s in the best interest of their institutions.

## Inclusiveness

The second principle of shared governance, in our view, is that everyone who has a stake in a decision—faculty members, administrators, staff members, and even students—should be represented when that decision is made. Pam Schuetz, a postdoctoral fellow at Northwestern University, refers to this as the “collegial model” of shared governance: “a community of scholars, with consensual decision-making processes involving all constituencies affected by the decisions.”

Carol A. Lucey, the president of Western Nevada College, argued in a [2002 \*Academe\* article](#) that “institutional mission, strategic planning, program review, and resource allocation are generally recognized as matters for the governing board and its administrative delegates.” In the traditional division of labor, that may be true: the faculty gets to do the hiring and develop the curriculum, and the administration gets to do everything else. But real shared governance means that faculty members and others have a say even in decisions that aren’t entirely theirs to

make. According to Ron Lau, the former vice president of business at Compton Community College, such across-the-board involvement strengthens the institution by fostering a “sense of empowerment and equal partnership” among stakeholders, as accountability becomes “multidirectional, not hierarchical.” Consider “resource allocation,” for example. Let’s say that, during a recession year, the state legislature cuts the community college’s budget by 8 percent. Who determines where those cuts will be made? Most would agree that the president and the vice president for finance have primary fiduciary responsibility—but does that mean the administration should make those decisions unilaterally?

If the institution embraces shared governance, the answer to the second question is no. There, leaders will do their best to bring to the table all groups that might be affected by any cuts. If there’s time, they may form ad hoc committees or task forces composed of faculty, staff, students, and administrators, with the charge to examine specific areas and recommend where cuts might be made. Ultimately, the president and vice president will have to decide which recommendations to accept and which cuts to make—but only after they’ve gotten as much feedback as possible from as many groups as possible. Some community colleges (like ours) more or less embrace this process, while others merely pretend to do so. Quite a few don’t even bother pretending.

## A Commitment to Tenure

The third principle of shared governance is also the most timely, in light of current trends: a commitment to increasing the number of tenured faculty members in all programs, including (at the community college level) technical and professional education. Full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty members are indispensable to the governance of a college. Contingent faculty may offer just as much knowledge and expertise, but, unlike tenured faculty, they are politically vulnerable. Lacking long-term job security, they are potentially open to manipulation by the administrators to whom they owe their livelihood. Thus, as the percentage of nontenured faculty members rises on campus, the number of those who are in a position to speak out—and who are willing to do so—shrinks.

Unfortunately, most institutions these days are employing fewer and fewer tenure-line faculty. In 2007, nearly 70 percent of faculty members at all institutions nationwide were in non-tenure-track positions, and at community colleges, more than 80 percent were in such positions. Clearly, what Collins referred to in 2002 as the “adjunctification” of community college faculty is proceeding apace.

As faculty members who have held administrative positions, we understand the financial constraints of running a community college, usually on a shoestring budget. We also have a great deal of respect for nontenured instructors, most of whom do a wonderful job and without whom many of our colleges would be in deep trouble.

We’re simply saying that true shared governance requires the active participation of full-time, tenured faculty members. As former *Academe* editor Lawrence Hanley put it, shared governance “signifies the necessity of faculty control over the conditions of professional work.” Administrators who embrace this concept will set their priorities accordingly and do everything in their power, over time, to decrease their institutions’ reliance on contingent appointments and increase the number of tenure-track positions.

## A Commitment to the Process

The fourth and final principle of shared governance is total commitment to the process on the part of everyone involved—including, as Schuetz argues, “all levels of state, system, and campus participants.”

We’ve suggested repeatedly that shared governance cannot exist without the willing cooperation of administrators who, at most community colleges, are not required by law or policy (beyond, perhaps, some vague boilerplate “statement on shared governance”) to share decision making with faculty members in any meaningful way. To cede real authority, administrators must be fully committed to the ideals of shared governance.

However, we’d like to point out that shared governance also requires a major commitment of time and energy on the part of others, especially faculty members. We’ve observed that faculty members don’t much like having administrators tell them what to do all the time, and understandably so. But when the administration introduces anything resembling shared governance, some of those same faculty members complain about the amount of work it involves. On more than one occasion, we’ve heard colleagues wonder aloud, “Why doesn’t the dean just make that decision?”

Shared governance isn't easy. It requires a willing faculty every bit as much as a willing administration. It entails hours spent on committees, poring over reams of documents, most of which aren't particularly interesting. It means having the courage to express unpopular points of view—and the intellectual rigor to back up those opinions with facts. It means working late nights and early mornings and sometimes even on weekends. No amount of willingness on the part of the administration can produce real shared governance unless the faculty is also willing to share the burden and responsibility of governing.

## Conclusion

In the end, it's easy to pay lip service to the idea of shared governance. Many two-year colleges do: they organize a faculty senate, set up committees and task forces, give them all a bunch of busywork, and call the resulting processes "shared governance"—even when everyone knows it's not. And administrators aren't the only ones who fall short: faculty members are often complicit in the charade as well.

But meaningful shared governance can exist only when (1) tenured faculty members have authority over academic matters, and the administration defers to them in those areas; (2) everyone affected by a decision has a say in how that decision is made; (3) a clear majority of faculty members are tenured or on the tenure track—or at least the administration is working toward that goal; and (4) everyone concerned is committed to both the concept of shared governance and its practical application. Only when tenured faculty members advocate energetically for these principles, and administrators embrace and implement them, will those of us who work in community colleges have a system we can honestly call shared governance.

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