

Most Popular

1. **Omicron in Oakland: How a Wisconsin wedding with 'super responsible'...**
2. **Newsom to use Texas abortion law tactics to go after assault rifle,...**
3. **Another atmospheric river is headed to the Bay Area. Here's when and...**
4. **Whe Area ansv**

OPINION // OPEN FORUM

Ronald Reagan's ghost runs the UC system. Expect strikes until that changes

Sammy Feldblum and John Schmidt

Dec. 11, 2021



UC Berkeley owes much of its livelihood to lecturers, who deserve their own protections and the opportunity to educate with stability and support.

Jeff Chiu / Associated Press 2020

The University of California could not function without the labor of lecturers. In a given year, UC employs more than 6,000 of these educators, who are hired on short-term contracts and lack the stability of tenure. All told, they teach roughly a third of courses offered across the system. Since 2011, the number of lecturers at UC has expanded at more than three times the pace of the tenured professoriat.

This trend, in line with nationwide hiring patterns, is often decried as an existential threat to higher education. And it is true that the increasing presence of a class of underpaid and overworked lecturers operating without the guarantees of tenure indicates an ominous subordination of American higher education to the prerogatives of the market. But in California and elsewhere, nontenured faculty are here to stay. This workforce deserves its own protections and the opportunity to educate students with stability and support.

skip to main content



Next Up: Omicron in Oakland: How a Wisconsin wedding with...

In November, the UC system took a major step in this direction. After nearly three years of negotiations and nearly two without a contract, a deal reached Nov. 17 between the institution's administration and UC-AFT — the union representing the University of California's lecturers — averted a strike planned across the state-wide system. The union hailed the agreement signed with UC, as the “best contract in its history.” Lecturers received a 30% raise in wages over the six years of the contract, along with guarantees of greater job stability year over year.

These changes represent not only material gains for lecturers themselves, they also offer long-overdue recognition of the vital role of this workforce in teaching California's students and in fulfilling the university's historic teaching mission in the 21st century. However, while the contract is a big win for UC-AFT, more needs to be done. So long as it continues to rely on lecturers to carry out its core

responsibilities, UC needs to incorporate efforts to stabilize this essential workforce in the medium and long terms.

Working conditions among lecturers vary. While these faculty members are well-trained and talented, the conditions of their employment still limit the “opportunity to perform,” as USC professor of Higher Education Adrianna Kezar writes. And within this group of so-called “contingent” faculty, the number of part-time employees routinely exceeds the number of full-time positions, meaning that most lecturers lack a durable connection to the campus that employs them.

Because contingent faculty often lack an office on campus, may juggle appointments at multiple schools and are less likely to be retained semester to semester, the students they teach have fewer opportunities for the sustained student-faculty interaction that many researchers have linked to academic success. As UC-AFT has insisted throughout the negotiation process, teaching conditions are students' learning conditions.

So how did we arrive at this point?

The move toward contingent academic labor at UC reflects broader nationwide trends in higher education. Nearly a million more people teach in universities than in 1969, but the number of those with tenure has remained roughly constant. The other two-thirds of all faculty across the country mostly lack the security of employment protections offered by tenure.

The specific situation at UC, however, can't be separated from California's specific political and economic history — and to the retreat from a model that assumed higher education to be a public good from which the state and its residents would benefit.

The foundational moment for the modern UC was the 1960 drafting of the California Master Plan for Higher Education. This plan formalized the relationship between UC, the California State University system and community colleges, laying the groundwork for everything from instructional focus to enrollment numbers to physical footprints. At the time, public institutions were supported overwhelmingly through state appropriations, which allowed community colleges, CSU and UC to remain tuition-free to state residents.

The explosion of free speech protests at UC Berkeley in 1964, however, diluted voter support for higher education in California. The student movement became a central aspect of Ronald Reagan's gubernatorial campaign the following year, which he launched with the promise to "clean up the mess at Berkeley."

This strategy proved successful, and Reagan's 1966 election triggered a shift in thinking about higher education in California that still reverberates today. Reagan used the free speech movement as a wedge to introduce an "educational fee" to supplement public financing of the university. The fee began its life as a \$250 charge levied on students (approximately \$1,700 in 2020 dollars). It has since ballooned at many times the rate of inflation and now represents approximately half of the UC's core revenues — bringing in over \$3 billion in 2020 alone.

Reagan's fee went into effect in February 1970. Since that pivotal moment, heightened competition for state resources has contributed to a decline in state appropriations for higher education. The passage of Proposition 13 in 1978, which cut property tax collection in half, exacerbated this pattern and heavily curtailed the ability of local governments to raise revenue.

Spending priorities were shifted too. Through the 1980s and '90s, state funding for prison construction rose far more quickly than did higher education funding. In the years since this carceral turn, a succession of economic crises — the drawdown

of defense contracts in California in the early '90s, the dot-com bubble bust in the early 2000s and Great Recession of 2008 — has reduced public spending on higher education further. All the while, California's student body has grown significantly, tripling from 87,087 the year of Reagan's election to 291,239 in 2021 and becoming increasingly diverse in the process.

The result is a long-term decline in per-student funding in a system that is more dependent than ever on tuition and private funding streams — through industry partnerships and private philanthropy (which often leads to outlandish results, as the recent controversy over a planned mega-dorm that critics have likened to a prison, gifted to UC Santa Barbara by billionaire amateur architect Charlie Munger, makes plain).

About Opinion

Guest opinions in **Open Forum and Insight** are produced by writers with expertise, personal experience or original insights on a subject of interest to our readers. Their **views do not necessarily reflect** the opinion of The Chronicle editorial board, which is committed to providing a diversity of ideas to our readership.

Read more about our transparency and ethics policies →

It is perhaps no surprise that in such a volatile environment, university administrators are seeking ways to build a more flexible, low-cost labor force.

As this workforce has become more essential to the university's functioning, however, its members have organized to demand recognition of their work. The last time that UC-AFT's members struck, in 2002, they achieved "continuing appointments" for long-term lecturers who have taught six years' worth of classes, a status that came with a pay raise and security of employment through indefinite contracts.

This stability, however, remains elusive. According to the union, fewer than 20% of UC lecturers have achieved this status, and the average term of a lecturer's employment is only two years. In fact, 25% of all lecturers are "churned" out of the UC system each year, only to be replaced with new hires.

The number of lecturers employed by the UC has grown since the 2002 strike. And while the recent contract was an important step toward fair labor practices for this population, it is only a beginning. Contingent faculty members are still excluded from shared governance within departments, and it remains difficult and rare for them to achieve continuing appointments, partially because teaching credits do not transfer between departments.

As part of what it calls its "UC 2030" plan, UC is aiming to graduate an extra 200,000 students atop the estimated million that were to complete their degrees between 2015 and 2030. This ramp-up will necessarily depend on the further expansion of lecturers as well as on the work of postdoctoral scholars, graduate researchers and teachers, and non-faculty staff. UC needs a new compact, like its original 1960 Master Plan, to enshrine excellence, fairness and access to all, including the teachers on which its very existence depends.

Should administrators refuse to follow this path, a newly militant labor movement on campus appears ready and willing to point the way.

Sammy Feldblum and John Schmidt are graduate students at UCLA and research fellows with the UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy. Their report detailing the history of labor at the UC will be released in early 2022 at <https://luskincenter.history.ucla.edu>.

Sign up for the Opinion Central newsletter

Hard-hitting views from The Chronicle's Editorial Board

Email

SIGN UP

By signing up, you agree to our [Terms of use](#) and acknowledge that your information will be used as described in our [Privacy Policy](#).

Written By

Sammy Feldblum and John Schmidt

[VIEW COMMENTS](#)

Top of the News

How effective are today's vaccines against omicron? Here's what we know

Less than three weeks after omicron was identified and given a name, scientists already have the first evidence that the highly mutated coronavirus variant may be better than any of its...

BY ERIN ALLDAY

Another atmospheric river headed to Bay Area. Here's when to expect rain

BY DANIELLE ECHEVERRIA

S.F. reading list: What are the most popular books set in the city?

BY NAMI SUMIDA

She was a transplant from a Texas town. She became the heart of S.F.

BY CARL NOLTE

Bay Area animal shelters see surge in unwanted ‘pocket pets’

BY ANDRES PICON

San Francisco Chronicle

TOP

ABOUT

- [Our Company](#)
- [Terms of Use](#)
- [Privacy Notice /Notice At Collection](#)
- [Careers](#)
- [Your California Privacy Rights](#)
- [Advertising](#)
- [Interest Based Ads](#)

NEWSROOM

- [Ethics Policy](#)
- [News Tips](#)
- [How We Cover Politics](#)
- [Newsroom News](#)
- [Endorsement Process](#)

CONTACT

- [Customer Service](#)
- [Newsroom Contacts](#)
- [FAQ](#)

CCPA

[Do Not Sell My Personal Information](#)

SERVICES

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| Subscriber Services | Archives |
| e-Edition | Membership |
| Reprints & Permissions | Store |
| Corporate Subscriptions | Subscription Offers |
| App | sfgate.com |

HEARST *newspapers*
©2021 Hearst