

No Confidence in the CSU

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Abstract

Over the last eight years, faculty senates across multiple California State University campuses have passed a vote of no confidence in their campus leadership. Many of the votes stem from mismanagement of sexual harassment claims and the lack of accountability for upper-level administrators who engage in such behavior or work to cover it up. This article summarizes the votes of no confidence, including the circumstances that led to them, the common themes present across institutions and resolutions, and the broader context of eroded shared governance and reactive administrative power within which faculty vote. In addition to the problems surrounding sexual harassment and Title IX reporting processes, faculty resolutions consistently cited loss of faculty participation in deliberative processes, administrative overreach into curricula, a lack of clarity around budget allocations, and low morale.

What is wrong with the California State University? The nation's largest public university system—one that prides itself on equity, access, and social mobility—has a leadership problem. Over the last eight years, multiple faculty senates have forwarded and, in many cases, passed a vote of no confidence in their campus leadership. In May 2022, the academic senate of the California State University (CSU) system even delivered a vote of no confidence in the board of trustees itself for its gross mismanagement of former CSU chancellor Joseph Castro's resignation (CSU Academic Senate 2022). An investigation by *USA Today* revealed that Castro had helped a colleague facing sexual harassment charges obtain an impressive settlement and administrative appointment. Castro's behavior, and the desire to cover it up, is indicative of a culture in the CSU that supports poor campus leadership with outrageous salaries and benefits—all while moving bad actors to other positions or campuses to avoid accountability (Shalby and Watanabe 2022; Shalby and Lopez 2022a; Peele, Smith, and Willis 2022).

Increases in such votes of no confidence are not unique to the California State University system. Scholar Sean McKinnis (n.d.) maintains a thorough database of such votes around the country. An article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* overviewed the proliferation of votes of no confidence, citing two CSUs in its list of examples. In fact, 2021 had the highest number of votes of no confidence in recent history (Zahneis 2022). This statistic was impressive considering how "risk averse" faculty can be. Faculty reported feeling that such votes were the only option

available given the lack of transparency and shared governance. Moreover, the scope of such resolutions is now being widened beyond individual administrators to include policies or administrations as a whole. This article summarizes the votes of no confidence coming out of the CSU, including the circumstances that led to them, the common themes present across institutions and resolutions, and the broader context of eroded shared governance and reactive administrative power within which faculty vote.

Though CSU leaders continue to increase the number of scandals in which they are involved—including ones concerning sexual harassment and assault (Bakersfield, Channel Islands, Chico, Fresno, Humboldt, Maritime Academy, Monterey Bay, Sonoma, San Diego), destroyed artwork (Sonoma), cronyism (San Bernardino, Los Angeles, Northridge, Bakersfield), and golden parachutes (Fresno)—the votes of no confidence also point to an equally compelling issue: shared governance, or the lack thereof, in campus decision-making. In nearly all of the resolutions (successful or unsuccessful), loss of faculty participation in deliberative processes, administrative overreach into curricula, a lack of clarity around budget allocations, ongoing administrator turnover, and the resulting low morale emerge as determining factors of faculty mistrust in their campus leadership.

In May 2017, a resolution of no confidence was brought against the president of California State University, San Bernardino, Tomás Morales. The resolution's text cited a lack of shared decision-making, high turnover among administrators leading to a loss of institutional memory, and an overall negative campus climate. The last point in particular illustrated a pressing campus problem. A senate report detailed how faculty requested that the CSU chancellor's office conduct a campus climate survey to better understand morale. When the chancellor's office refused, the faculty senate commissioned its own survey, finding an "atmosphere of toxicity, fear, and distrust" (Campus Climate Committee 2016; CSU, San Bernardino, Faculty Senate 2017). The senate passed the resolution by a vote of 21–15. The case of San Bernardino is indicative of how the chancellor's office handles problems with its campus leaders: ignore faculty and support management. In fact, after the vote, then-chancellor Timothy White wrote an open letter backing Morales—leading the academic senate of the California State University as a whole to pass its own resolution of support for CSUSB faculty (Muckenfuss 2017).

At California State University, Northridge, former president Dianne Harrison narrowly escaped a similar resolution of no confidence in November 2018. Among other issues, the resolution cited a loss of CSUN's institutional mission. Additionally, it called for accountability and transparency. Detailing President Harrison's "failed leadership" and "authoritarian management," the resolution noted the high turnover in academic leadership and a detrimental focus on rapid graduation rates over serving the best interests of students (CSU, Northridge, Faculty Senate 2018). The latter point comes from a misguided attempt by the California State Legislature to fund the CSU based on its ability to quickly push students through curricular pathways.

The resolution's primary focus was on Harrison's handling of systemwide executive orders (EOs) regarding math, writing, and cross-cultural studies. At CSUN, the EO-mandated restructuring of general education courses would have meant losing important curricula in ethnic studies, gender and women's studies, and queer studies. Malik Campbell and colleagues (2019, 19) note that these classes "make sense of social realities—high levels of imprisonment, constant attacks on immigrants, assaults against LGBTQIA community members, environmental injustice, and disparities in health and education, among other issues—and provide tools for transformative change." Despite widespread faculty concerns, Harrison pushed ahead with implementing the poorly designed curricular decisions from the top down and did not "uphold the primacy of faculty in curriculum development" (CSU, Northridge, Faculty Senate 2018). Ultimately, the faculty senate voted against the resolution 26–32.

The year 2022 was a busy one for presidential ineptitude in the California State University system. In April, faculty at Sonoma State University passed a referendum of no confidence in President Judy Sakaki, citing low morale and high attrition among faculty and administrators. Faculty also expressed frustration with Sakaki's leadership style, which downplayed both shared governance and engagement with faculty (she even skipped graduation at the height of her troubles). The referendum focused extensively on allegations of sexual harassment against her husband, Patrick McCallum, and her corresponding retaliation against a whistleblower. An investigation by the *Los Angeles Times* revealed that CSU paid \$600,000 to a former provost in order to settle her claim of retaliation after reporting sexual harassment by McCallum to the chancellor's office. Sakaki soon resigned, and in response the faculty senate released a statement acknowledging the deep-rooted problems in CSU management: "There remain deep cultural challenges within the Cal State system and change is long overdue. There have been too many circumstances where women have been harassed, intimidated and retaliated against. We implore the incoming Chancellor to make this glaring issue their top priority and advance change that we can all believe in and reestablish trust" (cited in Shalby and Lopez 2022b).

Shortly thereafter, the president of CSU, Los Angeles, William Covino, faced an overwhelming vote of no confidence. Covino refused to accept responsibility (or apologize) when a popular Black activist professor was racially profiled and forcibly removed from a public event by campus police. After widespread condemnation, 91 percent of the CSULA faculty voted no confidence in the president. Notably, it was the second time Covino had faced a vote of no confidence. The first, in 2019, was advanced by both faculty and student leaders. In that resolution, members of the Associated Students (2019) organization criticized a lack of shared governance and student participation in campus decision-making. The faculty senate advanced a similar vote, but in a dramatic turn of events, the vote was tied and the senate chair voted no—meaning it did not pass (Baker 2022). The second vote of no confidence was successful and Covino subsequently announced his retirement.

Although long, the above list is certainly not exhaustive. And more may be coming soon. At California State University, Chico, the academic senate has scrambled recently to deal with the fallout from a biology professor's affair and threatening behavior. The university's provost, Debra Larson, escaped a vote of no confidence but resigned after she was criticized for handling the matter poorly. Chico president Gayle Hutchinson also faced criticism for a lack of oversight and not protecting faculty and students. A December 2022 meeting of the academic senate discussed a vote of no confidence in Hutchinson but ultimately decided to request a formal, independent investigation. Shortly thereafter, Hutchinson announced her retirement. All this comes seven years after the campus passed a statement of no confidence in its previous president, Paul Zingg, Provost Susan Elrod, and Vice President of Business Lori Hoffman.

At my home institution of California State University, Channel Islands, a senate resolution was recently passed specifying conditions under which a vote of no confidence would occur—an attempt to address growing issues of curricular overreach and defunding of academic programs. A decision to stop funding study abroad entirely was made at the same time the campus hired an unprecedented number of upper-level administrators. In fact, a recent report by the National Association of College and University Budget Officers (2022, 6) found that Channel Islands has a “higher percentage of [management] staff than most other CSU campuses,” which “reflects diseconomies of scale.” Thus, the senate resolution was a clear message about misplaced priorities and poor budgetary oversight from the highest levels of the CSU system, though again this is not surprising. Efforts to scale back or eliminate similar liberal arts-based programs across US universities are occurring at a time when such programs are increasingly necessary.

Several factors have led to the prevalence of votes of no confidence. The aforementioned *Chronicle* article counters common administrator complaints that such actions are the result of “upset faculty.” Rather, it is clear that the votes stem from widespread systemic problems including budget crises, declining enrollments, and the corporatization of the university. Additionally, the revolving door of administrators can often pit ideologies against one another. As the article's author, Megan Zahneis (2022), observes, “Leaders who don't stay in their posts long term may have less opportunity to build trust with the faculty or to embed themselves in an institution's culture.” Indeed, this is the case on my campus, where an internal campus climate survey found that 80 percent of faculty had little to no trust in senior leadership.

Despite the increasing use and broader scope of such votes, Zahneis points out that there are few concrete procedures for undertaking a vote of no confidence. Academic senates, most of which use some version of *Robert's Rules of Order*, will find that the manual does not mention when or how to conduct a vote of no confidence. Processes and outcomes vary across campuses, and the AAUP does not offer members formal guidelines. Thus, more clarity on the *how* (since we already know the *why*) is needed. Such votes, though not binding and with no official punitive measures, can still be effective. A vote of no confidence often causes leaders to resign or move to other institutions—as was the case with several of the CSU administrators. Unfortunately, this

often means a promotion and higher salaries. Still, “no-confidence votes also mark a permanent blemish on an administrator’s record” (Zahneis 2022). Search committees (on which faculty continue to insist to participate, often in the face of counterpressure), should ask the hard questions of potential leaders and insist on accountability. Indeed, the president of San Bernardino came to the university after being the subject of another vote of no confidence at his previous institution, the College of Staten Island.

Votes of no confidence must be viewed within the wider context of eroding shared governance across higher education—an erosion that accelerated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Bérubé 2023). Eva Cherniavsky (2022) provides a thorough overview of shared governance, from the AAUP’s 1966 *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities* to the contemporary erosion under neoliberal ideals and corporate forces of lower pay, simultaneous understaffing and workload creep, and the “exponential growth” of administrators—most of whom lack any experience in higher education. Cherniavsky calls for a refiguring of shared governance beyond “a process of non-binding consultation, where university administration reserves the sole prerogative to define the parameters of decision-making.” Rather, she suggests we begin with the money. Faculty must become consumers of budgetary documents, reports, institutional reserves, and other materials that can help counter the “austerity” measures used to rhetorically circumvent shared governance. As Michael Bérubé (2023, 68) advocates in an article on academic labor, faculty must get involved in the governance of their institution or risk being “administered by policies [they] never heard of and certainly had no hand in writing.” Like faculty and graduate students have done across the country, faculty must continue to build solidarity and unionize. Such efforts are often challenging in institutions where workers view themselves instead as intellectuals.

Nonetheless, the growing number of examples of faculty and graduate student activism across higher education offers a glimmer of hope for those committed to shared governance and faculty participation. Last year, there were multiple strikes across US higher education, a result of mounting unionization and union activity in academia. These included successful actions at Temple, Rutgers, the University of Michigan, and several universities in Illinois. Graduate students in the University of California system won a hard-fought victory for higher wages and more protections after a long strike that mobilized educators, labor unions, faculty, and undergraduate students.

We can and should learn from the success of these movements, for the entrenched bureaucratic power against which faculty agitate presents numerous challenges. In California, foremost among them is a management simultaneously out of touch and deeply committed to neoliberal ideals in higher education. Much like corporations, the California State University is fraught with inequality and inequity. The CSU is a system where campus presidents earn a monthly housing allowance equal to a semester’s tuition. It is a system where administrators are rewarded with 12 percent raises while faculty are disparaged for requesting a 3 percent increase

to keep up with inflation. It is a system where presidents pull in half a million a year for overseeing students dealing with housing and food insecurity. It is a system where money given by the state legislature to ensure compliance with the law (general education coursework, mandated ethnic studies classes, etc.) is not monitored or tracked and gets “reallocated” into the university’s general funds to be spent on growing more management. Unfortunately, the California State University is not the exception in experiencing this crisis. It is the norm.

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