

# CLASSIFIED

SENATE

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## **Does the Caste System Exist in Community Colleges?**



**What does equity really mean?  
What do you really believe?**



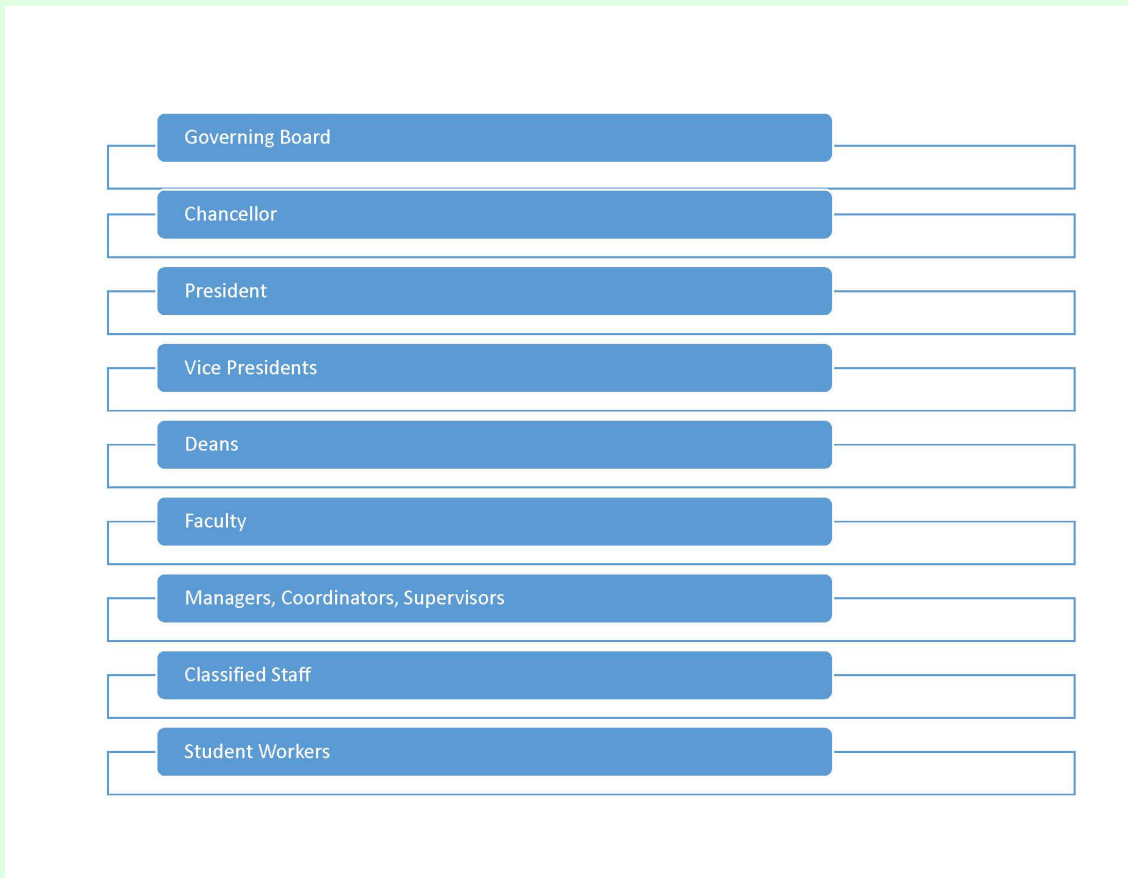
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# Does the Caste System Exist in Community Colleges?

## What does equity really mean?

### What do you really believe?

I have been asking myself hard questions about my values over the last year. I have determined that (1) I need to expand my cultural competence, and (2) I need to develop relationships with my co-workers. My co-workers include the chancellor, the college president, faculty, and staff. Both of these determinations brought me to the title of this article. Does the caste system exist in community colleges? What does equity really mean? What do I really believe?



A caste system is a division of society based on differences of wealth, inherited rank or privilege, profession, occupation, or race. In the community college, the hierarchy of our titles, length of service, tenure, or union membership can all create a caste-like system. We may inherently respond or react to an individual or a group based on their status rather than their humanity. It is very subliminal. We fall into a cultural standard of rank and order based on our subconscious beliefs and how we experience our co-workers. Everyone participates -consciously or unconsciously. Over the last year, I have become aware of my unconscious response to title hierarchy which has perpetuated this caste-like structure. When I started in the community college system I was not accustomed to the value that was placed on individuals based on their title alone. I thought perhaps it was my misperception, so I continued to work as an equal member of the office. But, I was feeling unimportant. My comments were invalidated and I didn't feel a part of the group. I felt like I needed to mold myself into the culture of the college to be accepted. So I did. I fell into the 8-to-5 routine, work was not meaningful, relationships were inconsequential,

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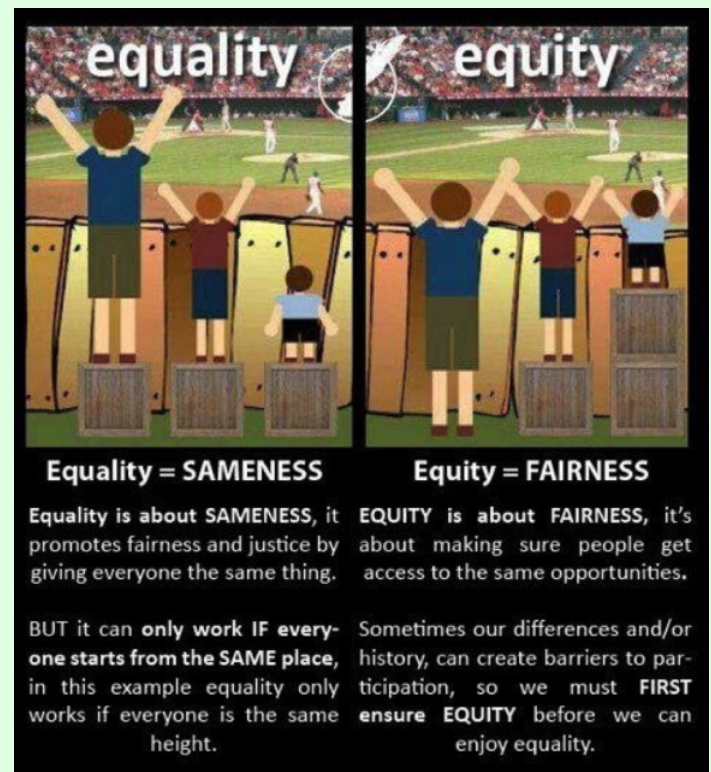
## What does equity really mean?

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and there was no buy-in. I kept my nose down and my productivity high. However, last year, while I was taking notes at a meeting, I felt very passionate about a topic that was being discussed. I took a risk and expressed my opinion in the meeting. My comments seemed well received, but I was concerned that I had stepped over an unspoken boundary, that an administrative assistant taking notes can't contribute. When I returned to my office, I shared my anxiety about speaking at the meeting to Lida Rafia, our Associate Dean of Student Success & Equity. She looked at me with kind eyes and said that I should always be able to speak my opinion, and validated that I had good ideas. Her statement resonated to my core. It was at that point I started to question how and why I felt so "less than" at a place that was all about educating and providing opportunities for students.

After reviewing the 2017 Professional Development Climate Culture Findings, I realized that my experience was not unique. The top three classified staff findings indicated that (1) classified staff wanted opportunities to participate in professional development and the time allotted so they could participate, (2) they wanted to see an interconnection with other people at Grossmont College from a local to broader level, and (3) they desired more cultural competency. The findings indicated that there was a gap of meaningful connection with classified staff. They felt as if they were not valued.

I wrote this article because I believe we are at a pivotal point of change at the college. The college is working towards creating an equity minded environment for our students. It stands to reason that an equitable environment needs to grow from within. It is important to note that equity is not equality. Equality is about sameness. It promotes fairness and justice by giving everyone the same thing. Equity is about making sure people get access to the same opportunities. I think this diagram provides a good visual of equity verses equality.



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How do we create equity? It begins with community. Over the last year I have had the opportunity to build relationships with equity-minded individuals. I am learning that the unconscious biases I hold directly affect how I interact with co-workers and students. I am learning that as I build relationships with others throughout the college, I get to know them as individuals, the divisions of title and rank crumble, and the silos fall. It is an equity-minded, people-first model. I ask you to join me.

Let's start the conversation on how we can build meaningful business relationships to develop trust, mutual respect, equity, and equality at Grossmont College. As classified professionals we have a large presence on this campus. If it needs to start with us, then let it be.

In the fall Professional Development will be kicking off the campus community We're All In campaign. This should be validating since we already show our students that we care by calling them by name, smiling, listening, and showing genuine interest in them. Hopefully it will help us build relationships, with administrators, faculty, and staff in other departments on campus as we become more familiar with the resources offered to our students.

We can also look forward to training on cultural competency leadership that the Social Justice and Equity Team has been working on. Several of us have been asking for this type of training. It is an exciting time to be working in a community college.

## Let's start this conversation.



Please feel free to let me know your thoughts. I work in the College Planning and Institutional Effectiveness Office. I can be reached at [cindy.emerson@gcccd.edu](mailto:cindy.emerson@gcccd.edu) or 619-668-1729.

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