



# DIALOGUE



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## THE LAB AND LECTURE PROBLEM AT SRJC

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### INTRODUCTION

The problems surrounding the lecture and lab distinction at our college are currently under discussion in the Academic Senate and in departments. A problem that has been identified is that we do not have clear definitions of lecture and laboratory. I contend that as long as salary and load are linked to these classifications, any definitions we might formulate will inevitably be flawed unless these definitions include workload components. Further, while clear definitions would help the Curriculum Committee classify courses, the terms Lecture and Laboratory do not accurately describe every type of course taught at SRJC.

Faculty members who have taught courses for years at the lecture rate would clearly be unhappy if those courses were re-classified as lab. Yet, the inequities that have been created by the lecture/lab system *must* be addressed. Since defining a course as lecture or lab impacts load and salary, the choice to classify courses as one or the other has often been salary driven rather than pedagogically driven, making our curriculum inconsistent and probably confusing to many students.

In the University system, there is a relationship between the levels of education of the individuals teaching lecture vs. lab courses (see box on the right). That relationship dictates the custom of paying at different rates. In our Contract salary schedules, we have class columns that take education and degree into account. Lecture and lab distinctions at our institution are not intended to bear any relationship to level of education. Without this relationship, we need some other rationale for the different rates of pay for different types of courses. If the State paid us at a different rate for lab hours than for lecture hours, that could provide a possible justification for paying faculty at different rates, but such is not the case.

### WORKLOAD

Workload differentials provide the only reasonable justification for paying faculty at different rates for different courses. Currently faculty at our college are being paid at the lecture rate for courses for which the workload is clearly equal to (or sometimes less than) another course taught at the lab rate.

### THE HOUR IN THE CLASSROOM

Everyone probably agrees that “baby-sitting” a class and being available for occasional questions is not as difficult as actively conducting a class. Therefore, we *might* agree that this hour in the classroom should be paid at a lower rate (although then we might have to say that one should get paid at a lower rate if showing a film). However, even if we could agree to that, very few lab classes fit this “baby-sitting” model. Disregarding this type of lab, it is difficult to establish that teaching one subject is more difficult for that hour in the classroom than any other class. I like to think that no one at SRJC believes that instructors of some subjects ought to be paid less for the hour in the classroom based on the intrinsic value of the subject matter,

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### THE ORIGIN OF THE LAB

The practices surrounding Lecture and Laboratory were established at the University long before the Community College system came into existence. Laboratories originated as research facilities in Medieval European Universities. Research remains one of the primary functions of the laboratory in the University, but as the University evolved, the definition of “lab” evolved as well. “Lab” sections came to serve various purposes. In the context of non-scientific disciplines, smaller classes that were subsets of larger lecture sections came to be called “labs” even though they did not fit the traditional scientific laboratory model. To this day, such labs serve as the setting for interactive modes of learning such as discussion and act as tutorials for the lecture classes to which they are attached. Thus, the lecture/lab system while grounded in the research function of the University evolved to serve the educational purpose of the institution as well. At the University, Graduate students, Teacher’s Assistant, or Associate Professors teach lab sections (as opposed to Senior Faculty). Lab sections do not exist in a vacuum but accompany large lecture courses. At some Universities this type of lab course is identified as “Discussion” or “Seminar.” Because courses in the Visual and Performing Arts do not fit this model (i.e. are not attached to large lectures and may or may not be taught by Grad Students) they are sometimes referred to as “Studio” courses. Physical Education courses may be referred to as “Activity” courses.

yet that is one of the repercussions of the lecture/lab system at SRJC. I suspect that the notion that teaching academic subjects is worthier than teaching skill-based subject matter may have come into play when courses were initially classified. To my mind, the hour in the classroom cannot be used to justify different rates of pay except in a small handful of supervised labs where the student is essentially performing homework and where a lab assistant can easily assist an instructor who does not perform any course preparation.

### PREPARATION AND ASSESSMENT

If we eliminate the hour in the classroom from the equation, preparation and assessment are the two components of workload that may justify a different rate of pay for different types of courses since preparation and assessment entail work outside the classroom. All courses require preparation and assessment of some sort; however, not all courses are equal in this respect.

### PREPARATION

Preparation is largely a personal matter. One instructor may find it necessary to prepare for hours for a subject that another instructor can teach with little or no preparation. Quantifying preparation on a course-by-course basis seems impossible to me, but a workload study that takes into account the reported preparation of a large enough sampling of instructors of a particular subject matter may have some validity. Paying more based on preparation would only make sense for subjects that are *unusually* prep-intensive. Currently there is no congruent connection between the lecture and lab designations and the amount of preparation necessary to teach courses. It was assumed at some point that teaching a lecture course required more preparation and therefore should be paid at a higher rate. However, in this determination, the many permutations of pedagogy were not considered.

### ASSESSMENT

Not all courses include assessment outside of the

classroom. Therefore, the presence of homework that necessitates outside assessment provides a basis for higher payment for teaching a course. With our current system, if a course includes homework, that gives us a guideline for whether the course is lecture or lab from a curriculum standpoint (based on Title 5). Since there is a connection between homework and assessment (i.e. work) outside the classroom, drawing a connection between the presence of homework and a higher rate of pay seems reasonable. Some find it objectionable to define lecture by the presence of homework because there are many labs that include homework. Under our current system, such labs should be reclassified as *lecture* or at least as *lecture/lab*. If a course with homework is designated strictly as lab, not only is the faculty member being underpaid for teaching that course, the number of hours expected of students may overburden them. Sounds easy enough to remedy, but converting a course from lab to lecture also means that the number of hours the class meets is reduced, which for many subjects, such as Theatre Arts performance courses, is untenable.

Some faculty members feel that the assessment performed within their lab classrooms is unusually difficult and therefore justifies a higher rate of pay (e.g. Health Sciences courses). I find some difficulty with quantifying the difficulty of performing assessment in various subjects. It is my opinion that if an instructor is actively engaged in instruction or assessment for the hour in the classroom (as opposed to sitting at a desk multi-tasking while students practice or work on a computer), that instructor deserves appropriate pay for that hour. That said, instructing or assessing fifty students as opposed to twenty in the same time slot is clearly harder work, which raises the question of a higher rate of pay for *large labs*.

### CONCLUSION

Our system of classification must include workload considerations for differing rates of pay to be justifiable. Although it seems

that preparation and assessment may help us out of this quagmire, a definition of lecture based on homework alone will not necessarily solve the problem. For our system to be restored to fairness, clear criteria must be established for classifying courses. However, there are too many types of lectures and labs for those catchall terms to fill the bill in the current educational climate which encourages exploration of alternate teaching methods. Alternate methods aside, *traditional* methods of teaching subjects such as Performing Arts are not taken into consideration in the Lecture/Lab model. Rather than continuing to try to make every course fit this model, I believe we need to venture out of the lecture/lab box developing more accurate categories to describe our courses such as *studio*, *discussion*, *activity*, *workshop*, and *seminar*. But it would not be enough to simply call courses by these different titles, variable rates of pay appropriate to the different types of courses would be necessary depending on workload factors. “Aaaarghhh” you say, “Way too complicated!” (Or was that a voice inside my head?) Our current woes are attributable to taking a complex situation and attempting to force it into an overly simplistic solution. The simplest solution that works makes sense...cramming square pegs into round holes does not.

Some courses should continue to be classified as *lecture* if that’s appropriate; *lab* if they entail an instructor essentially sitting and watching students work or actually take place in a laboratory (although this seems like two distinct types of lab); or *lecture/lab* if they include both (even if not clearly differentiated time slots). For all those other courses, it is time to expand our horizons, explore other possibilities – to look at what other institutions are doing and find a more logical way to classify courses that both serves the needs of the institution and fairly compensates all faculty members for the work they are performing.

AFA WELCOMES YOUR FEEDBACK
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