

State colleges bear down on transfer shortage

By Matt Krupnick

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State education leaders are trying to overcome failures to improve the pathway from community colleges to public universities.

The University of California and California State University are working with the state's vast community college system to boost the number of students who transfer from the two-year schools. Some are applauding, while others worry it could fail as past attempts have.

A relative lack of communication among the three systems has long been a problem, compounded by problems coordinating with K-12 educators.

Rather than having a master blueprint that allows any community college student to transfer to a public university, California's 110 community colleges have been largely responsible for drafting their own agreements with each of the state's 32 UC and Cal State campuses that have undergraduates.

Some say the state will never improve transfer rates unless it overcomes a fear of standardization in higher education.

College educators highly value their unique curricula, said Sacramento State researcher Nancy Shulock, a co-author of a 2007 study that found only one in four community college students who planned to transfer to four-year schools actually did so within six years.

"We just fear statewide uniformity," she said. "Somebody's got to say, 'We can't cling to these assumptions of what works, because it isn't working.'"

The issue that has hampered previous discussions is making sure that transferring students can actually use credit earned in community college courses. University faculty, particularly in the Cal State system, have resisted standardizing courses so they fit neatly into transfer-ready categories.

In some cases, Cal State campuses expect transferring students to take courses not available at a local community college, said Linda Michalowski, a vice chancellor with the state community colleges.

"It's disruptive and it doesn't make much sense," she said.

The answer, some say, will be persuading university professors that some courses at the two-year schools are suitable for transfer purposes without perfectly fitting those molds.

"I think people are going to have to realize that you can't standardize a liberal-arts education in the 21st century," said John Travis, a Humboldt State political-science professor and a top officer with the Cal State faculty union. "I think some faculty are open to that, but some remain suspicious."

Each of the three systems has appointed a leader to the task force, which is gathering researchers to look into transfer problems. The UC appointee, UC Berkeley law Dean Christopher Edley, said the effort is part of UC President Mark Yudof's plans to smooth the path from preschool to college.

The task force, Edley said, hopes to improve upon past attempts, particularly a 1997 agreement between UC and the community colleges that laid out broad goals for improving transfer rates.

"The earlier (pact) created a check-the-box culture based on meeting a head count target more than a culture of lifting up the whole education system," he said. The goal of the new endeavor "is making sure students know where the onramps are so they can get back on track."

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