

## First in a four-part series:

### Students lose way on road to degree

**Bureaucratic, financial obstacles ingrained in community colleges**

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• Article Launched: 03/23/2008 03:01:06 AM PDT

If community colleges are pipelines, they have developed major clogs and leaks.

Even dedicated students at the two-year schools have trouble navigating the bureaucratic and financial twists and turns that lead to a university education.

By some estimates, one in four students with transfer aspirations reach four-year schools, and the ratio is much lower for Latino and black students.

Nicholas Cabatingan, for example, was well on his way to transferring from Las Positas College in Livermore to Chico State, taking a full load of classes as he worked two jobs.

But the 21-year-old could not persuade school administrators to declare him financially independent, which would have given him more access to financial aid. Instead of continuing on his path toward becoming a history teacher, he left school last year to work at a copy shop in Chico.

"I had to get a full-time job," said Cabatingan, who said he plans to take night classes at a Chico-area community college until he can transfer. "My savings got so low that I had to choose one or the other."

Intended to be pathways to bachelor's degrees, California's two-year institutions instead are losing the majority of students who enroll expecting to transfer to universities.

For students intent on transferring, the community college road is fraught with obstacles. Counselors are in short supply, a majority of students can't read or do math on a college level and students' own lives derail their ambitions.

Transfer aspirations are difficult to pin down, mostly because students' goals are unclear. Often, students taking transferable courses, such as basic psychology, may not plan to continue their education at a university.

In a 2007 study, Sacramento State researchers Nancy Shulock and Colleen Moore concluded that 60 percent of the state's incoming community college students in 1999 wanted to transfer or earn a degree or certificate. About a quarter of those 314,000 students had accomplished their goal six years later.

State administrators argued the study defined far too many people as degree-seekers or transfer students. But even best-case scenarios place success rates at around 50 percent, meaning more than 100,000 students per year fall short of their goals.

## **Unprepared students**

Students entering community colleges unprepared is the defining reason. More often than ever, remedial courses -- meant to teach what high schools didn't -- shatter students' college aspirations. It dawns on them that they will have to take several courses just to reach college-level math or English.

"Suddenly, that four-year degree starts looking like a six-year degree, at best," said Rick Wagoner, a UCLA education professor. "That really takes down their motivation to try to get the degree."

Although initiatives to improve college enrollment have succeeded -- more than 2.6 million Californians attend community colleges -- far less focus goes to keeping students there long enough to move forward.

The state restricts the use of colleges' funds, preventing schools from improving student services that would boost transfer rates. California community colleges must spend at least half their money on classroom instruction, which limits the hiring of counselors, financial-aid employees and other nonfaculty staff.

The result: long lines for overburdened counselors. Statewide, the student-to-counselor ratio is 1,900-to-1.

The counselor shortage causes particular problems for students who are the first in their families to attend college, a growing population that requires extra attention. Counselors say they must fill in the gaps for those students -- many of them immigrants -- who often have trouble finding support from relatives unfamiliar with the college system.

"I'm one counselor, and my intervention is the hour I have with them in my office," said Norma Valdez-Jimenez, head counselor at Contra Costa College in San Pablo. "For some students, that's enough. But for others, it's not."

Some students' obstacles go beyond the realm of counseling. Valdez-Jimenez cited a brother and sister who had to decide whether to drop out last year after their father had a stroke, placing the family's house at risk.

"You're talking about basic necessities, food and shelter," Valdez-Jimenez said. "They're going to take precedence over whether to go to class today."

## **Bad language**

Community college students who understand how to navigate to a university are the exception.

For many, college is a mysterious labyrinth, with ill-conceived bureaucratic literature heavy with eye-glazing language such as "matriculation" and "articulation" to explain basic concepts, educators say.

Prospective students looking to enroll at Los Medanos College will not get much help from the Pittsburg school's lengthy, text-heavy Web site.

"Matriculation is a state-mandated process," the site notes, "which promotes a mutual commitment by faculty, staff, and students to work together to help students develop clear educational goals and be successful in reaching those goals."

Simply put, matriculation is when a student registers for classes.

A more comprehensible question-and-answer page on the state chancellor's Web site includes faulty information, such as conflicting fees -- none of them correct.

Students who doubt they can handle college aren't likely to feel more confident after reading extensive jargon, experts say. But Web development is not a priority for cash-strapped colleges trying to spread a budget across several departments.

"It makes the need for a human touch from a counselor even more important, and we don't have the resources for that either," said Linda Michalowski, a statewide vice chancellor.

### **Lack of agreements**

Then there are the systemic stumbling blocks, such as the financial-aid obstacles that stalled Cabatingan's college plans. And there is the puzzling jumble of articulation agreements, or contracts among community colleges and universities that lay out exactly which classes a student must take to transfer.

Although many parts of the state's education system are rigidly standardized, articulation agreements are glaring exceptions. Some basic transfer pacts are negotiated by the statewide systems, but each community college must ensure its students will be able to transfer smoothly to universities.

It's one thing for a Bay Area college to strike deals with Bay Area universities, but it's much more difficult for those community colleges to arrange articulation agreements with Southern California schools.

"There are many different articulation agreements," said Anne MacLachlan, a researcher at UC Berkeley's Center for Studies in Higher Education. "It's totally insane."

Los Medanos College, for example, has far fewer articulation agreements than it needs, said Bill Fracisco, who directs the school's transfer center. Without those contracts in place, students could finish their community college studies only to find some Los Medanos courses don't count toward university transfers.

"There's a lot of anxiety a student has to go through," Fracisco said. "It's not pleasant."

### **That college feeling**

Another problem is ambiance, but not the kind that can be solved with candles or artwork.

State administrators estimate that 80 percent of community college students work, far more than students at four-year schools. With few students spending significant time on campus, two-year schools have found it difficult to make students feel like they're in college, said Steven Brint, a UC Riverside sociology professor.

"If you're surrounded by people who have one foot in the world of work and a few toes in the world of school, it's unlikely to create a climate where people are heated up to transfer," said Brint, an author of a book on community colleges.

"You're going to have a lower climate of expectations. That can't be good for the average student," he said.

## **Immigration issues**

Immigration laws add to the obstacles by preventing perhaps thousands of California students from transferring to universities.

Illegal immigrants often manage to make it through more affordable community colleges, but financial-aid rules stymie their university plans. That was the case with a former Contra Costa College student, a 13-year United States resident from Mexico who finished her community college work three years ago but could not transfer to San Francisco State because she did not have a Social Security number.

"Everything just collapsed at that point," said the 25-year-old, who asked that her name not be used because of her immigration status.

Some schools are turning to innovative experiments to boost transfer rates.

The Los Rios Community College District in the Sacramento area is building a two-year campus at UC Davis, hoping to give community college students a taste of the four-year experience.

The community college already offers classes at the university, and about 3,500 UC Davis students take courses in Farsi, Arabic and Tagalog through the community college, said Larry Vanderhoef, UC Davis' chancellor.

The new campus should help transfer rates, Vanderhoef said.

"I think the biggest benefit (community college students) get is they get used to being on a UC campus," he said. "It gives them confidence."

That confidence helps the four-year campus, as well. Although so-called "transfer shock" often leads to lower-than-usual grades during a community college graduate's first term at a university, their final grade-point average generally is higher than those of college graduates who started at a university as freshmen.

"When students come in, they feel they are prepared," said Eva Rivas, director of UC Berkeley's Transfer, Re-entry and Student Parent Center. "At the end, their grades bear that out."

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