

## Final story in a four-part series

### Colleges short of cash, but reform possible

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When national experts talk about the challenges facing community colleges, there's California and then there's everywhere else.

California's a whole other story, they say, pointing out that the state's community college enrollment is larger than the population of at least 16 states.

And there's the rub for anyone hoping to make life easier on those schools and their students.

Fixing problems in the world's largest higher-education system has proved difficult for California's policymakers, both because of the sheer size of the system and because community colleges are rarely popular political causes. Cutting elementary school budgets brings cries of protest; cutting community college funding barely elicits a whimper.

Per-student funding has remained nearly flat since 1970, despite the increasing cost of educating students in all disciplines. More community college advocates than ever are saying California's fees -- far lower than the next cheapest state at \$20 per unit -- simply need to be raised.

Grants are available from public and private sources, but that money quickly runs out, leaving promising programs with no way to survive.

And even when a school finds an innovative way to solve its problems, the solution is difficult to enact on a statewide level because each college district is governed by its own board.

But researchers and educators say reforms are possible even with the funding problems, both statewide and locally. Often, those solutions demand money and political will, but some say all it would take is the realization that the college system must change now to avert severe societal and economic problems in the near future.

Let's look at some of the proposed solutions:

#### **Vocational**

As with most issues at community colleges, money -- and especially the lack thereof -- is the root of the system's workforce development problems.

A nursing student -- who costs the school more than twice as much to educate as humanities or social-science majors -- generates the same enrollment-based funding as a

psychology student. The standardized formula makes it difficult for schools to afford the expensive equipment needed to train machinists, mechanics and nurses.

Several states recognize the cost differences and give colleges more money for students in fields such as the health sciences than for those in the social sciences. Recent appropriations in California have boosted funding for particularly important programs, such as nursing, but despite experts' repeated recommendations over the years, California has not changed its basic funding structure.

That shortcoming is likely to hurt the state in tough economic times, researchers say. California's colleges are expected to help solve the severe nursing shortage, for example, but they can afford the expensive training only as long as the state gives them more money per nursing student.

In some cases, industry groups and companies have picked up the slack, giving schools the money to build facilities and buy equipment that will better prepare students for careers. There are scattered examples of car dealerships and manufacturers chipping in for training facilities, but no wide-scale financial help.

State leaders recently have realized the disconnect between industry and community colleges, but more of their attention has focused on building vocational programs in high schools. For a 25-year-old high-school dropout, however, it doesn't help when the local high school bulks up its auto shop.

In general, companies have been slow to realize that community colleges often are best equipped to solve worker shortages. The Southern California companies that make the nuts and bolts needed for aircraft construction, for example, only realized their need for trained workers recently, when they were unable to fill all their shifts.

But much of the fault lies with the colleges themselves, many of which are not equipped to communicate with local companies. Colleges often send counselors to local high schools to recruit transfer-oriented students, but it's more rare for them to ask businesses what they need and to explain the colleges' training capabilities.

Of course, colleges can't be expected to communicate effectively when state law requires them to dedicate at least half their budgets to classroom instruction. The "50-percent rule" limits the money to spread among the myriad administrative tasks needed to help a school run effectively.

## **Transfer**

The 50-percent rule frequently is cited as a main culprit when colleges run into problems sending students to four-year schools. The law gives colleges little flexibility to spend money on counselors and other student services, leading to problems when students try to navigate the pitfalls on their way to a university.

The funding restriction manifests itself several times along the transfer track.

Students express frustration about the confusing financial-aid process, noting that employees in those offices are often students who rarely have the answers to important

questions. The lack of answers can have serious consequences; only a small percentage of eligible students realize they qualify for fee waivers in California, for example.

Experts often cite orientation as one of the most effective ways of keeping students on track for transferring. An in-depth session familiarizing new students with the campus and its services can do wonders, research shows.

But schools often have little money available to provide orientation for all but the most traditional students, the 18-year-old freshmen who start school in the fall. Few services are available for students who start later in the semester or midyear, or those who work during the day and come to class at night or on weekends. For them, college can become a confusing and sometimes scary place.

And like all colleges, community colleges have seen a spike in the number of students with mental-health needs. But unlike universities, two-year schools rarely have health centers with trained mental-health professionals.

Funding restrictions also can be blamed for the dearth of clear information for students. Community colleges don't have the money to spend on Web development, leading to shoddy online sites that provide only the barest facts written in hard-to-decipher language.

The Diablo Valley College chemistry department's Web site is representative of other department sites.

The site gives no department phone number. The "View DVC Chemistry Faculty" link leads to a page of photographs that don't include professors' names, much less their contact information.

Even if a student manages to weave his or her way past the pitfalls, they still could be tripped up by the state's failure to standardize what are called articulation agreements. These are pacts between community colleges and universities that give transfer students a clear path to follow.

In some cases, the lack of an agreement can leave students unable to transfer, even though they've spent two or more years taking courses they thought universities would accept.

## **Remedial**

The community colleges' funding problems are most visible when it comes to their inability to help underprepared students.

Research shows that it costs more to teach remedial students effectively than it does to teach general-education courses, but California does not pay schools more for unprepared students. With at least 670,000 of them attending community colleges, the lack of funding has caused serious problems for educators.

Although the state has recently dedicated more money to help colleges improve basic skills, the sheer magnitude of the problem requires far more funding. Few schools are able to give faculty members the training needed to engage remedial students, leading to dismal retention rates.

Colleges also could improve student success by requiring that only full-time professors teach remedial courses. At some schools, full-time professors are reluctant to teach students who are unprepared for college, even though those students may make up a majority of the school's enrollment.

On many campuses, part-time professors do not have their own offices, meaning they rarely have office hours when they are available to counsel their students. That one-on-one interaction has proved extremely effective at keeping students in school, researchers say.

Although the 50-percent rule often is cited as the reason schools can't hire tutors and other student-service personnel, some colleges have found ways to help remedial students without running afoul of the funding restrictions.

Chaffey College in Rancho Cucamonga, for example, classifies many of its services as instructional, meaning the money spent on those services does not count against the school's classroom-funding minimum.

Perhaps the easiest step toward fixing remedial problems would be improving the research on community college students. At Chaffey, proponents of the school's transformation used the data they had collected to prove to colleagues the need for such changes.

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