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Disputed report criticizes colleges

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FREMONT -- Ohlone College isn't buying the findings of a recently released -- and controversial -- study that gave community colleges a failing grade for their performance in helping students complete their education.

That is because the California State University, Sacramento, study missed the mark, Ohlone President Doug Treadway said. And -- Treadway said -- it doesn't address a deeper problem: outdated policies.

The report noted major flaws in the world's largest higher-education system, which has 110 colleges and 2.5 million students whose goals range from job training and certification to post-retirement cooking classes.

To begin, only a quarter of community college students seeking transfer to a four-year college or a two-year degree or certificate succeed within six years, and the state's economy will suffer unless educators do a better job of helping students complete their education, the study said.

Researchers also found that completion rates were much lower for black and Latino students than for white and Asian students.

But it gets worse.

Educators and policymakers have spent more time and money helping students get into college than on helping them earn degrees, Cal State Sacramento researchers found.

Financial aid programs primarily focus on helping students entering college, researchers said, and unintentionally dissuade students from finishing their educations. "The community colleges were designed as a bridge between high school and college," said Nancy Shulock, the report's co-author and director of the university's Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy. "Our policies just aren't helping students complete their journey."

Lawmakers and other researchers said the findings would help the state reform its education policies.

But some community college leaders said the researchers used flawed data to come to their conclusions.

"Frankly, we were insulted by the report," said Scott Lay, president of the Community College League of California, which lobbies on behalf of the colleges.

"The report shows a real misunderstanding of the mission of California's community colleges."

Treadway echoed the statement, saying there is room for improvement.

However, he called the report's assumptions "outdated."

Students don't follow a linear sequence from high school to college to university any longer, Treadway said. "The entire society is taking advantage of learning."

Half of Ohlone's students take classes at the college for professional or personal development. Twenty percent already have a college degree.

The other half work full or part time, lengthening the time they require to finish their studies, Treadway said.

In addition, two-thirds of students who come to Ohlone need help in basic math and English skills, which reflects the education they receive in high school, Treadway said.

Still, Ohlone boasts a transfer rate that is among the highest of the state's community colleges.

In terms of raw numbers, 227 students transferred to private colleges in 2004-05, the most recent figures available. The number who transferred to public universities rose from 496 to 549 between 2004-05 and 2005-06.

Treadway said he would like to see policies that reflect the reality of contemporary community college education, particularly in terms of funding.

Universities receive three times more money per student than community colleges from the state.

"That is the biggest sore point," Treadway noted.

"We would have a better chance of innovating (education) if we had more money," he added.

Shulock emphasized that the report, titled "Rules of the Game," did not criticize the colleges, saying educators were doing the best they could despite restrictive state rules. State law requires community colleges to spend half their money on instruction and to limit the number of part-time faculty members.

The report concluded that colleges would be able to help students graduate or transfer if they had more flexibility on financial and hiring decisions.

Other researchers asked educators to take the results seriously.

"All you have to do is look at California's position compared to other states to realize we need to make changes," said Patrick Callan, president of the San Jose-based National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. "This isn't a time to react defensively."

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