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## Study: Student aid better than cheap fees

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High living costs and financial-aid shortfalls are preventing many California students from attending the state's community colleges, where student fees are the lowest in the nation, according to a study released this week.

Fees -- lowered to \$20 per unit this year -- make up an average of less than 5 percent of the costs for community-college students, according to the report from the San Jose-based National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. Books, rent and health insurance all cost far more than fees, the study found.

Fees are waived for more than half of the full-time students because they are in the lowest income brackets. Researchers urged policymakers to focus more on adding scholarships than lowering fees to best serve the more than 2.5 million students on 109 California campuses.

"The state has underinvested in student aid," said William Zumeta, one of the report's two authors. "The fee rollbacks don't do these students any good because they already get fee waivers."

With rental-housing costs and book prices each rising faster than inflation, financial aid continues to lag far behind the costs of attending college, researchers said. The maximum award of the Cal Grant B scholarship, used to pay costs other than school fees, is just \$1,551, or 15 percent higher than it was 20 years ago.

The report also noted that California's community-college students are far less likely to apply for and receive federal financial aid than students in other states. About 15 percent of California students receive Pell grants, the most common federal scholarship, compared with 25 percent of community-college students in other states.

Researchers recommended that the state gradually raise community-college fees at the pace of inflation and spend the extra money on academic improvements and improving transfer rates and financial-aid counseling.

Education experts lauded the report and said lawmakers would do well to follow the recommendations.

"We've just been so fixated on fees," said Nancy Shulock, a Cal State Sacramento professor who heads the school's Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy. "Our students are not well-served by that."

Leaders need to do more to help students obtain financial aid, said Robert Shireman, executive director of the Berkeley-based Institute for College Access and Success.

"We have made it very easy to enroll in a community college, and that is a good thing," he said. "Compared to that, applying for financial aid is confusing, intimidating and difficult."

Several students at Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill said Tuesday they preferred finding jobs to navigating the daunting student-aid process.

Maria Pikusova, a first-year student from San Ramon, said she hasn't bothered with financial aid because she doesn't think she would get it as a dependent living at home. She chose a movie-theater job instead.

And Cory Ramos, a second-year student from Pittsburg who works at a Chinese restaurant, said he looked into financial aid as a way to defray the cost of \$100 math books and rent but quickly gave up.

"It's so much of a process to do and there are so many steps," he said. "I didn't have the time. I just decided to get a job."

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