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HEADLINE: California's future depends on education

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BODY:

ACCORDING to the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy at California State University, Sacramento, there is an alarming decline in the percentage of California students going to college directly after high school.

California students entering college from high school dropped from 61 percent to 52 percent in the past 10 years, according to the "State of Decline" study. Moreover, California ranks 40th among states in the rate of high school graduates going directly to college.

Dr. **Nancy Shulock**, director of the institute, explains the significance of the findings. "California is facing some really serious challenges in higher education that are not getting the policy attention that they deserve," she said.

She adds, "The bottom line is that we are issuing a really strong warning that we must close these gaps in educational attainment across regions of the state and across racial and ethnic groups or we'll see a real decline in not only the economic health of the state and the education of the workforce but all of the social health of the state that goes along with these findings."

The obvious long-term impact of the study is an extension of the overall pressure on the middle class. As older, better-educated Californians retire, they will be replaced by younger, less-educated workers that will only increase the decline in wages we are already experiencing.

As is the case with most studies of this magnitude, the results of this report are especially hard on minority communities. Nearly 50 percent of the 18-year-old population in California is black or Hispanic, but only 25 percent of undergraduate certificates and degrees are awarded to black or Hispanic students. Overall, California is 47th among states in the number of certificates and degrees granted per 100 undergraduates. This latter statistic indicates, however, the gravity of the problem is in all sectors of the population.

For all of the hyperbole that politicians espouse around election time to their commitment to education, California, the nation's leader in so many areas, remains in the lower percentile in most areas when it comes to student achievement.

This dilemma makes the community college system in California enormously important in changing the current landscape. With 109 campuses throughout the state, community colleges have a much larger role in higher education in California than any other state in the country.

One of the strengths of higher education in the state has been the ease of attending college. It's accessible. I still maintain that a college education is within the grasp of anyone who lives in California who has the desire. This is one of California's long-term priorities, found in its Master Plan for Education first adopted in 1960. But access to college is not the same as being properly prepared, nor does it suggest that one will graduate.

How can California retain and attract new business if it continues to produce students that consistently rank in the lower percentiles of student achievement?

At a time when students are required to have more substantial knowledge, as well as more technical workplace skills in the post-industrial economy, we are turning out students unable to meet the stated goals. Given our current trend, the ranks of the working poor will expand, thus creating a larger two-tiered society.

The current higher education trend in California can only be altered by a shared commitment by the populace along with a corresponding obligation to invest in the required resources.

It was the leadership of former governor Pat Brown in the early 1960s that spawned California's unprecedented commitment to higher education. If we are to meet the challenge issued in the "State of Decline" report, we must replicate his visionary lead.

There is no question that we are going to spend the money. The only question will be whether we spend it developing a better-educated workforce or building more prisons.

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