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Access and Success — Is it Either/Or?

A new report on California's community college system argues that policies in place to enhance access have had the unintended effect of inhibiting student completion.

“Although California does a great job of opening the door to college ... our policies aren't helping students complete. We need to do both, we need to keep the door wide open, and we need to help our students succeed,” said Nancy Shulock, executive director of the [Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy](#) at California State University's Sacramento campus and lead researcher for [“Rules of the Game: How State Policy Creates Barriers to Degree Completion and Impedes Student Success in the California Community Colleges.”](#)

Shulock said a variety of state policies — “the rules of the game” — combine to create a culture that bolsters a “student's right to fail.” Shulock stressed Thursday that there's not a trade-off between California's historic commitment to access and a newly invigorated push for greater completion, and that nothing in the report suggests access should be compromised. But some of the recommendations of the report — including proposals to remove restrictions on campus-based fees and tie completion to state funding — fueled criticisms that it privileges success over access. “The report sorely underreports our student success numbers and misses the mark relating to what works and what doesn't,” Marshall Drummond, chancellor of the [California Community Colleges](#), said in a written statement.

“As we work to address the challenges in the CCC system, it is important to not ‘toss out the baby with the bathwater;’ our dedication to access to higher education in California is paying off.”

At \$20 per credit, resident fees for California's community colleges are, the report states, by far the lowest in the nation. Yet, California's commitment to access — manifested not just by low fees charged to students, but also a reluctance to impose requirements regarding assessment, remedial placement, advising and orientation — has inadvertently helped fuel pretty dismal completion rates, the authors argue.

Of the 60 percent of California community college students who seek a degree or certificate, only 24 percent succeed in transferring to a four-year university and/or earning an associate degree or certificate within six years, according to the report. The

completion rates for black and Latino students were even lower, at 15 and 18 percent respectively. The same goes for older students: Just 18 percent of degree-seeking students in their 30s completed, and 16 percent of those 40 and over.

“Access without completion gives California’s college students a false sense of opportunity and could jeopardize the state’s competitive edge in the global economy,” the report states.

“For too long, Californians and their elected representatives have been satisfied with high levels of access and have focused policy attention on *removing barriers to enrolling* in college. With emerging concerns about inadequate education levels of the state’s workforce, the time has come to turn attention to *removing barriers to completion*” (italics per the report).

Among the problems cited in the report are statewide restrictions on hiring and expenditures, both of which inhibit the flexibility of community colleges to direct their resources toward student support services; a funding system based on enrollment to the exclusion of completion; lenient policies regarding student advising, assessment and remedial placement; and a state-controlled fee system. That system, the report states, does not allow institutions to directly benefit from their students’ fees, thus eliminating any incentive for colleges to support fee increases, and, due to the low rates, keeps per-student funding below national averages despite comparable state support, while detracting attention from financial aid options available to help students defray the total cost of attendance.

Shulock stressed that the report does not recommend an increase in fees, but instead calls for a system that allows colleges to directly benefit from fee revenue, while not penalizing those institutions that enroll high numbers of students qualifying for fee waivers (however, the system being proposed would, of course, create new incentives on the part of institutions to seek higher fees). The report also calls for removing statewide restrictions on campus-based fees that would discourage student behaviors like late enrollment — part of an effort, the report explains, “to give colleges more tools to manage their finances in the interest of student success.”

Other recommendations include making placement tests on entry mandatory for degree-seeking students, requiring students with remedial needs to enroll in basic skills courses upon beginning classwork, enhancing flexibility for institutions in regards to expenditures and hiring, and funding institutions based on completion as well as enrollment, with bonuses built in for completions by disadvantaged and under-prepared students (various thresholds for the level of completion that would be rewarded could be imagined, the authors write).

An affordability policy that would encourage full-time enrollment – the report finds that California’s full-time students are four times more likely than their part-time peers to complete their degrees – and better direct students toward state and federal aid programs would also enhance completion, the report argues.

“This is not a question of improving completion at the expense of open access,” Shulock said. Nor is the concept of maintaining access while boosting completion novel: Community colleges with open-door policies across the country have, she said, “moved in another direction to believe that it’s the institution’s responsibility to help the students to succeed.”

“It’s outstanding work,” said Michael Kirst, an emeritus professor of business management and education at Stanford University. “The report poses it directly: We think we have a good system because we have one of the lowest fees in the country, but we don’t have good rates of completion and we may have to trade off low fees for completion.”

He added: “This can be an inexpensive ticket to nowhere if you don’t complete your intended program.”

Meanwhile, in his response to the report, Chancellor Drummond argued that about 51 percent of students seeking a degree, certificate or transfer to a four-year institution “do so or become prepared to do so within six years of starting at a CCC campus” (A spokesman clarified that the phrase, “become prepared to do so” refers to students who complete at least 60 credits transferable toward the University of California or California State University systems with a GPA of 2.0 or greater). The chancellor’s office uses a more narrow definition of “degree-seeker” than that employed in the study, researchers said.

“Our own experience in helping students who are educationally and economically challenged suggests that, if given a chance, they can and will succeed. To deny students the opportunity of succeeding by reducing the rates of college enrollment as the report suggests would be to shut the door on the dreams of countless thousands of Californians,” Drummond wrote. *“The success rate of students who have no access to college is always zero.”*

Drummond also faults the report for failing to acknowledge the circumstances that cause many students to enroll part-time or discontinuously, and for ignoring work already underway to improve student success. He cited several priorities identified in the California Community College Board of Governors’ [recently approved strategic plan](#) as examples. These include enhancing communication between college and K-12 instructors, increasing financial aid, and creating a strong linkage between high school standards tests and college placement standards.

Martha J. Kanter, chancellor of [Foothill-De Anza Community College District](#) in the Silicon Valley, added that funding for access shouldn’t be diverted to provide an incentive for meeting certain outcomes, although new monies should be provided to allow the community colleges to do more in terms of access and degree attainment.

“The report recommends redirecting existing funds to provide incentives to achieve higher completion rates. This recommendation would effectively decrease higher

education access to college for Latino and African American students,” Kanter said in a statement in which she outlined the failure of past incentive-based funding initiatives in California. The incentive funding proposed in the report “is a good thing,” she said, but “not at the expense of keeping our doors open to the middle class of Californians and the working poor. This should not be an either/or discussion.”

— [Elizabeth Redden](#)