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HEADLINE: Few community college students transfer or earn degrees, study says; The survey, which tracked about 520,000 people over six years, cites 'well-intentioned' state policies, including ones that affect funding.

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BODY:

Only one-fourth of California's community college students seeking a degree transferred to a university or earned an associate's degree or certificate within six years, a report released Thursday found.

Researchers at Cal State Sacramento said the figure was an unintended consequence of state policies created over the last few decades to remove barriers to community college access.

"Historically, state policies have succeeded in getting students into community colleges, but the same policies impede community colleges from flexibility in meeting the students' needs and getting them through college," said **Nancy Shulock**, the report's lead researcher.

Over a six-year period, Cal State Sacramento's Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy tracked 520,407 students who initially enrolled at California's community colleges during the 1999-2000 academic year. Sixty percent of the students identified themselves as degree seekers, while 40% were non-degree seekers who took courses to gain job skills or personal enrichment.

Shulock, joined by other researchers and lawmakers, announced the results in a teleconference from Sacramento.

Researchers said their report explained why 76% of degree seekers didn't earn an associate's degree or successfully transfer to a four-year institution.

Some of the main "barriers to completion" involve policies that affect how much funding colleges receive, how they spend their funds and student fees.

Community colleges receive most of their state funding based on enrollment, which leads some institutions to allow students to register late and postpone exams until enrollment is reported to the state, researchers said. The strategy boosts funding but not academic excellence, the report said.

"There is a tremendous amount of pressure to get student enrollment as high as possible," said Steve Boilard, higher education director for the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office in Sacramento. "But very little pressure to make sure they complete or transfer out."

Boilard said the report justifiably raised concerns over some state policies, such as one requiring a college to spend at least 50% of its budget on direct classroom instruction instead of on support staff, such as academic and financial aid advisors.

Another policy under scrutiny requires 75% of the faculty to be full-time instructors, instead of part-time teachers who could specialize in fields where jobs are needed in the local

community.

"All of these provisions were well-intentioned efforts to address the rights of faculty and ensure a quality education," **Shulock** said. But they sometimes hinder a college's ability to offer the kinds of courses students need, she said.

The report also found that completion rates were higher among students who attended colleges full time, were enrolled continuously, completed an orientation course and registered on time for most of their courses.

"The colleges with the lowest transfer rates are typically those in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, areas like Southwest Los Angeles or Oakland," said Senate Education Committee Chairman Jack Scott (D-Altadena). "It's the same pattern you see with in K through 12 schools."

The report's findings back up a November study by the San Francisco-based Public Policy Institute of California, which also found that blacks and Latinos have the lowest completion rates of community college students statewide.

Black and Latino students have lower rates of completion -- 15% and 18%, respectively -- when compared with 27% for whites and 33% for Asians, the Cal State Sacramento study found.

"The community college is viewed as the principal route to upward mobility for many of California's Latinos, but the disparities are evident," **Shulock** said. "We just can't throw up our hands in the air."

California's 110 community colleges have about 2.5 million students.

The report calls for policymakers and community college officials to work together to increase completion rates, making specific suggestions on the financial and instructional constraints that state policy has over community colleges.

Shulock said the report was not intended to portray California's community college system as a failure but to point out how the colleges were "just playing by the rules" set by the state.

"About three-fourths of the state's public undergraduates attend community colleges, which contributes a lot to society," **Shulock** said. "But it's going to take not only more money, but better policies to produce better results."