

College opportunities for state residents ebb

The state ranks 29th for people between 25 and 34 attaining an associate degree, a study says. Without improvement, it risks a serious shortage of educated workers to compete in a global economy.

By Gale Holland
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California's historic leadership in higher education is in decline, with the state failing to provide a new generation of low-income, heavily Latino and immigrant students with the college prospects their parents and grandparents enjoyed, according to a study released Thursday.

The state ranks near the top nationally for residents over age 65 who have at least an associate of arts degree, but places only 29th in the nation for those between 25 and 34 who have the same level of education, the study said. Unless the pattern of shrinking opportunities is reversed, the state risks a serious shortage of educated workers to compete in a global economy, the study warned.

"We're facing some really serious challenges and it has to do with not getting our younger generation educated at the same rate as other generations," said Nancy Shulock, coauthor of the report and executive director of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy at Cal State Sacramento. She spoke during a conference call Thursday about the report. "We don't think the budget crisis can be an excuse not to act."

Titled "The Grades Are In -- 2008," the report said too many of the state's high school students are not prepared for college, too many of its adults lack "basic literacy" and too many colleges fail to make sure their students complete certificate programs or degrees.

Getting a college education in California increasingly is a matter of where one lives. The Inland Empire and Central Valley, the fastest-growing parts of the state, lag behind Orange County, the Sacramento region and the San Francisco Bay Area in college preparation and participation, the report said.

But the statewide picture also is dismal, Shulock added. California ranks 40th in the nation in the percentage of high school graduates who head directly to college, 45th in high school students taking advanced science and math classes and near the bottom in the percentage of students earning college degrees and certificates, she said.

Nearly 80% of California's black and Latino college students enroll, at least initially, at the state's 110 two-year campuses. But with California State University and the University of California capping freshman enrollment and contemplating fee hikes, educators fear that more-prepared students, who in most years would have gone straight to universities, will squeeze out some of the traditional two-year college population, making it more difficult for them to transfer to four-year institutions, Shulock said.

"It becomes competition for scarce seats, and the fear is the less well-prepared will lose out," she said.

Shulock said that even in the face of the financial crisis, the state should take action, including shifting funding formulas for colleges from the number of students they enroll to the number who complete programs or degrees. Pat Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, which does its own national assessment of college issues, agreed, saying the state system needs an overhaul.

"This state has a master plan which does not work . . . and has not worked for probably 20 years," said Callan, who participated in the conference call. "Every time we take a turn into recession, we hemorrhage students."

"Throughout most of my career, California was the first in everything we could measure in the nation and world," he said. "But we have not responded well to the huge demographic and economic changes that are changing the face of California."

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