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Report calls for overhaul of California community colleges' transfer process

It finds the obstacles that students face in moving to a four-year school are endemic and that fixing the pipeline to baccalaureate degrees is vital to the state's economic future.

By Seema Mehta
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Community college student Kristen Grand dreams of transferring to Cal State Long Beach so she can earn a bachelor's degree in social work and become an adoption caseworker. But the process of accumulating the right course work and filling all the requirements is overwhelming, the 26-year-old says.

"It's kind of stressful," Grand said after class at Long Beach City College one afternoon this week. "Finances, for one, and whether I'm going to get the right amount of counseling to figure out what I need to do."

Grand is not alone. More than 2.7 million Californians are students in the state's sprawling network of community colleges. Some are enrolled in vocational classes or pursuing two-year degrees, while others seek a path into a four-year institution. But relatively few make the jump -- in the 2007-08 school year, 106,666 students successfully transferred to a University of California or California State University campus, or to private or out-of-state colleges.

Now, a new study finds that the obstacles California community college students face in transferring are endemic and require an overhaul of the transfer process.

Fixing the pipeline to baccalaureate degrees is vital to the state's economic future, according to the study by the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy at Cal State Sacramento. The report, which is scheduled to be released today, notes that by 2025, there will be 1 million more jobs for college graduates in California than there are degree-holders.

"The issue is not new, but the problem is taking on increasingly large dimensions," said Nancy Shulock, the institute's executive director. "It's a pretty straight line -- you can connect the dots between the number of educated people we have and the economic future of the state."

The problem, she said, is exacerbated by the fact that community colleges often serve students who are unprepared, including those who are the first in a family to attend college, and lack enough counselors to meet their needs.

The report also found that the state's higher education system, which includes 110 community colleges, suffers from a hodgepodge of transfer policies that result in students taking too many courses or the wrong courses -- a frustrating waste of time and money that leads some to drop out.

"Yes, I've been there," said Amanda Sosa, 24, who is in her second year at Long Beach City College and spent four years at another community college. By the time she is eligible to transfer next year, the Hacienda Heights resident said she will have completed 78 transferable credits -- 23% more than required -- because of confusion about the process.

Transfer requirements vary from campus to campus, according to the study.

For example, if a Bay Area student enters community college and hopes to seek a bachelor's degree in psychology, the six nearest public four-year institutions, including San Jose State and UC Davis, each has a different set of course requirements for transfer.

"That is very frustrating and confusing to students," Shulock said. "They may not know what major they are going to choose, or what university they want to transfer into. They may not get into their first-choice university."

Another problem, the report says, is that transfer requirements are different from the requirements to get an associate's degree. So if students do not transfer, or if they transfer and do not complete their bachelor's degrees, they have nothing to show for their work.

There have been previous efforts to address the problem, including legislation, campus-based initiatives and task forces. But the study, which also examines policies in states that are more successful in transferring students, says comprehensive, statewide reform is essential.

The report's authors advocate creating associate degrees specifically for transfer students that would fulfill the basic requirements for all California colleges and universities, and guarantee transfer of all credits earned in certain courses.

Other recommendations include creating a standardized general-education checklist of courses that would allow transfer to all of the state's public four-year institutions, and creating a degree-audit system so students and counselors could easily check whether they are meeting the requirements.

Eloy Ortiz Oakley, president of Long Beach City College, said such efforts are vital.

"We tinker around the edges, we maybe increase transfers by 1% or 2% -- that's not going to get us where we need to be," Oakley said. "We've got to scale up our efforts a hundredfold."

A link to the study can be found at www.csus.edu/ihe.

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