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## Our View: Remove barriers to college dream

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Californians justifiably take pride in their community college system. With an open-door policy, it takes all comers -- those dabbling in a course here and there, upgrading job skills or seeking a two-year degree or higher.

California consistently has among the highest community college participation rates in the country.

At the same time, policymakers have considerable anxiety that California is not producing enough college graduates to assure future prosperity for the state and upward mobility for individuals.

A new policy brief, "Rules of the Game: How State Policy Creates Barriers to Degree Completion and Impedes Student Success in the California Community Colleges," shows that the concerns are real. Policymakers need to focus new attention on the community college gateway to a college degree.

For six years researchers Nancy Shulock and Colleen Moore at the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy in Sacramento tracked students who started community college in fall 1999. They separated out students who were sampling courses for personal improvement or job skills, concentrating on students whose goal was, or should have been, a degree. They followed students who were ages 17 to 19 and/or reported a goal of earning a certificate or two-year degree or transferring to a four-year university.

The result was dismal: Only 24 percent earned a certificate or associate degree, or transferred to a university within six years.

The community colleges point out that another 25 percent to 26 percent complete the course work to transfer to a four-year university, but then never transfer. Unfortunately, the researchers did not address this issue, though Shulock acknowledges it is huge.

California should have the nation's best transfer system, she notes, yet it has among the worst. A state-wide solution to make transfer seamless between the community colleges and the California State University and University of California systems would go a long way to improve completion rates.

The researchers conclude that California's traditional emphasis on access to community colleges is not enough: "We must give equal attention to removing barriers to completion," they write.

This diagnosis of the problem should be noncontroversial and should jump-start discussions among Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, legislators and the higher education community, not only about how to better help students succeed but how to raise student expectations.

The more controversial part of the 16-page policy brief is the proposed solutions, but they don't yet have supporting evidence to back them. The researchers say the full research product will arrive at the end of February. Until then, it's best to start with widespread agreement on the most serious barriers to degree completion:

Inadequate academic preparation, especially in reading.

Students juggling children and job responsibilities as they attend school.

Students not understanding that the full cost of college is more than the fees, which remain low in California, and includes textbooks, transportation, child care and more.

California needs to address these issues to increase the number of students who earn certificates or degrees or transfer to a four-year university, and the state particularly needs to focus on lower-income, minority and first-generation college students. The community colleges, as the state's premier entryway to higher education, are the logical place to begin that conversation.

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