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Preserving California's Competitive Edge: What's Causing Low Student Completion in the Community Colleges and How to Fix It

**New report finds exclusive policy focus on improving college access
unintentionally inhibits student success;
Students who attend full-time are four times more likely to succeed**

SACRAMENTO — For decades, whether students got into California's community colleges — not whether they completed their educational goals — has been the principal measure of the college system's success. But completion rates are low and a new study is raising questions about whether the single focus on access is giving community college students a false sense of opportunity that could jeopardize the state's competitive edge in the global economy. The report stresses that open access must be accompanied by public policies that promote student success.

"We are at a critical crossroads in California," said Senator Jack Scott (D-Pasadena), chairman of the Senate Education Committee. "The future of our state economy and even the California dream are tied to increasing the number of Californians who both enter and complete their college education. By design, the community colleges are the most viable stepping stone for the majority of our high school graduates."

The study, "*Rules of the Game: How State Policy Creates Barriers to Degree Completion and Impedes Student Success in the California Community Colleges*," uncovers low completion rates among community college students seeking a degree, certificate or transfer to a four-year university. The report, authored by researchers at the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy at California State University, Sacramento, also provides the first comprehensive analysis of *why* completion rates are low, including the surprising finding that the very policies created to remove barriers to access are unintentionally impeding student success.

"California does a great job of opening the door to college and upward mobility," said Nancy Shulock, director of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy at California State University Sacramento, referencing California's long-standing commitment to open access. "Our policies just aren't helping students finish the journey."

"Rules of the Game" found low completion rates, as did a report recently released by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC). Specifically, it finds that of the students who enter community college seeking a degree, certificate or transfer to a four-year university, fewer than 25 percent reach one of these completion milestones within 6 years. Black and Latino student completion is even lower, with 15 percent and 18 percent completion rates, respectively.

The new report picks up where PPIC left off, revealing why the completion rates at California's community colleges are so low and how to fix the problem without reducing open access.

For decades, California has enacted policies aimed at removing barriers to access, but the exclusive focus on access has produced barriers to completion which have gone unrecognized or unattended. While many

may be quick to point the finger at the community colleges themselves, the study finds that they are just playing by the “rules of the game” established by state policy — policy that creates incentives for them to exclusively focus on access in order to survive financially, politically, and legally. These include:

- Finance policies that reward colleges for enrolling students up front, but not for helping them succeed;
- Rules and regulations on how funds can be spent which hold the community colleges accountable for *how they spend money* instead of *what they accomplish*;
- Restrictions on hiring that have the unintended consequence of limiting a college’s ability to offer the courses and teach the skills that students want and that are needed by employers in the local communities that the colleges serve;
- Fee and financial aid policies that largely ignore the major costs of going to college and, as a result, leave colleges with inadequate resources to help students succeed and leave students with inadequate financial aid that causes them to work and attend part-time more than necessary; and
- Reluctance to impose requirements on students — even when professionals and research data support such requirements as an aid to student success — because it may reduce access. The result is a system-wide philosophy that a student has a right to fail, rather than that the colleges have a responsibility to help them succeed.

“Community colleges are the most important link in the chain of upward mobility,” said Assemblymember Anthony Portantino, Chair of the Assembly Higher Education Committee. “We look forward to reviewing the policy recommendations outlined in this report so we can help improve students’ overall success without sacrificing California’s commitment to making college accessible to all.”

The policy recommendations outlined in the report are:

- Fund community colleges based on both completion and enrollment, with bonus funding for completions by disadvantaged and under-prepared students;
- Give colleges flexibility to use their funds to produce successful outcomes;
- Give colleges flexibility to obtain the human resources they judge will best help students complete academic programs in areas that will strengthen the state and local workforce;
- Allow colleges to benefit from fee revenue, remove restrictions on campus-based fees and develop a college affordability policy that recognizes the full cost of attending college; and
- Revise assessment, placement, and student support policies based on the goal of helping students succeed, not giving them the right to fail; this would include requiring all degree-seeking students to declare their education goals and receive substantive orientation to college to help them understand what their options are, what resources are available to them, and what is expected of them in order to maximize their chances of success.

“Support from the business community will be critical as California’s community college system struggles to fulfill its huge and critical linchpin role in our economy,” said David Rattray, vice president of Education and Workforce Development for the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce. “But we won’t be successful in a 21st century global economy without these fundamental reforms.”

The study also identifies two key factors — full-time attendance and enrolling in college soon after high school — that contribute greatly to the likelihood that community college students complete their educational goals. Full-time students are four times more likely to finish their degree, earn a certificate or transfer than part-time students. Younger students are nearly twice as likely to succeed as those who are over 40 years old when they first enroll.

The research, funded by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the James Irvine Foundation, was released in the form of a policy brief and will be the focus of an upcoming briefing for policy-makers and the community college system. For a full copy of the policy brief, go to www.csus.edu/ihe.