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EDITORIAL

Students left behind

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IT'S LIKE inviting someone to dinner -- and then only serving them a salad.

California is extraordinarily generous in welcoming students to community colleges, but does a lousy job helping many of them satisfy their educational aspirations.

A core part of the California mythology is that the doors to public **higher education** are open to anyone who wants to enter them. Community colleges fees especially have been kept very low -- a mere \$20 per unit. Nearly one-third of students get waivers, so they don't pay any fees at all. Virtually anyone can enroll, even those who don't have a high school diploma.

But when it comes to helping students succeed after they have enrolled -- that is a far more depressing story.

A study released Thursday by the **Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy** at Cal State University Sacramento presents a startling picture of college failure, inertia -- and good intentions gone awry. (**F**or the report go to www.csus.edu/ihe.)

The report shows that out of 314,407 students who enrolled in a California community college in 1999 seeking an AA degree, a certificate or a transfer to a UC, or CSU campus, only 75,682 -- or 24 percent -- had achieved their goal six years later. **F**or black and Latino students, the completion rate was even lower -- 15 and 18 percent respectively.

In fact, the report shows that the state's obsession with providing college access may have had the unintended consequence of undermining student success.

One problem is that most funds community colleges receive is based on the number of students they enroll -- not on the number who meet their educational goals. As the report states, "We are buying college enrollments, but not college completion."

Another problem is that the state stipulates that colleges spend at least 50 percent of their budgets on direct classroom instruction. That may seem reasonable -- but it means that there is not enough money to provide essential support services such as academic and financial aid advisers. These aren't frills, but are essential to keeping students on track.

The state's generosity in keeping fees low encourages students to enroll in courses without much planning and to add or drop courses without any financial consequences.

Low fees also give students a "false sense of opportunity" because fees only account **for** 5 to 7 percent of the total costs of going to college. California's community college students, the report notes, are left with "more unmet needs than community college students nationally."

These are only some of the factors that push students out of college before they have fulfilled their educational aspirations.

What is needed is a rethinking of state policies -- and more focus on helping students reach their goals. Community college funding should be based not only on the number of students who enroll, but also on the number who complete their course of study. **For** California to remain competitive, all students must succeed.

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