

EDITORIAL

The 'access gap' to college

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MUCH OF the concern about access to a college education in California has focused on the effects of Proposition 209, the 1996 ballot initiative which banned the use of race or gender in college admissions.

At least some of that attention has been misplaced. The greatest obstacle to increasing college enrollments is not Prop. 209, but the fact that too few of our young people go directly from high school to a four-year college.

The reason that's important is that research shows that students who go from high school to a four-year college are most likely to earn a college degree. California's performance in this regard has been abysmal. Out of all 50 states, only Mississippi sends a lower percentage of its high-school seniors to a four-year college.

California's famed three-tier system of public higher education is based on the premise that the majority of its high-school graduates attend a two-year community college. Those who succeed there will be eligible to transfer to a four-year CSU or UC campus.

But the community college enrollment of 1.2 million presents a misleading picture of college accessibility. "We have lots and lots of people enrolled, but relative to the numbers of students going to college, we award very few degrees compared to other states," said **Nancy Shulock**, director of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy at Sacramento State.

She pointed out that community colleges have done an excellent job in sending the message that anyone can enroll, even those without a high-school diploma. But they've been less successful in emphasizing the need for high-school students to acquire the skills they need to succeed in college -- or to convince them not to postpone going to college.

"If you postpone and go later, and only go part time, and you have a family and other financial obligations, your chances of completing are severely diminished," she said.

Part of the explanation is that too many high schools don't offer the courses students need to take college-prep classes. With an average of only 1 high-school counselor for every 790 students, many students don't receive the help figuring out what they need to do to enroll in college.

Also missing in the debate is the fact that college fees represent only a tiny proportion of the total cost of going to college. For many students, just the costs of buying textbooks can keep them from entering college, let alone persisting until they earn their degree.

What's distressing is that the state is moving in the wrong direction -- at precisely the time when the state needs more college-educated workers. In 2005, only 44.7 percent of high-school graduates were enrolled in a public university -- compared to 50.5 percent in 1986.

California has operated for too long on the illusion that its system of public higher education leads the nation. In at least one important respect -- gaining an actual degree -- it lags far behind.

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