

Study points out failures

POOR DEGREE RATE IS RESULT OF TOO FEW RESOURCES

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The combination of an open-door policy and low fees has made California's community colleges the nation's largest higher education system.

It also may be the nation's largest sieve. Three-quarters of students who had indicated an intent to get a certificate or two-year degree or to transfer to a four-year college fall by the wayside, according to a new study. The completion rate for Latinos and African-Americans is even lower: 18 and 15 percent respectively. Their missed opportunities are the state's collective loss. The state needs a workforce armed with college degrees to compete in a world economy.

Some of the research findings of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy at California State University-Sacramento aren't new. We reported a similar low completion rate and its implications last year. But researcher Nancy Shulock has gone one step further with policy recommendations that could help the 110 community colleges increase the completion rate. Her overall point is that funding formulas and regulations hinder the colleges from committing more resources to students, especially recent high school graduates who need remediation and direction. Here are some key points from Shulock's report:

- Colleges can't hire enough counselors and advisers because they must spend at least 50 percent of the budget on classroom instruction.
- They struggle to hire part-time teachers in nursing and some technical areas because three-quarters of instructors must work full time.
- The state doesn't commit enough financial aid to community colleges. And the colleges don't make enough of an effort to guide students to federal aid to cover textbooks and living expenses. This is important because most community college students also work full time and easily become frustrated about how long it takes to get a degree. More financial aid would enable younger students to concentrate on taking more courses.
- Community colleges are funded based on enrollment and not on student success, creating a high churn rate to keep revenues up. The Legislature doesn't sufficiently fund proven programs, like the Puente Project, that provide mentoring for low-income Latino students. And colleges don't adequately screen students who arrive unprepared for college.

Community colleges and the chancellor have reacted defensively to the study, which is disappointing since it's not an attack on the system. They clearly dislike Shulock's strongest recommendation, which is to tie additional revenue to a school's success in raising the degree completion and transfer rate.

They argue that incentive-based funding would erode the state's commitment to open access to college -- something that need not happen if the changes are designed effectively. Next month, the chancellor's office will release a study showing that 51 percent of students -- twice the rate that Shulock found -- succeed in getting a degree or transferring within six years. (Shulock's figures, using different methodology, are closer to the mark.)

Shulock's research points to ways to create more flexibility and better incentives with the money they now receive. Community colleges argue, rightly, that they are under-funded. They should welcome the study and the attention it is bringing to the difficulties they face.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

To read the full report -- "Rules of the Game: How State Policy Creates Barriers to Degree Completion and Impedes Student Success in the California Community Colleges" -- go to www.csus.edu/ihe/.