

Few Calif. Community college students meet graduation goals

By Matt Krupnick
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Only one-quarter of community college students seeking transfer to a four-year college or a two-year degree or certificate succeed within six years, according to a study released Thursday.

Educators and policy-makers have spent more time and money helping students get into college than on helping them earn their degrees, researchers at California State University-Sacramento found.

The state's economy will suffer unless community college leaders do a better job of helping students complete their education, the study said.

Researchers echoed concerns brought up three months ago in a report by the Public Policy Institute of California.

"The community colleges were designed as a bridge between high school and college," said Nancy Shulock, the Sacramento report's co-author and director of the university's Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy. "Our policies just aren't helping students complete their journey."

The report cites major flaws in the world's largest higher-education system, which has 110 colleges and 2.5 million students whose goals range from job training and certification to post-retirement cooking classes. Financial-aid programs focus primarily on helping students entering college, researchers said, and unintentionally dissuade students from finishing their educations.

Researchers also found that completion rates were much lower for African-American and Latino students than for white and Asian-American students.

Lawmakers and other researchers said the findings would help the state reform its education policies, but some community college leaders took exception to the results. Some said the researchers used flawed data.

"We were insulted by the report," said Scott Lay, president of the Community College League of California, which lobbies on behalf of the colleges. "The report shows a real misunderstanding of the mission of California's community colleges."

In a written statement, state community college Chancellor Mark Drummond said the report "misses the mark" by ignoring ongoing attempts to improve student success.

Shulock emphasized that the report, titled "Rules of the Game," did not criticize the colleges, saying educators were doing the best they could despite restrictive state rules.

State law requires community colleges to spend half their money on instruction and to limit the number of part-time faculty members.

The report said colleges would be able to help students graduate or transfer if they had more flexibility on financial and hiring decisions.

Community college students often are older than traditional students and sometimes have families to support. Colleges need to find ways to support non-traditional students, said Martha Kantor, chancellor of the Foothill-De Anza Community College District.

"Two-thirds of our students are working, and of those half are working full time," said Kantor, who estimates that nearly 20 percent of the Foothill-De Anza student body are working poor. "We need to understand that many working students do take longer than six years to complete their college requirements."

Other researchers asked educators to take the results seriously.

"All you have to do is look at California's position compared to other states to realize we need to make changes," said Patrick Callan, president of the San Jose-based National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. "This isn't a time to react defensively."

The Sacramento researchers, legislators and college leaders agreed that better financial-aid programs could help more students finish college by devoting themselves to their studies full time. Other studies have shown that full-time students have higher graduation rates.

At Pittsburg's Los Medanos College, student leader Jasmine McDermott said many of her peers would appreciate a revamped financial-aid system to help them more quickly reach their educational goals.

"We have programs that pay for books," McDermott said. "But as far as outside of school, there's not a lot of help available."

Mercury News Staff Writer Dana Hull contributed to this report. Contact Matt Krupnick at (925) 943-8246 or mkrupnickcctimes.com.