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**HEADLINE:** Study **urges revamping** of community colleges

**BYLINE:** Eric Stern, The Sacramento Bee, Calif.

**BODY:**

Feb. 2--For decades, California has earned high marks for its public universities, with more than 100 community colleges prided as the low-cost gateway to a degree. Whether you're a high school dropout or bound for Berkeley, you need only to be 18 to get in.

Today, with 2.5 million students, community colleges in California educate as many people as the population of Utah. But a new report issued Thursday questions whether the emphasis on opening the front door for students has kept state officials from placing enough attention on getting those students through the back door -- that is, staying on track for that diploma.

Because community college funding is largely based on the number of students enrolled in classes after the third week of the semester, researchers say college officials have learned to game the system by packing classrooms with unprepared students.

The result: Only 24 percent of degree-seeking community college students accomplished their goals of transferring to a four-year school, receiving an associate degree or earning a certificate within six years.

"We are buying college enrollments but not college completion," according to the report written by Nancy Shulock, director of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy at California State University, Sacramento.

Shulock cites an "institutional reluctance to help students" in order to boost enrollment.

Her report paints a picture of college officials postponing exams until after the third week of the semester and allowing students to skip remedial classes or prerequisites for higher-level coursework.

She recommends a drastic restructuring of the funding formula -- dedicating a "substantial portion" of money based on the number of students who complete courses. She also said the state needs to mandate placement tests for new students and give colleges more flexibility to hire guidance counselors and financial aid advisers.

The report also takes aim at the cheap tuition and financial aid system -- a third of students get low-income waivers and don't pay any fees, which encourages students to "enroll in courses without much forethought." The report recommends giving local college districts the authority to raise fees and steer students to loans and other financial aid options.

The report drew the scorn of Mark Drummond, chancellor of the statewide community college system. He said the report ignores students who completed transfer-level coursework but didn't transfer to a four-year school within six years. If those students are counted, the

completion rate jumps to 51 percent.

Drummond said the study suggests cutting off access to those students -- part-timers who stretch out their coursework because of family and financial needs.

"The success rate of students who have no access to college is always zero," he said.

He said the report also ignores that community colleges have been implementing measures to ramp up assessment, remedial courses, tutoring and counseling.

The Los Rios Community College schools -- American River, Cosumnes River, Folsom Lake and Sacramento City -- already require placement tests for students taking English and math classes and won't automatically let students take high-level classes, said Chancellor Brice Harris.

"The computer won't let you enroll in a course if you don't have the prerequisites," he said.

Harris said the report makes too many broad -- and wrong -- generalizations.

"You have to question the validity of a study like that," he said.

Shulock said she was dismayed by the harsh reaction to the report, which she notes comes as community college backers are pursuing a 2008 ballot measure to reduce fees and increase state funding.

The League of California Community Colleges, an advocacy group behind the measure, sent talking points to college presidents, discounting the report as insulting, elitist and flawed.

Shulock said she met repeatedly with community college officials in weeks leading up to the study, even utilizing a data team from the system headquarters to crunch numbers.

"We're just calling it like we see it," she said. "I heard the chancellor say two weeks ago he welcomed the spotlight."

Assemblyman Anthony Portantino, D-Pasadena, who heads the Assembly Higher Education Committee, called the report "thought-provoking."