

## Foothill College's diverse challenge

### SCHOOL ATTRACTS STUDENTS WITH VARIED NEEDS, GOALS

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Foothill College trains the people who take your pulse, clean your teeth, fix your computer and install your plumbing.

Like other community colleges with "open admissions," it has often been considered a school of last resort.

But the real picture is more complex: It recruits a diverse student body with differing needs.

Many of its students are academically ambitious - but just not ready for university life. Others are needing remedial help. Still others are retiring baby boomers who seek to retool their skills.

It's a long to-do list on a tightening public purse. Like other two-year colleges, Foothill receives far less financing for higher education than four-year universities.

Since its founding 50 years ago, the hilltop oak-studded campus on El Monte Road has been forced to respond to a quickly changing world.

**Diverse student body** Originally serving a largely white population, Foothill increasingly attracts more Asian and Pacific Islander students. Its share of Hispanic and African-American students is climbing more gradually.

About half of its students are under 25 - typical college age.

Of these, an increasing number are suburban students who are ready for University of California, California State University or private universities, but seek to save money and boost academic readiness in Foothill's small classes. Living at home, often while working part time, they use Foothill as a place to satisfy general educational requirements - then transfer.

"As the tuition has been going up more steeply in four-year institutions, community colleges are an increasingly attractive alternative for savvy kids who want to save money," said Nancy Shulock, a CSU-Sacramento professor who studies educational trends.

But some Foothill students come needing catch-up in math, reading or writing. Because the CSU campuses aim to end all remediation classes, Foothill and other community colleges increasingly find themselves with more needy students. Of these, some are full-time parents with full-time jobs - and close to the edge financially.

Building skills The other half of Foothill's students come with very different expectations: aging baby boomers who seek to upgrade their skills for second or third careers. To meet the needs of these well-educated Silicon Valley residents, Foothill has expanded its course offerings.

The college's ongoing challenge is to stay relevant - shifting curricula to keep pace with the valley's changing composition of businesses. In the past decade, valley jobs have shifted away from manufacturing and moved toward knowledge-intensive occupations, especially allied health fields like lab technicians and physical therapists.

Foothill's expansion has been aided, along with De Anza College, by passage of two construction bonds, the \$248 million Measure E in 1999 and \$490 million Measure C in 2006. Its new Lohman Theatre recently hosted its first production, "My Fair Lady." A radio station/language arts building is planned, along with a physical sciences center and renovated classrooms.

Yet like other community colleges, its operating budget is chronically underfunded. Foothill was forced to cut over 10 percent of its budget over the past few years. Increasingly, it must seek partnerships with businesses and raise funds to fill gaps in state funding.

Despite expanding demand and reduced funding, "Change is opportunity," according to Foothill's master plan.

"Our vision and mission consistently emphasizes excellence - and innovation will be critical," the plan asserts.