

Sacramento Bee (California)

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Business News

February 7, 2007 Wednesday

**SECTION:** STATE AND REGIONAL NEWS

**ACC-NO:** 20070207-SA-0207-The-Sacramento-Bee-Calif-Peter-Schrag-column

**LENGTH:** 888 words

**HEADLINE:** The Sacramento Bee, Calif., Peter **Schrag** column: A little college **snit** - and the big stakes behind it

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**BODY:**

Feb. 7--By the time Sac State researchers released their report last week about the low rate at which community college students get degrees or complete other programs, the community college establishment was in full defensive posture lobbing stinkbombs over the parapets.

The report, said the talking points issued by the Community College League, is "insulting to community colleges." It's written "with an elitist view of education." It's "a direct assault on access to higher education." Class warfare at the ivory tower?

The main point of the report, written by Nancy Shulock and Colleen Moore of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy at Sac State, was simply that in its funding and other incentives, state policy was rewarding access, on which California has done well, and neglecting success, on which it hasn't.

It didn't suggest that the open doors be slammed in the huge community college system, which is far and away the state's largest entry point to higher education, especially for first-generation students -- those whose parents didn't go to college. It didn't blame the colleges or their staffs. It simply said, as an earlier report from the Public Policy Institute of California also found, that in the effort to maximize enrollment, the system was failing to provide enough information, counseling, financial aid and other resources to get students through to completion.

Of entering students who indicate that they intend to get an associate's degree or transfer to a four-year college, Shulock said, only 25 percent do so. Scott Lay, head of the community college league, said the number is misleading because 51 percent of those students would in fact be able to transfer but for various reasons never do.

One of those reasons is money. Another is the admission practices of the four-year universities themselves. Moreover, he said, noncontinuing California State University students (meaning those who went, left and then came back) graduated at rates no higher than similar students in the community colleges. Many have to work. But the number is still too low.

There's no certain way to determine the real intentions of those hundreds of thousands who enter the system each year. How many high school graduates simply go because it's the thing to do, or because their friends are there -- but still say they intend to get a degree? How many discover that, despite their high school diplomas, they're not qualified for college work? How many learn too late that the low sticker price covers only a small fraction of the real costs in books, transportation and living expenses?

The community colleges, a great democratic institution, have to be all things to all people:

adults going back for a course or two to improve job skills or simply for personal growth; 18-year-olds working for transfers and four-year degrees -- and more -- at the University of California or CSU; others learning a trade or profession; plus tens of thousands doing remedial work to compensate for their inadequate high school education.

The colleges are taking steps to improve their counseling and to upgrade the math and English requirements for an associate of arts degree. Lay, of the community college league, also says that more community college students are being counseled to apply for federal grants than in the past, and more are getting them.

But behind this little class war there's a crucial issue: California, like the nation as a whole, is losing its historic edge in literacy and skills.

"America's Perfect Storm," a study by Irvin Kirsch and three others and issued Monday by the Educational Testing Service, concludes that unless the nation invests more in education -- and invests more efficiently -- the literacy level of the work force in 2025 will be lower than it is now. It also shows that not all degrees are equal.

"Put crudely," the report says, "over the next 25 years or so, as better educated individuals leave the workforce they will be replaced by those who, on average, have lower levels of education and skill. Over this same period, nearly half of the projected job growth will be concentrated in occupations associated with higher education and skill levels."

If that's correct, millions of Californians, many of them black or Latino, will be shut out; our economic competitiveness will be attenuated; income and social gaps will widen and the social and political stresses that they produce will grow with them.

Factors other than education and literacy -- the availability of health care, infrastructure and tax policy among others -- will have a major influence on those gaps. But that hardly undercuts the point, either for the nation or for California.

Because this state will depend on a work force composed disproportionately of immigrants who, on average, arrive with low skills, and their children, it will rely even more on its seriously underfunded community colleges. Which is to say that after all the sniping is done, California better invest a lot more in success.