

Peter Schrag: More money for colleges, lower fees, come get it!

By Peter Schrag -

Published 12:00 am PDT Wednesday, July 18, 2007
Story appeared in EDITORIALS section, Page B7

[Print](#) | [E-Mail](#) | [Comments \(4\)](#) | [Digg it](#) | [del.icio.us](#)

Given all the other groups that have used the ballot box to engineer big-bucks raids on the state treasury, the only surprise is that the lobbies for the money-strapped California community colleges waited so long.

But now they've done it, qualifying an initiative that will appear on the February presidential primary ballot. By 2009-'10 it will lock up nearly a half-billion additional dollars in state funding -- meaning taxpayer money -- for California's 109 two-year colleges. Its 2 million students make it the largest college system in the country.

The colleges badly need the money. They probably deliver more opportunity per buck than any other state system. But instead of trying to reform the convoluted fiscal structure responsible for their starvation diet, this measure asks voters to put a few more kinks in it.

As a lot of analysts have pointed out, the big problem in California isn't so much a shortage of state funding as it is the very modest fees that students pay. This year it's \$20 per credit unit in tuition, \$600 a term for a full course load.

That's barely half of what students pay in the next lowest state and less than a third of the national average. As a result California loses a lot of federal financial aid money that could be used not just for tuition but for other expenses.

Yes, the sudden, unpredictable fee jumps of recent years are irritating. But instead of addressing the basic imbalance between fees and state funding, the initiative, backed by the California Community College League, the California Federation of Teachers and various other community college groups, proposes to make it worse.

It would change education funding formulas to require more money from the treasury, reduce fees to \$15 a unit and cap future fee increases to growth in per capita personal income, or 10 percent, whichever is lower.

In addition, it would write a series of governance changes into the state constitution that would guarantee employee groups representation on the system's board of governors. Roger Salazar, the spokesman for the measure, says requiring the governor to choose some board members from lists drawn by employee groups would "take the politics out of the process." More likely, it would just shift the political arena and, in any case, bring people with conflicts of interest to what's supposed to be a citizen board.

Called the Community College Governance, Funding Stabilization and Student Fee Reduction Act, it's a complicated 5,500 words that de-couple community college funding from Proposition 98, the K-12 school finance system to which it has been tied since 1988.

Instead, it would create a set of fiscal formulas that base increases in future community college funding not on enrollment but on growth in the state's college-age population, regardless of how many actually attend the two year institutions.

Two recent studies have both pointed to the low completion rate of California community college students -- the percentage who get an associate's degree, transfer to a four year college or finish a formal career training program; 79 percent of community college students get no credential. Half never go past the first year.

Some of that is predictable in a system used by a lot of Californians who take just one or two courses to upgrade their job skills and employability. Yet it's also true, as Nancy Shulock of Sacramento State University pointed out in a report issued earlier this year, that while the state provides financial incentives to increase enrollment, it has few incentives encouraging a higher completion rate.

By no longer coupling funding to enrollment, the measure is likely to undercut even the incentive to enroll more students. And it does nothing, other than lower fees, to increase completion rates. Nor will it help inform adolescents that mere graduation from high school doesn't necessarily prepare them for college work.

The fee decrease is itself a little misleading. Although the sticker price at the community colleges is low even without the proposed cut, it doesn't cover an array of other expenses -- books, transportation, foregone income -- that often get forgotten.

The main object, as Salazar says, is to stabilize funding, which makes absolute sense in a state that raises and lowers spending with no long-term strategy. But does it make the system more accessible? Since the 25 percent fee cut represents only a small percentage of the total cost even at community colleges, it looks a lot more like a political sweetener to help the measure draw support than a genuine attempt to get more students to attend.

And, of course, as in so many other raids on the treasury -- the stem cell bonds, Arnold Schwarzenegger's \$500 million after-school program, California's road bonds, the prison bonds -- it's advertised as involving no new taxes. It's all supposedly free money. In that, it would join the parade of other unfunded initiatives that have helped create the chronic budget mess that California continues to live with.