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**BODY:**

Locked in the attic over the shiny door to California's huge community college system, there's a crazy uncle called "completion." That's the percentage of beginning students who actually get a degree, transfer to a four-year college, or complete the vocational program they began.

In California, getting in is easy -- and cheap -- but often it doesn't lead to anything defined as success. And as higher education policy analyst **Nancy Shulock** at California State University, Sacramento, points out, the colleges get funded solely on the basis of warm bodies. There's no state incentive -- and pathetically few resources -- to raise the system's low completion rate.

A recent Public Policy Institute of California report by Ria Sengupta and Christopher Jepsen provides another reminder of how low that is. Roughly 15 percent of full-time community college students eventually transfer to a four-year college; another 3 percent get an associate degree; 3 percent get some other certificate; 79 percent get no credential. Half of entering students never go past the first year.

Because of poor preparation, most need basic-skills courses before they can even begin college-level work. According to Community Colleges Chancellor Mark Drummond, "90 percent can't do college math; 75 percent can't read or write at college level." Many arrive without any idea of what college work requires.

A large percentage of students enroll for only one or two courses to improve job skills or to learn English, or to cultivate a hobby. And because it's hard to determine what many students' goals are, or if they really have any, the numbers are squishy and not precise indications of success.

"Often," Drummond said, "we don't have a foggy clue what people's intentions are."

With 2.5 million students, most of them part time, the community colleges are -- and have to be -- all things to all people.

Presumably many go simply because it's the thing to do after high school and because fees -- roughly \$600 a year for a full program, the lowest in the nation -- are no barrier for most. Those who can't afford the fees can usually get them waived. But attrition is high.

**Shulock** and her colleagues, who are preparing to issue a study in January into the causes and policy implications of the low completion rates, say that state finance policies and regulations are funding "the wrong end of a student's career. The state is buying enrollment (not success)."

Her project will also address the lack of coordination between high school and community colleges. The University of California and the California State University make clear what course preparation they want. The community colleges send as many signals about preparation (109) as there are colleges.

The **Shulock** study will almost certainly call for better assessment and counseling of students. Many of them are not just academically underprepared but unable to choose the proper courses and negotiate the system to best advantage. They enroll in courses for which they're woefully underprepared. Many just flounder.

Even Chancellor Drummond acknowledges that the state's "wrong end" fiscal incentives induce many instructors not to give tests until enrollment has been officially counted -- sometime after the third week of the term -- because that's the basis of funding. If a class shrinks below a certain number of students, it has to be canceled.

There are still other distortions. The California Legislative Analyst has pointed out that if California's community college fees were higher, many students would be entitled to higher federal student grants, which would in effect generate more funds for the system but cost students little. In effect, California taxpayers are subsidizing the federal treasury.

If California offered financial incentives for the Pell Grants and other federal aid students receive, the colleges might well do more to help them get it.

And because the state keeps the student fees, actual funding for the community colleges is low -- 45th in the nation, according to Drummond, in what it has to spend.

Many beginning students, attracted by the low fees, are unaware of the cost of books, transportation and other expenses that are often far higher than the fees.

Raising fees to more-realistic levels and generating more federal financial aid for students who need it might also encourage wiser college planning. So would more-intensive counseling and student assessment and funding that rewards success.

Unfortunately the only major fiscal proposal now pending, a ballot initiative backed by leaders of the system, would reduce fees by 25 percent, force up state spending by nearly \$500 million annually (in part by letting the colleges retain student fees), but do little to increase the success rate.

A low-cost, easily accessible first-level college system has long had a strong democratic appeal for Californians, and for good reasons. But unless we begin to deal with the crazy uncle in the attic, the outcomes will never live up to the promise. The overwhelming majority of California's students are in community colleges; to the extent they fail, so does California.

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