



Colleges in California must step up

State economy faces impending shortage of college-educated workers

By Tony Burchyns/Times-Herald staff writer

Article Launched: 03/13/2008 08:07:53 AM PDT

California is losing its competitive edge - and community colleges need to step up to the challenge, a new report argues.

The analysis, released Wednesday, follows findings that just 24 percent of the state's community college students earned degrees or certificates, or transferred to a four-year university during a six-year period.

Meanwhile, California's economy faces an impending shortage of college-educated workers, the report reveals.

"We can always do better," said Jerry Kea, director of Solano Community College's Vallejo Center, reacting to the statistic. "We have too many students who are not doing well in our classes and who drop out."

Kea said he did not know Solano Community College's graduation and transfer rates.

The state's community college system is the biggest supplier of educated Californians - serving 70 percent of the students who get college degrees annually. But researchers are saying too many students are also getting knocked off the path to a successful life.

The 22-page report, titled "It Could Happen: Unleashing the Potential of California's Community Colleges to Help Students Succeed and California Thrive," describes several strategies to help students improve.

Authored by the Institute for Higher Education at California State University-Sacramento, its recommendations include:

- Tying funding to student progress;
- Giving more freedom to community colleges to use resources based on local needs;
- Improving student-advising programs that lead toward credentials. By changing academic and finance policies, and increasing access and advising, the California Community Colleges System could raise its program-completion rate by 50 percent, the report states.

Kea said community college graduation rates can be deceiving. Many students enroll for enrichment courses or to advance their professional careers without earning a degree.

Nevertheless, Kea said community colleges are facing a tidal wave of high school graduates unprepared to succeed in higher education, placing a huge burden on instructors to help those students catch up.

"Historically, students coming out of the K-12 system have not had such basic skill needs in math and English," Kea said. "We are here to meet their needs, but at the same time we need more resources. This is the challenge."

California's community colleges face a possible system-wide \$40 million funding cut next school year, depending on the state budget.

Solano Community College president Gerry Fisher said a property tax shortfall of \$550,000, announced last week, makes the financial problem even worse.

"The state doesn't have to make up the difference," Fisher said, adding the state budget impact may be felt across a number of programs next year including CalWORKS and disabled students support services.

Despite the budget situation, the study's authors argue in favor of policy changes that they say won't require much funding, such as linking student fee waivers to academic progress and standardizing the definition of "college readiness."

Chris McCarthy, Napa Valley Community College's president, expressed hope the report energizes discussions that may lead to improvements.

"This report casts a clear eye on the hidden issues that are experienced in every community college, but are rarely discussed," McCarthy said.

Nancy Shulock, director of the Institute for Higher Education at California State University-Sacramento, said even amid a "terrible budget crisis" it is a "really good time for planning and making reforms."

"Each year without change," Shulock said, "more and more students are knocked off the path they need to be on."