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**BYLINE:** Dan Walters

**BODY:**

California's highways are congested and crumbling, its prisons are overcrowded and close to being taken over by a federal judge, its elementary and high schools do only a mediocre job of educating students, and its parks and other public facilities are in ill repair.

Does anything work very well in California anymore? Yes. Its three systems of public higher education still provide high-quality and relatively low-cost instruction -- not perfectly, certainly, but more efficiently and effectively than most other big public programs.

The state's 109 **community colleges** are an especially praiseworthy institution, providing both **college**-level classes and technical, job-related training at very low cost to students -- their fees are the lowest in the country -- and to taxpayers.

Taxpayers shell out just \$6 billion a year to support **community colleges** and their 2.5 million students (equivalent to just over a million full-timers), which is just about the same amount that the state allocates to the University of California and the state university system, which absorb scarcely a third of the **community colleges'** undergraduate student load.

Put another way, while **community colleges** are educating the equivalent of 1.2 million students for \$6 billion, a much-troubled prison system is spending \$8 billion-plus a year on 170,000 inmates, seven times as much per capita. Still another comparison: K-12 schools have six times as many students as **community colleges**, but cost us 10 times as much.

Given these positive facts about our **community colleges**, why do so many folks want to beat up on them? Two new think tank reports are hammering the **community colleges** for supposed shortcomings.

Nancy Shulock, director of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership at California State University, Sacramento, wrote a report lamenting that just 24 percent of students who attend **community colleges** with the declared intention of earning degrees actually receive two-year diplomas or transfer to four-year **colleges** within six years.

"We are buying **college** enrollments but not **college** completion," Shulock declared as the report was released last month, decrying what she described as an "institutional reluctance to help students" and an obsession with expanding enrollment to secure more state funds.

This week, the San Jose-based National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education issued a weighty report that was critical of what the center's president, Patrick Callan, called the "cherished myth" that scattering **community colleges** throughout the state and keeping their fees very low was doing the job sufficiently.

The thrust of the report was that since the cost of living -- housing, food, transportation, health care, etc. -- in California is high, **community college** students must work or find other means of supporting themselves and need more aid.

Neither critique holds much water.

It's one thing to criticize K-12 schools for their outcomes -- low test scores, high dropout rates, etc. There is a societal commitment to universal and compulsory education, after all, so elementary and high schools should be held at least partially accountable for outcomes (although familial and social factors also play major roles).

Public higher education, however, is not compulsory. It's an opportunity for presumed adults to better their lives by pursuing post-high school instruction or, in the case of **community colleges**, job skills training. Californians are free to take advantage of that opportunity or not. The state and its taxpayers do their jobs by keeping out-of-pocket costs reasonably low. The rest is up to students.

Blaming **community colleges** for circumstances that are beyond their reasonable control is just gratuitous nitpicking.

Reach Dan Walters at (916) 321-1195 or [dwalters@sacbee.com](mailto:dwalters@sacbee.com). Back columns: [www.sacbee.com/walters](http://www.sacbee.com/walters).