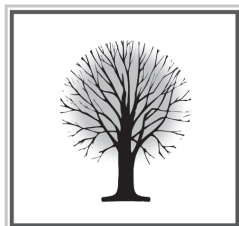


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
LEADERSHIP & POLICY

BEYOND THE OPEN DOOR:

Increasing Student Success in the California Community Colleges

by

*Colleen Moore and Nancy Shulock
Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy*

with

*Miguel Ceja
Department of Public Policy and Administration*

and

*David M. Lang
Department of Economics*

California State University, Sacramento

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Executive Summary

In a policy brief released in February 2007, titled *Rules of the Game*, we presented data indicating that rates of completing certificates, degrees and transfers to universities in the California Community Colleges (CCC) are low. More importantly, we concluded that low completion is in part due to state policies which have produced barriers to the CCC's ability to better foster student success and completion. This report presents more in-depth results of those analyses and offers recommendations for policy reforms aimed at improving student success. Another Institute report, due for release later this year, will describe how state finance policies for the CCC contribute to low completion and will offer additional suggestions for policy reform.

California's Future at Risk

Researchers, policymakers, and educators are beginning to recognize several factors important to any discussion of postsecondary student success:

- 1. The future of our state economy is tied to increasing the number of Californians who both enter and complete their college education.** Several recent studies have projected a shortage of educated workers in California unless the state increases degree production in its colleges and universities. Changes in California's economy require workers with more education and a greater ability to adapt their skills to a changing labor market. Disparities in educational attainment across racial/ethnic populations and socioeconomic groups are an increasing danger, as population growth is occurring primarily among populations with historically lower rates of college enrollment and completion.
- 2. California cannot continue to rely on attracting college-educated workers from other states and countries to meet the needs of its information-based economy.** While this strategy has worked in

the past, recent research by the Public Policy Institute of California indicates that the state will not be able to import enough workers from other states and countries to meet the needs. Competition for skilled workers is increasing, and California's high cost of living puts us at a disadvantage. It is likely that the state will need to improve rates of degree attainment among Californians in order to meet the demand for educated workers.

- 3. The community colleges are the only pathway to a college education and upward mobility for many Californians.**

The California Community College system is indispensable to any effort to increase degree production, given that nearly three-quarters of the state's public undergraduates attend community colleges. Rates of completion must increase in the CCC in order to ensure that there are enough educated adults to maintain the social and economic health of the state.

- 4. The job of educating California community college students isn't easy.**

Community colleges serve an incredibly diverse range of students, many of whom are under-prepared for college-level work, hold full-time jobs, provide financial support to their families, have limited English language proficiency, come from disadvantaged families, or lack clear educational goals. Despite these challenges, the community colleges are expected to succeed in fulfilling a variety of vital missions with far less funding per student than what is provided to K-12 schools and the California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) systems.

In this report, we use the term “student success” as it was recently defined “in its simplest form” by two national experts in higher education policy, Peter Ewell and Jane Wellman—“getting students into and through college to a degree or certificate.” Ewell and Wellman acknowledge that there are numerous potential meanings of student success beyond degree attainment, but conclude that possession of a college credential “will remain the essential policy measure for the foreseeable future.” While arguments can certainly be made for broader definitions of success in California’s community colleges, the social and economic imperative to ensure that there are enough college-educated workers in California makes it reasonable to equate “success” with “completion” for the purposes of this policy-focused discussion. In doing so, we include the intermediate achievements that represent progress toward completion, like retention, course completion and finishing needed remediation.

The February policy brief generated a considerable amount of controversy, in large part because it was interpreted as critical of the system for factors that are largely outside of its control, such as students’ preparation, their competing life priorities, and system funding levels. But the Institute’s research is not aimed at evaluating the CCC. Rather, the research is intended to heighten awareness among state leaders about the state’s need for an educated workforce and citizenry, and to identify changes in state policy that can help the CCC, in concert with other educational segments, meet that need.

Ultimately, state policymakers are responsible for ensuring that California’s population is sufficiently educated to maintain the social and economic health of the state. Discussions about the rates of success among CCC students in completing certificates and degrees are essential because of the huge role that community colleges play in educating Californians. This focus on the CCC is not meant to minimize the role that the UC and the CSU have in helping improve educational outcomes in the state. Improvement is needed throughout the education enterprise and collaborative efforts will be especially important. This research focuses on the CCC because it serves by far the most students, including large numbers who later attend UC and CSU.

“Multiple Missions” do Not Preclude Attention to Completion Rates

Given the broad set of missions assigned to the community colleges, there has long been a justifiable resistance to completion rate measures that do not account for these multiple missions. Community college officials around the country have historically shared these concerns about the calculation of graduation and transfer rates, but increasingly recognize the importance of monitoring these rates as part of state efforts to strengthen educational capital. It is possible to have constructive policy discussions about increasing rates of completion in the CCC within the context of the community colleges’ multiple missions. In an effort to encourage such discussions, this report uses a method presented in the earlier policy brief to distinguish between those who seek a degree or certificate and those who do not, and applies that method in analyzing student success among degree seekers in California’s community college system.

California Must Increase Community College Student Completion

Applying the method to the 1999-2000 incoming cohort of students, this study found that approximately one in four degree seekers in the cohort “completed” – meaning they earned a certificate or degree, transferred to a four-year university, or achieved some combination of those outcomes within six years of enrolling in a community college. About three percent of all degree seekers earned a certificate, 11 percent earned an associate’s degree and 18 percent transferred to a university (there is overlap, as some students achieved more than one outcome). Seventy-six percent of degree seekers did not achieve any of these outcomes within six years of enrolling in community college.

These results confirm other research indicating that rates of persistence and completion in community colleges are low, likely too low to meet the needs of the workforce and to ensure continued economic growth and prosperity for individuals and the state.

California has one of the most accessible community college systems in the country, and Californians are rightfully proud of that. But the reality of low completion rates begs the question: access to what? We need to do more than open the door to college. Providing true opportunity for upward mobility

through higher education requires that community colleges have the capacity – both in terms of adequate resources and supportive public policies – to help students meet their educational goals.

State and CCC Policy can Affect Student Success

The amount of resources available to community colleges obviously affects their ability to help students succeed. State appropriations provided per full-time student at the CCC are less than 60 percent of that for students at the CSU and less than one-third that of students at the UC. When state funds and student fee revenue are considered together, CSU has about 2.5 times the per-student funding as the CCC and UC has about 5 times the funding. While strict comparisons are hard to interpret in view of the different missions assigned to each segment, many reasonably question why community college students, who are among the most expensive to teach given their considerable needs for intensive instructional and support services, should receive so much less funding than students at four-year institutions. It is certainly the case that the comparatively low level of funding in the CCC puts a premium on the effective use of those limited resources. For the community colleges to best help the state meet its goals of educating more Californians, there must be additional resources and policy reforms so that the CCC has both the resource capacity and the policy environment to help students succeed.

The research literature points to many factors that affect student success in community colleges, including factors related to 1) the students themselves and what characteristics they bring with them to college, 2) the course-taking and enrollment patterns students follow while attending college, and 3) the policies and practices of colleges. These research findings provide guidance for potential actions state policy-makers and the CCC can take to improve student success.

For this report, we analyzed relevant data for the 1999-2000 cohort of degree-seeking CCC students, and confirmed many of the relationships noted in the research literature. In particular, completion rates for this cohort of students varied according to student characteristics, including:

- Gender, with higher rates of completion among female students (26%) compared to male students (22%);

- Age, with rates of completion decreasing as the age of the student increased upon initial enrollment (27% completion for students age 17 to 19, 21% for age 20 to 29, 18% for age 30 to 39, and 16% for age 40 or older);
- Race/ethnicity, with Asian and white students completing at higher rates (33% and 27%, respectively), than Latino and black students (18% and 15%, respectively);
- Socioeconomic status, with a completion rate of 27 percent among students attending a college in an area with personal income in the highest quartile relative to other CCC populations (a proxy for student income), compared to a completion rate of 22 percent among students attending a college in an area with income in the lowest quartile;
- Academic preparation, with a completion rate of 28 percent among students attending a college with average academic preparation levels in the highest quartile relative to other CCCs (a proxy for student academic preparation), compared to a completion rate of 19 percent among students attending a college with average academic preparation in the lowest quartile; and
- Students' commitment to a goal of completion, with the rate of completion higher for students who demonstrated more commitment to a goal of transfer or certificate/degree completion (35%) than for students who demonstrated less commitment (29%) or no commitment (19%) to the goal.

Consistent with other research, we found that CCC completion rates also varied according to selected course-taking and enrollment patterns. Students were more likely to complete if they:

- attended full-time in a majority of terms (47% compared to 12% for part-time);
- enrolled continuously over the period they attended (40% compared to 24% for students who stopped out);
- enrolled in an orientation course (32% compared to 23% for students who did not);
- avoided excessive course dropping (35% compared to 9% for students who dropped many courses); and
- avoided frequent late registration for courses (27% compared to 21% for students who often enrolled late).

These descriptive results were mostly confirmed through a statistical method known as regression analysis. With the exception of enrolling in an orientation course, each of the factors had a statistically significant, independent influence on the likelihood of a student completing a community college program. The results for enrolling in an orientation course varied across different models, perhaps, in part, related to the difficulty of accurately measuring that variable in the dataset.

With respect to the policies and practices of colleges, the research literature indicates that colleges can contribute to higher completion rates by:

- having an institutional focus on student success;
- using instructional methods such as learning communities that integrate student support services with instruction and increase student engagement with their peers;
- offering a comprehensive and integrated set of student support services and ensuring that students make use of those services;
- assessing students' skills in math and English and placing them in courses appropriate for their level of college readiness, with remedial work beginning immediately upon enrollment if it is needed; and
- sending strong and consistent messages to prospective students about what it means to be college ready, so as to increase the preparation levels of incoming students.

The student cohort data used for much of this research do not allow an investigation of these particular aspects of institutional policy, or of the important issues related to the teaching and learning process in the classroom. But the report includes an in-depth, qualitative review of assessment and placement policies and the system's overall approach to student advising.

Current Assessment and Placement Policies are Not Fostering Student Success

With such a large share of CCC students under-prepared for college when they enroll, analyzing the impact of assessment and placement policies is critical to understanding student success and rates of completion in the community college system. The system's approach to assessment and placement diverges in important ways from trends in other states and from the lessons outlined above about the factors that influence student success. Assessment and placement are voluntary as practiced at many colleges across the system, and policies are extremely decentralized: each of the 109 colleges determines its own assessment instruments, cut-off scores, and "multiple measures" to be used in recommending placement.

The CCC system itself has recognized that the process needs reform, and the Chancellor, the Board of Governors, the Academic Senate, and system and college researchers are actively involved in discussing possible reforms. Activity on the issue is occurring in the context of the implementation of the System's Strategic Plan and the related Basic Skills Initiative. As part of the Basic Skills Initiative, a comprehensive literature review was used to identify best practices, and an assessment instrument was developed to enable colleges to assess how well their own practices conform to those identified in the literature. Regional workshops are ongoing to provide technical assistance to colleges on ways to improve basic skills instruction.

Our discussion of the CCC assessment and placement process is intended to inform these efforts with a particular focus on issues of statewide policy. Our analysis indicates that the current process is not fostering student success in three respects:

The current process is not effective in helping students meet their educational goals.

Current assessment and placement policies are ineffective primarily because they place the priority on the process at the expense of outcomes for students. The process is designed to minimize barriers to students in course enrollment, protect local autonomy, and guard against legal action against the system. Colleges often give students the independence to make their own choices in spite of, or without, the best professional guidance. This independence allows

many students to circumvent basic skills courses – either by avoiding assessment altogether (only about 60 percent of degree-seeking students in the cohort we studied were assessed) or by choosing not to enroll in the remedial courses into which they were referred if assessed. Course pre-requisites are difficult to establish, leading, in many cases, to easy student access to courses for which they may not be prepared and to reduced standards in college-level courses, where faculty must accommodate students who lack proficiency in reading and writing. In addition, the policies do little to help students better prepare for college-level work before they arrive at community college. The most powerful reform efforts in other states now involve conveying clear standards of college readiness to help students arrive at colleges prepared for college-level work.

The process is not serving its intended purpose of treating all students equitably.

The CCC assessment and placement process has evolved over the years in response to concerns that there were unfair barriers to minority students gaining access to college-level classes. However, the current system does not promote equity, but rather interferes with efforts to help students overcome academic barriers. Under the current decentralized process, students are treated differently, depending on which college they attend, in terms of the standardized assessments used, the standards of “college readiness” reflected in placement recommendations, the particular choice of multiple measures relied upon by each individual college, and the degree to which course prerequisites are developed and enforced to regulate access to courses.

The process is excessively costly and administratively complex.

The complex, decentralized process entails significant costs. Each college is required to have a matriculation advisory committee, and to expend considerable time and effort in test development and validation efforts, in addition to the Chancellor’s Office expenditures for psychometric consultants, the Matriculation Advisory Committee, the Assessment Advisory Group, and the Matriculation unit. Owing to budget cuts in recent years, the Chancellor’s Office lacks the staff needed to fully enforce the myriad regulatory requirements, and many colleges lack the staff to fully engage the process as intended due to college size, or cuts in research staff, or both. As a result, the process as described in the

many pages of regulations, guidelines, manuals, and memos, is not as rigorous or valid as it was designed to be. Regardless of initial intentions, the process has evolved into a large administrative enterprise in which the elaborate process for approval of instruments and prerequisites has overshadowed the needs of students.

The coalescing efforts across the community college system to review and reform the assessment and placement process are well justified. This is a tremendous opportunity to make a difference in the outcomes for the millions of Californians who depend on the CCC for brighter futures. Serving under-prepared students has become perhaps the most important mission of the CCC. The Basic Skills Initiative stands to instill new energy and wherewithal into the classroom and across college campuses. Changes to the assessment and placement process will complement those efforts and give college faculty and staff the best chance to help students become prepared for college success.

Policy Changes Could Increase Student Success

California’s future depends heavily on its system of higher education; the community colleges, by virtue of their sheer size and vital set of missions, are the linchpin of that system. Public policy can be a powerful tool for shaping the state’s future. Despite the fact that many current state and system policies explicitly address student success goals, Californians are not getting the results that they need. It is imperative that the colleges be given the resources they need and that lawmakers enact policies that will foster the best use of these resources to promote student success.

This research addresses a vital, but necessarily limited set of policy issues. More attention is needed to a variety of related issues, such as K-12 reforms to increase student preparation levels, innovations in teaching and learning and the kinds of faculty development needed to implement such efforts in the community colleges, what happens to the students who don’t complete an academic program at the CCC, factors related to student success in the UC and CSU systems, and how greater collaboration across educational segments could increase student success across the educational system.

The following recommendations—derived from our review of the research literature and our analysis of the factors associated with greater student success in community

colleges—are intended to capture the momentum building across the system about increasing student success in California’s community colleges, and suggest directions for new approaches. Implementation of some of these recommendations would require legislative changes, while others could be accomplished through regulatory changes at the system level or changes in campus policies and practices. Some changes will require additional resources, while others could be accomplished within current funding levels. A well-considered combination of increased resources and policies better targeted toward student success should yield significant gains in the educational outcomes for Californians.

Recommendations

1. Encourage direct college-going after high school
2. Send clear messages to high school students, teachers, and counselors about college-readiness standards in the CCC
3. Encourage UC and CSU to offer baccalaureate coursework on community college campuses
4. Provide substantive orientation to college for all degree-seeking students to help them understand what their options are, what resources are available to them, and what is expected of them to maximize their chances of success
5. Require degree-seeking students to declare a specific program focus and update their program intent annually
6. Enhance financial aid and provide incentives to encourage students to work less and attend college on a more full-time and continuous basis
7. Structure programs to encourage completion of shorter-term credentials along the pathway to longer-term credentials
8. Remove the prohibition on campus-based fees, giving colleges the option of using them as a means to guide students toward more successful enrollment patterns

9. Support college efforts to evaluate the impact of orientation courses, learning communities and other innovations that integrate academics with intensive student support services, particularly on first-generation and under-represented minority students, and expand such instructional offerings where proven effective
10. Revise assessment and placement policies to ensure that prospective students receive clear and consistent messages about college readiness and that all degree-seeking students receive the full benefit of professional guidance to enroll in the courses that will best promote their success
11. Expand counseling, advising and other student support programs with the goal of ensuring that more students receive such services on an intensive and ongoing basis
12. Collect and maintain additional data in order to answer key questions and monitor progress in student success and completion

Providing true educational opportunity for Californians requires that the California Community Colleges keep the door wide open to growing numbers of Californians and that the state provide the needed resources and enact the best possible public policies to ensure that students can succeed in earning the college degrees that they seek and that the state needs.





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Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy

6000 J Street, Tahoe Hall 3063 | Sacramento, CA 95819-6081
T (916) 278-3888 | F (916) 278-3907 | www.csus.edu/ihe