

## Editorial: Community colleges' potential must be tapped

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Here's a sobering prospect: To compete with other states and nations, California must increase the number of workers with college degrees by 55 percent before 2025. That would be 132,000 more graduates a year with an associate or bachelor's degree.

The projection by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems demands a commitment of the governor and Legislature. They should begin with community colleges.

About 70 percent of students who go beyond high school start out at community colleges. But the rate for getting a degree is a depressing 24 percent. For Latinos and African-Americans, it's only 18 percent and 15 percent respectively.

There's at least talk of K-12 reform, but scant attention has been paid to community colleges, whose funding is tied to K-12 schools through Proposition 98. Yet their challenges are equally serious, and a cogent reform strategy is ready to go. It's in the summary report by the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy at California State University-Sacramento: "It Could Happen: Unleashing the Potential of California's Community Colleges to Help Students Succeed and California Thrive."

To reach the potential implied in the title, the Legislature can't tinker at the edges. This must be a comprehensive approach.

The state's 109 community colleges share some of the K-12 system's problems: They have among the lowest per-student funding in the nation, no system to identify students who are behind and inflexible rules from Sacramento that make it hard to focus on students who most need help.

Bad policies result:

- A law requiring no less than 50 percent of funding be spent on instruction prevents hiring enough counselors and support staff for remediation.
- Funding based on attendance in the third week of a semester creates a perverse incentive to allow unprepared students into courses.
- A focus on open access and low fees works against student success. Fees represent only 5 percent of the full cost of college; it would be wiser to raise fees and increase financial aid for needy students so they could work fewer hours.

More money is needed - "It Could Happen" doesn't say how much - but it has to be wisely directed.

Through their Basic Skills Initiative, community colleges figured out what works to increase degree completion: counseling and intensive remediation. Base funding should include these programs, with extra dollars for districts that show high rates of success. And colleges should have the flexibility to spend money as they see fit.

The colleges need a uniform assessment of readiness, instead of each creating its own measures. High school students should take the test early enough to arrive prepared.

The current system is packed with incentives to push students through the pipeline, unguided and under-prepared. It isn't meeting their needs or the state's demand for an educated workforce.