



Quality, Access, Low Cost: Can California's Community Colleges Do It All?

California's community colleges are expected to provide a broad range of affordable educational opportunities to everyone who wants access: students needing basic skills, career or technical training, two years of coursework to transfer to a university, or enrichment courses. The colleges not only serve their students, but they also play an important role in reducing enrollment pressures on the state's universities and providing the business community with the skilled workers it needs.

The CCC system has attempted—with mixed results—to provide quality programs to serve its far-reaching and continually growing mission. In 2003 the system faced both dramatic growth in the state's young adult population and a state budget that reduced expected funding. In response, community colleges cut course offerings and student services. The situation shed a harsh light on the conflicts inherent in raising expectations for the state's community colleges with only limited regard for the costs or tradeoffs involved.

Reductions in funding also reduce access

For the CCC system, actual enrollment increases do not necessarily result in more funds. Instead, the state uses enrollment demand projections to set a limit on how much additional community college enrollment it will support. If actual enrollment growth exceeds the limit—throughout the system or at a specific campus—the state does not provide additional funding.

Thus, when community college funding is reduced, campuses typically respond by cutting student services and/or academic courses. Between spring 2002 and spring 2003, course offerings systemwide were cut by 4.7%, according to state data. Although these reductions affected some English and math courses required by transfer students, the cuts were disproportionately from vocational and non-transferable course sections. At some campuses that meant students were placed on waiting lists and eventually turned away.

Certain students are affected by these cutbacks more than others, according to the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy. First-generation college students, older students, and others less familiar with college systems frequently lose out to those who are more system savvy.

Adequate funding to accommodate an increasing number of students is, for many, just one facet of a larger financial crisis for the CCC system. The California Postsecondary Commission (CPEC) puts the cost per full-time equivalent student (FTES) in the 2003–04 academic year at \$4,367. This level of funding places California 40th among the 50 states in its per-student funding for community

colleges, according to the League of Women Voters of California. The League and others say that CCC funding is approximately \$3,000 per FTES below the national average. The CCC Chancellor's Office estimates that an adequate level of funding for community colleges might be about \$9,200 per FTES.

Growing demand will necessitate change

CPEC projections of enrollment demand include population growth plus the percent of the adult population who will attend, i.e. participation rates. Assuming moderate growth in participation rates, no increase in the amount per FTES, and no adjustment for inflation, the community colleges will need \$1.5 billion more in funds for instruction-related expenses alone by 2013, according to CPEC.

With California's current state budget crisis, the K–12 and CCC systems could easily become competitors for scarce resources. Both receive their funding under the provisions of Proposition 98, a minimum guarantee that has instead served as a maximum limit on state funding for K–14 education. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's 2005–06 budget proposes to suspend Proposition 98 but still provide a \$359 million increase for community colleges, enough to support a 3.93% cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) and enrollment growth of 3%. It also assumes no increase in student fees. The proposal recommends a similar increase covering COLA and growth for K–12. Under this scenario, neither system receives the funding augmentation that Proposition 98 would have automatically provided, an increase many believe both systems need.

With no new resources apparently available, many are looking at ways to make the current state funding for community colleges stretch further, particularly over the long term. Two suggestions—increasing fees and changing registration policies to limit access and thus enrollment demand—could have consequences for certain student populations and thus present political challenges. A third suggestion—reviewing the way funds are allocated—may help shift funds to regions where demand is the strongest; but, if implemented, lower-demand districts could suffer.

Fee increases: Fees only account for 5% of the CCC system's budget. A 44% increase in 2004–05 raised the annual full-time tuition to attend community college in California to just \$780. This compares to a national average of \$2,155 in 2003–04.

Prioritizing students: Technically, the community colleges cannot turn away a student who wishes to enroll, but they can and do set policies that favor one group over another. Which students should be the highest priority? And who should decide that for individual campuses and for the system as a whole?

Finding efficiencies: The CCC system could stretch funds by distributing resources more effectively. Currently the system uses a rather complex allocation formula called program-based funding (PBF), established in 1988, to decide how much funding each community college district receives.

Improving student performance benefits the system

In 2004 the Legislature passed both Senate bills 1415 and 1785 to improve the efficiency with which students can transfer from community colleges to CSU campuses. SB 1415 requires that, by June 1, 2006, the CCC and CSU systems as a whole adopt a common course numbering system for the 20 majors in highest demand, making it clear which courses any CSU will accept. (The common numbering system is optional for the UC and independent postsecondary institutions.)

Reducing the number of students who need remedial help and increasing the pass rate in remedial courses would also save money and alleviate crowding. In fall 2003 more than 285,000 students on CCC campuses, or about 19%, enrolled in at least one remedial course.

This is an issue that community colleges and K–12 schools need to work on together. Research shows that many high school students wrongly assume that community colleges have no curricular requirements. They are often unaware that they will have to take placement tests before enrolling in community college classes. They do not realize that, in California, the minimum skills and knowledge required to graduate from many high schools are not enough to qualify a student to take community college classes, even career/technical courses.

Improving student success in transfer and remediation programs could also help address the capacity and funding problems. Better articulation and instructional improvements could remove barriers and improve transfer rates.

Researchers have found that this lack of preparation at the high school level also affects students' ability to complete college. Students who take extensive remedial coursework at the college level are less

likely to attain their educational goal, whether that is a two-year certificate or a four-year degree.

According to a Chancellor's Office 2002 report, students pass approximately 59% of basic-skills courses, a rate that has remained fairly consistent from 1997 to 2001. This compares to completion rates of 75% or more for transfer and career/technical courses. Research is currently examining how factors such as student readiness, class size, staff qualifications, and instructional quality may affect student success rates in basic-skills courses. Results could help the CCC system improve remedial course completion rates.


In many cases, the state has already paid for these students to gain basic skills while they were in high school. Paying again for them to gain the same skills at the community colleges is expensive.

The state needs to address community college issues

Over the past 30 years, community college students have accounted for 73% of the increase in California higher education enrollment, according to the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), and the rate of adults attending community colleges is higher in California than in any other state. Regional variations in population growth and program needs further complicate the situation.

Absent well-considered state policy decisions, individual community college districts will make the choices necessary to keep operating. With little ability to increase their own revenues, the campuses will likely find ways to cut costs, limit enrollments, or both. These ad hoc decisions, constrained by many factors outside of the control of the campuses, may have unintended consequences. They will certainly reflect local needs, priorities, and politics that may not advance the greater good of the state as a whole.

More than one analysis indicates that the amount of funding required to provide a quality education to students is significantly higher than what California currently provides. But the K–12 system, which competes for the same dollars, makes a similar case. It is unclear whether leaders in these two systems can avoid a win/lose confrontation, instead presenting a united front to advocate for adequate funding for the K–14 system as a whole.

For the community colleges to provide quality programs and fulfill their core mission, the state may have to either increase funds or establish priorities to determine which students will be served. It may also need to craft some special regional approaches for those campuses that are seeing the most change. Addressing some of the cumbersome areas of the governance and funding systems—and examining the system's accountability mechanisms—could also make a difference. 

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Also at www.edsource.org find an extensive bibliography that contains links to research reports, commentaries, and other information about community colleges.

In addition, EdSource is publishing two student/parent guides on community colleges: *A Guide to California's Community Colleges* and *Community College: A first step to a bachelor's degree*. These two-page guides will be available in both English and Spanish to download for free from the EdSource website in April 2005.



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