

On Education

Too Many California Students Not Ready for College

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California's vibrant economy is in jeopardy because we aren't producing enough educated workers to meet the state's future needs, according to a recent study by the Public Policy Institute of California. The authors see only one solution: improving college attendance and graduation rates of Californians.

High-profile attempts by top universities to serve more low-income and minority students are important, but they won't solve this problem. Only a limited number of students can attend these schools. Substantially increasing graduation rates will require lifting achievement levels for students who are not admitted to public universities.

If approved by lawmakers, a \$33 million investment tucked inside the state budget represents a rare attempt to work toward that goal. The funds would ensure continuation of an audacious initiative that is shining a spotlight on a problem that has historically seemed intractable: the large number of students who don't succeed in college because they don't complete remedial English or math.

This effort represents the best chance in years to reverse that trend. It is being coordinated by instructors at the state's community colleges, and no one is better positioned to tackle the problem. But the plan will not work without the serious engagement of colleges and sustained state support.

About two-thirds of Californians who attend college go to one of the state's 109 community colleges. According to community college system estimates, more than 70 percent of students enter unprepared for college math or English. For every 10 who take a remedial class, approximately 6 complete it. Far fewer ultimately pass freshman math and English -- the gateway to a degree or transfer.

Though this problem originates with public schools, which badly need improvement, community colleges for years to come will be the make-or-break point for hundreds of thousands of such students every year -- students who are not served by the state's universities. Whether those students ultimately reach their educational potential -- becoming able to contribute fully to their families, their communities and the state economy -- will depend largely on the strength of the colleges.

That leaves the state's most poorly funded education system contending with one of the state's greatest problems. To their credit, the California Community Colleges Board of Governors, together with college administrators and faculty leaders, is rising to the occasion. Under the proposed \$33 million initiative, each college would examine how its approaches to serving under-prepared students stack up against the best research available, using a critical examination of students' progress to develop and implement campus action plans.

In our own projects with community colleges, we have seen the difference this type of inquiry can make:

-- At Cabrillo College, an instructor conducted hundreds of interviews to assess the needs of under-prepared students and developed a new semester-long curriculum to help them "learn how to learn" and accelerate through remedial coursework.

-- After conducting an analysis, Chaffey College in Rancho Cucamonga confronted the harsh reality of low completion rates. Administrators, faculty and counselors working together to understand the problem, reorganized classes and established campus-wide success centers to assist students.

-- At Pasadena City College, a group of mathematics faculty, discouraged by how many students failed or disappeared from their remedial classes, entirely reworked the pre-algebra curriculum and offered it as an intensive summer program.

Though the solutions differ, all yielded notably higher success rates for students. The common denominator is that each was developed and refined based on information about student learning. Now, in an unprecedented collaboration, system leaders will distribute the \$33 million to colleges that engage in this type of inquiry to drive improvement.

It will not be easy. But, as California Community Colleges System Chancellor Mark Drummond has recognized, the state has no choice. Whoever replaces him must sustain the focus. All colleges need to embrace this approach, to increase attainment, especially for low-income and minority students, while maintaining their open-access policies.

But colleges don't operate in a vacuum. The state must do its part, continuing the investment in future years and reversing the colleges' poor funding, with new dollars flowing into effective approaches to improve student outcomes. Much is at stake. California's colleges may survive with or without more investment in student success. California's vibrant economy will not.

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