

## **Building a 'Bridge to Success' at Colleges** **Sacramento Bee 2/11/07**

*By Marshall S. Smith and Pamela Burdman*

California's community colleges long have been engines of democracy, ensuring that virtually every state resident who desires it can attend college. Indeed, the state's master plan for education, which limits attendance at our four-year universities to the top third of high school graduates, has made community colleges the only road to public higher education for the majority of Californians. Among the illustrious whose talents were first nurtured in California's community colleges are Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, director George Lucas and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, to name just three.

But for too many of the 2.5 million students who attend one of the state's 110 community colleges each year for similar nurturing, the steps behind the open door are too steep to climb. A new report by the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy at California State University, Sacramento, finds that fewer than 25 percent of them achieve their goals of earning a credential to prepare for a skilled job or transferring to a four-year university.

One underlying cause clearly is the state's low investment in community colleges. While the UC system receives \$14,500 from the state for every student, making it one of the best-funded research universities in the country, California's community colleges receive an average of only \$5,234 per student, near the bottom among two-year schools nationally and even less than California's K-12 schools. Equally at fault are policies that reward colleges for opening the door, but don't supply the resources or incentives to ensure that students succeed.

The message is that student-counselor ratios of 1,900:1 are acceptable, that it's OK for students to take courses for which they are unprepared and that needy students can attend school part-time rather than receive the financial aid to allow them to focus on their studies -- in sum, that it doesn't matter what happens to students once they cross the threshold.

But ensuring that these students succeed is of concern to all Californians, as other numbers make clear. The Public Policy Institute of California, a nonpartisan think tank, projects that by 2020 almost 40 percent of jobs will require a college degree and another 36 percent will need "some college" -- far more than the state currently produces. Other states face similar gaps, but failure to address the shortfall will cost California more than any of them, according to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

The community colleges aren't the villain of this story. They're just playing by the rules. They are not the cause of low per-capita student funding or financial incentives based on enrollment without regard to academic success.

Though resource-poor, community colleges are rich in talented professionals who labor to provide opportunities for students despite the policies that stymie their efforts. Those professionals and their students deserve more than a single step into higher education. They deserve policies that make it possible for community colleges to guide students to take coherent sequences of courses and provide financial aid so that students can afford to take more than one class at a time.

It's time to trade an "open door" for a "bridge to success," so that more students can leave college heading to a different place from where they began, a place that includes the economic success and upward mobility that have always been part of the California dream.

Building that bridge is an effort that the business community, the advocacy community and the colleges themselves should embrace. For businesses, community colleges are critical to educating the future work force. For proponents of equality, who have fought for access to seats at UC campuses, it is equally important that low-income and minority students who don't go straight to four-year universities have a chance to succeed.

It is understandably difficult for community colleges to help students who, in many cases, have not been well served by the state's high schools. But with the right incentives and resources, the community colleges can help launch far more students on their journey.