

Community College Funding Crucial but Poorly Understood

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Earlier this month, California voters defeated Proposition 92, which would have increased funding for community colleges, lowered student fees and altered the colleges' governance system. It is urgent that policy-makers and educational leaders take the right lessons from the voters' decision.

First, it would be a terrible mistake to let the defeat of Proposition 92 signal that community colleges are not important to California's well-being. Research continually reveals the critical role that community colleges play in California education and the state's economic success. Most jobs that pay family-supporting wages require some post-secondary education. The open-access community colleges are the first college experience for the majority of Californians.

Nor does Proposition 92's defeat imply that California community colleges are adequately funded. Numerous studies have concluded that, when taxpayer dollars and student fees are combined, California spends far less on community college students than on either K-12 or university students. The investment is also lower than almost every other state's support (in tax dollars and student fees) of community colleges.

California's relatively low level of investment in community colleges is particularly important for lawmakers to keep in mind during a cycle of budget cuts. In fiscal downturns, universities have ways to limit access. The California State University system, for example, recently did so by moving its application deadline to February. Community colleges' open-door policies give them fewer options. In bad financial times, more Californians may seek retraining at the very time the colleges are ill-equipped to serve additional students.

In previous economic downturns, the colleges suffered both in dollars per student and in number of seats. In 2003, when colleges raised fees even as they cut course offerings, about 175,000 students were effectively turned away. California would be ill-served by repeating this pattern.

Third, it would be a shame to let the campaign over Proposition 92 confuse Californians about the low cost of our community colleges. At \$20 a unit, California's student fees are by far the lowest in the nation (one-quarter the national average), and low-income students are not required to pay fees. Affordability is a concern, but fees are not the main barrier, as documented in a report last year by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. Even with fees waived, living expenses and textbook costs create a huge burden for students, and many students work long hours to pay the bills.

It's essential that higher education and policy leaders work together to ensure sufficient financial aid for students and resources for colleges to distribute it. For students who succeed there, California's community colleges are the best value in the country - a message prospective students need to hear (not that fees are too high).

Lastly, the Proposition 92 campaign exposed fault lines between our educational segments, with K-12 teachers and public universities opposing the colleges. It's critical to heal these wounds.

For years, community colleges have been in an untenable budget position: tethered to K-12 funding under Proposition 98, overregulated, and excluded from the governors' compacts with other higher education institutions. The colleges can't be blamed for wanting a change.

But they also can be expected to have a laser focus on improving student success, through their own strategic plan. In this, K-12 schools, the University of California system and the CSU system must be their allies.

Educating Californians is the shared responsibility of the colleges and their K-12 and university partners. Although the initiative's defeat risks making college leaders feel outmuscled once again, all the parties need to bury their differences and work together to ensure adequate funding for community colleges, better financial aid for students, and smooth transitions among high schools, community colleges and universities so that more Californians can attend and finish college.

Neither California's young people nor its economy can afford the damage that another budget crisis will do if the pieces of our education system aren't working together.
