

Transcription

California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast Episode 6

Eloy: Hello, everyone. My name is Eloy Ortiz Oakley. Welcome to another session of the "California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast." Today, I'm excited to speak with Debbie Cochrane, Vice President of the Institute for College Access and Success. Welcome, Debbie.

Debbie: Thanks so much for having me.

Eloy: So Debbie, you work for an organization known as TICAS. And to those of us in the college and university world, we're very familiar with what you do. But why don't you give your listeners of a little bit of a primer on what is TICAS, and what do you focus on?

Debbie: Sure. We at TICAS focus both on national policy and California state policy that works to make college more affordable for students from all backgrounds. So practically speaking, we're looking to find more manageable ways for students to pay for college. That's often about increasing the financial aid that's available to them like Pell Grants or Cal Grants here in California. And also, making debt more manageable for the students who do need to borrow.

Eloy: So your organization looks at college affordability, primarily in financial aid, in general. Do you look at the entire national structure of financial aid and college affordability, or do you focus on state or both?

Debbie: For a lot of our work, we focus nationally. We look at the big picture of who's taking out student loan debt, who's receiving financial aid, where the college affordability struggles are most pronounced. We do have a team of folks that work specifically on California state policy and advocacy.

Eloy: So speaking of California, which is something that's near and dear to our heart, college affordability has been in the news a lot lately. There's a organization in California called the Public Policy Institute of California, or PPIC for short. They recently did a poll and college

affordability is the major source of concern for those surveyed. Most state residents, 56%, say affordability is a big problem in California public colleges and universities. And although most adults, 61%, say that almost anyone who needs financial aid can get loans or financial aid, a large majority say that the price of college keeps students who are otherwise qualified and motivated from attending college. In your work, what have you seen in terms of trends of college affordability? Does this poll resonate with the work that you've been doing? What are your thoughts about college affordability, in general, across the nation, but specifically here in California?

Debbie: Well, college affordability, from all the research, is an area where there's a lot of concern. That's true for nationally and in every state across the country, including California. In California, we recently did an analysis of what college costs for families of different income ranges. In California, we found that going to a public four-year institution costs more than half of low-income students' family income. So basically, it's untenable for a lot of families to get to college, let alone get through college and dedicate the time they need to study.

So I think the PPIC study really reinforced that these are huge concerns for a growing share of the population. It's harder for more and more families to afford college, more students are having to borrow, and there's also a lot of signs that, you know, borrowing is getting harder to manage after students leave school.

Eloy: So speaking of borrowing, along with this college affordability question, a lot of people are concerned about student debt. The amount of debt that students across the nation are taking out to finish their undergraduate degree, or in many cases, the tremendous amount of debt that's taken out to complete a graduate degree. What are you seeing in terms of trends across the country, and are those trends also happening in California in terms of student debt?

Debbie: Well, we actually recently just put out our 12th annual report looking at student debt levels for college graduates for every state in the country. And what we see in this, the most recent report, is what we've seen in the others, is that debt continues to just incrementally creep up, both the amount of debt that borrowers have, and also the share of students that are leaving school with debt. In California, the picture's a little different because California has been what we call a "low-debt state" in every year of our analysis. So that's good news for Californians.

What we do see when we dig a little deeper, though, is debt is not held equally amongst all graduates. We have a real problem with low-income student debt in California. In fact, when we looked just at the University of California and graduates from that segment of public higher education, we see about half of all UC graduates who leave school with debt have family incomes under about \$50,000. So there's a lot more we can be doing to make debt more manageable, and the burden of it held more equitably.

Eloy: Well, I can attest that I still carry my debt from the University of California, although it's paid off quite well for me, personally. But it is a concern, I think, to many, the growing amount of debt. In some cases, though, some students are not taking out any debt, and to their detriment. Have you looked at what level of debt is good for students? Is there a position that TICAS takes on student debt? For example, in California Community Colleges, we have very low debt. But in some cases, some would argue that if students took out some debt, they could more quickly finish their certificate, degree, or to transfer. What are your thoughts about debt, in general? Are there levels of debt that are good for students?

Debbie: That's a great question. You know, I think first and foremost, a lot of students go to the California Community Colleges because they don't want to have to borrow, and they don't need to borrow if they go there, and that's great, and they shouldn't have to borrow.

But our position, most broadly, is that students who do need to borrow for college should have access to federal student loans. You know, what we see is a lot of students who are going to college, maybe they're not borrowing for federal student loans, but they're borrowing private student loans. Or they're putting their textbooks on a credit card. And those aren't good outcomes for students. You mentioned whether students should be taking out more in loans if it's something that they're open to.

You know, we see this as an issue that's very much related to attendance intensity, or whether students are part-time or full-time.

There's, you know, far fewer students in the California Community Colleges are attending full-time. And that's a problem, because we know full-time students are more likely to graduate and they'll graduate faster.

So if a little bit of a loan will help them, you know, reduce those work hours, take more classes per semester, and get through college faster, that's a good payoff for them.

Eloy: Well, yes. It's certainly something we wrestle with quite a bit in the community colleges, and we are making a big push to get more students to go full-time. One of the reasons is to be able to access the federal Pell program. Now, in this new administration, there's been a lot of talk about Pell and this whole issue of a Pell surplus. What do you see is the importance of Pell to the kinds of students that we educate in the California Community Colleges? And should we be concerned about federal policy related to Pell?

Debbie: I would say community colleges and California Community Colleges, in particular, should be enormously concerned with the state of the Pell Grant program, and following those developments closely. Most of the, you know, the grantee [SP] that's going to California community college students is actually coming from the federal Pell Grant. So it's an enormous source of financial aid for students. It's the most equitably distributed financial aid program in the country. And it helps students cover both tuition costs and non-tuition costs like housing, food, textbooks.

It's almost impossible to overstate its importance to California community college students.

Eloy: So speaking of affordability and tuition and college attendance, full-time attendance, we recently had a bill signed into law, AB-19, with Governor Brown signature California establish the California College Promise. And so, there was a lot of discussion and debate about this bill, was...which essentially allows colleges to now use state resources to offer a free year of tuition for first-time, full-time students. It also creates a structure to ensure that what we had formerly called the Board of Governor Fee Waiver, now we call the California College Promise Grant continues to be used to offset the cost of tuition to all low-income students.

But in addition, it also encourages full-time enrollment, it encourages the use of Guided Pathways at colleges. It encourages the introduction of the federal student loan program, and other things. You've had a little bit of a chance to look at the legislation. How do you think that this California College Promise is going to impact this issue of affordability, and your thoughts, in general, about AB-19?

Debbie: Well, I think AB-19 is an enormously important bill. We know a lot about some of the practices that are helping students get to and through college. Establishing Guided Pathways, establishing linkages

and partnerships between educational institutions, whether it's between K-12 and higher ed, or within higher education segments.

So AB-19 essentially rewards colleges for engaging in those types of practices, including, as you mentioned, making sure that students have access to all the need-based financial aid that's available for them if they need help paying for college. So I think it's an enormously important bill that was well-designed.

In terms of how it will help students, you know, in terms of college affordability, I think it really remains to be seen. Colleges have a lot of flexibility in terms of how they would use any of the money that would be made available to them under AB-19. A lot of the focus has been on how colleges would be authorized to use that money to cover tuition charges or fee charges for students who aren't eligible for the California Promise Grant. But they can also use it in other ways. If they see they have a problem with retention among their student parents, they could establish childcare centers, or help students by giving them childcare vouchers. They could help them with transportation costs so that they can more reliably get to and from campus.

I think it has a lot of potential. Community colleges, generally, and in California, especially, there's not often a lot of flexibility with financial aid spending. You know, the Pell Grant goes to the students who are eligible for a Pell Grant. The Cal Grant goes to the students who are eligible for a Cal Grant. But colleges don't always have a lot of money that they can use for financial aid purposes as they see fit, when they see challenges arising for their students.

And that's unfortunate. Because they're the ones who are the closest to the students and see most intimately what those challenges are. So I think it would be great if colleges really, really take a good look at what is stopping their students from an affordability standpoint, and helping them get to and through college, and direct those funds accordingly.

Eloy: Now, there's a myriad of different configurations of College Promise initiatives throughout the country. And I know here in California, there's been a great emphasis on local philanthropy taking a role in College Promise initiatives, and getting local communities to support the needs of students in local colleges. In California, we have well over 50 College Promise partnerships that have been developed locally.

What do you see as the role of local philanthropy, or fundraising, in

Transcription by www.speechpad.com Page 5 of 9

general, in supporting the cost of attendance for students? Do you see that as an important role, or should we be primarily relying on state and federal policy to take care of those needs?

Debbie: Well, I think state and federal policy needs to focus, you know, on the students who need the help the most. In California, we do a pretty good job with that with Promise Grants and basically any student who needs help paying for college in the California Community College system can get those tuition fees covered. I think local philanthropy can help fill in those gaps.

I would also just say, more generally, I think that the Promise movement is incredibly important in California and nationally with all the local efforts that go into it, which is, you know, philanthropic, but also just all of the efforts that go into a college-going culture, creating the alignment that communities need to get more students to college.

Eloy: So one of the benefits, in my experience, when I was at Long Beach, is this issue of full-time attendance, and taking a hard look at the full cost of going to college. California Community Colleges have been known for and continue to have the lowest tuition in the country. Very affordable in terms of tuition.

But not too long ago, TICAS published some findings that suggest that in some communities, going to a community college could be more expensive in terms of the total cost of attendance, than attending the University of California. Can you talk about those findings, and why these findings are so surprising to many people in California when most of us think of California Community Colleges as very affordable?

Debbie: Sure. What our study did was we looked at all the nine regions of the state where there's an undergraduate surveying University of California campus. And then, we took the nearest CSU campus and the nearest community college, and we looked at what it would cost for a student, a low-income student, less than \$30,000 of family income, to attend that campus. And what we found was shocking. We found that not a single one of the nine regions was the community college the most affordable option for students.

Now, we're looking at total cost of attendance; so that's tuition, textbooks, transportation, but also living costs like housing and food. And then we're subtracting out all of the financial aid that doesn't need to be repaid. So your Pell Grants, your Cal Grants, your fee waivers, or

Promise Grants, those all get subtracted from this calculation.

But what it means is that you actually have to come up with more money out of pocket if you want to be a full-time student at a community college than you do if you are a low-income student at UC or CSU. And I think that's really surprising because we've so prioritized this notion of low tuition, low fees in the community colleges, and that fact alone, making the community colleges so affordable. And as a result, we've really shortchanged those students in terms of financial aid.

Eloy: That's very insightful, because I think this is a myth that has challenged us in the community colleges about the notion that it is inexpensive to go to community college. It is inexpensive, certainly, in terms of tuition. But as there is a greater and greater emphasis on students getting some sort of credential in community colleges, their need to finish a credential as quickly as possible to get into the workforce, I think it highlights all the things that you and your organization have pointed out.

So speaking of community college attendance and the availability of aid, one of the chief providers of aid in California is the Cal Grant system, which has been noted as one of the finest state aid systems in the country, and certainly has fueled access to the UC and the CSU system for many, many years. I think what we're finding as a challenge in the California Community Colleges is the relatively low access to Cal Grant aid for our community college students.

What do you see as needing to change, if anything, in the Cal Grant system? And more broadly, what do you see as the future of the Cal Grant system? Or does TICAS have any thoughts about what we could do differently?

Debbie: Yeah. I will say we have a lot of thoughts about what could be done differently, and we actually work with a coalition of a couple dozen organizations, with Californians for College Affordability pushing for a stronger Cal Grant program.

You know, I think that the Cal Grant program has, for a very long time, shortchanged community college students, in particular, in part because of that focus on fees. You know, community colleges in California educate about two-thirds of the state's undergraduates, but the system as a whole receives less than 10% of all the state Cal Grant funding. And that's a massive problem, especially when we think that low-income

students are more likely to go to the community colleges. Students of color are more likely to come to the community colleges. So there are huge equity concerns that are baked into those types of discrepancies.

You know, I think what we have to do first and foremost is make sure that more students can get Cal Grants at the community colleges. We have a system right now where 70% of all full-time students are getting their fees waived through the fee waiver program, but only about 4% of California community college students get Cal Grants.

Eloy: Wow.

Debbie: And that's shockingly low. And there's been a lot of focus in recent years on how do we support more of the full-time students at the community colleges, or enable more students to go full-time, and we've kind of created some additional add-on financial aid programs to those Cal Grants; a full-time student success grant program a few years ago, and then a college completion grant. Both of those are add-ons to those Cal Grant. But if only 4% of the students are even getting the grant to which those ones are added on, we're leaving, you know, 96% out, and that's not okay. So we've got to do better, and we've got to figure out a way to get more students in the mix for Cal Grants so that way, we can better support more students to go full-time.

There's been a lot of energy devoted to talking about how we need to do better with the Cal Grant program, even some thinking about how we might redesign it from scratch. I think those conversations are gonna evolve quite a bit over the next year. We'll certainly be engaged in them, and are really interested at the current moment in time just trying to figure out where there's consensus around college affordability problems in the state of California amongst experts. So I think it's a conversation to watch.

Eloy: And we will certainly be watching it, and very actively involved, pushing for our students in the California Community Colleges, because we agree with you. I think leaving that many students out of the Cal Grants system is not good for the future of California.

Now, to sort of close our conversation, I'd like to ask you one final question. If there one thing that keeps you up at night in terms of college affordability, or the direction we're going in terms of ensuring that all students have access to some aid in the opportunity to gain a higher education, what do you think are the most troubling things that keep you

up at night, or that you would say really needs to be focused on in order to ensure that all Californians, and all Americans, have access to a higher education?

Debbie: That's a big question. You know, I think...this is a wonky thing to say it keeps me up at night. But I think one of the most troubling concerns we really see in higher education, generally, is the lack of sufficient state investment in public higher education, whether California or in most other states. Most undergraduate students are going to public colleges. And there's all this focus on rising tuition. Well, tuition is rising because states aren't keeping up with their share of funding higher education on a per-student basis. And right now, there's no real reason for them to do it. It's kind of a helpful release valve in their state budgets.

I think we need to take bold action around keeping states at the table. I think there has to be federal action. And I don't see a lot of movement on that right now, but hopefully we'll get there.

Eloy: Well, I think that's a great way to wrap this up. I completely agree with you. States need to step forward if we're gonna be successful. So you've been listening to the "California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast." I've had the pleasure of talking with Debbie Cochrane, the Vice President of TICAS. Thank you for being with us today, Debbie.

Debbie: Thanks so much for having me.

Eloy: That wraps up our session today. Please join me again in the future for the "California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast." We'll see you soon.

Recording: Be sure to join us for the next "California Community Colleges Podcast." This has been a California Community Colleges presentation.