

Transcription

California Community Colleges
Podcast on Guided Pathways

Episode #3

Eloy: Hi. I'm Eloy Oakley. And welcome to another podcast brought to you by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. Today's topic is a new vision for success document that has been prepared to guide the California Community Colleges over the next five and ten years to improve student outcomes and meet the needs of our changing economy. I'm joined today by none other than Hans Johnson, the Director of the Higher Education Center at the Public Policy Institute of California, or PPIC. He's also a Senior Fellow at PPIC. Hans, it's great to have you. Welcome.

Hans: Thank you, Eloy. It's a pleasure to be here. I'm very excited about the work that's going on in the community colleges, the importance of that work, and what it means for the state of California.

Eloy: Well, I have been following your work for a long time, and we very much appreciate the great work that you're doing in your center, in general, the PPIC work. It's wonderful for California. We want to talk a little bit about the Vision for Success, and the goals that are in it. And just for our audience, I'm gonna briefly talk about the goals and then we can get into them.

First of all, what we're saying in the Vision for Success is that we want to increase by 35% annually the number of California community college students transferring to the University of California or California State University campus. We also want to increase the number of students completing career education programs who find a job in their field of study from the current 60% to 69%. Our colleges also want to increase by at least 20% the number of students annually who earn associate's degrees, credentials, certificates, or acquire specific skills that prepare them for in-demand jobs. We also want to significantly reduce the average number of units accumulated by students who earn an associate's degree from around 87 to 79. Most associate degrees require 60 units and reducing the average number of units to degree will help our students reach their educational goals sooner, at much less cost to them, and for the taxpayer. We also want to reduce the achievement gaps by 40% within five years and fully closing those achievement gaps for good within ten years.

So given all that, Hans, what are the completion outcomes that you think, based on your work, are required for California and its future, particularly coming from the community colleges?

Hans: Yeah, so let me first of all just say how pleased I am to be here

and be a part of the Vision for Success. I have the pleasure of being an advisor to that project. And there is no other higher education system in the country that is larger than the community colleges and that I would say is more important at this point in our state's history to accomplishing the ideals of higher education.

And specifically, I think there's this real question out there, a valid question, about whether higher education continues to serve as an economic and social ladder of mobility in California, or whether it perpetuates economic and class divides. And certainly...Eloy, you know this better than anyone else, the California Community Colleges are at the forefront of serving a diverse population of Californians, a large number of low-income students, very large numbers of students who are underrepresented in other sectors of higher education, but not in yours, not in the community colleges.

And so, if we are going to achieve the ideals of higher education for our state and for our citizens, it is going to be through effective outcomes for students in the community colleges. And for so long, California's community colleges have done a great role, especially at serving, it is often said, the top 100% of California's high school graduates.

Eloy: And we're proud of that.

Hans: And you should be. And that access is something that needs to be upheld as we go forward and start thinking more and more about improving student outcomes and student success. Certainly one way to do that is to restrict access only to those who you know will succeed. And that's not what you're doing. That's not what the community colleges are planning on with these new outcome measures.

So from PPIC's perspective, the Public Policy Institute of California's perspective, we've been doing a lot of work looking at what California needs from the labor market standpoint. And that's just one way to look at higher education and higher education outcomes. It's one that I think matters a lot. It matters to the people across the street over here in the Capitol. But maybe most importantly, the number one reason most students and their families say they want their children to go to college is to have a better life. And part of that is a better economic life.

And the community college goals, if achieved, these new goals that have been laid out in the Vision for Success which you've outlined here, will be, from my standpoint, the single most important change in our

higher education system since the Master Plan. And that's maybe a big statement, but realize we're talking about, as you do realize, hundreds of thousands of students who will have better outcomes in their lives if we're able to achieve these outcomes.

So at PPIC, when we've done this work looking at "What do we need for our future economy?" We have identified the need for more bachelor's degrees. And so, in particular, the transfer goal is one I'm really excited about. It is the way that UC and CSU and other universities, the private nonprofits as well that community college students transfer to, can help serve a more diverse population than they're currently serving. Again, going to improve that economic and social mobility ladder.

We've also done work at PPIC looking at career tech vocational education, and outcomes there. And again, there are exciting programs going on in the community colleges. I think the challenge is to identify those that really work for students from an economic perspective, and figure out ways to scale those programs and get more students into and out of those programs. And all of this is complicated, especially on the career tech side, with local labor markets and how fast they're changing. And certainly, a central challenge you face here in the community college is being able to respond quickly to changes in what students need and what the economy needs.

Eloy: So given all that, Hans, paint a picture for me. California is around the sixth-largest economy in the world, 30+ million residents, and the California Community Colleges serve about 2.1 million. So paint a picture for me. If we're not successful doing what you just mentioned and achieving those goals, what would be the consequences for the state of California?

Hans: And the consequences are dire. I don't want to be, you know, overly gloom and doom, but it is the case that in California, right now, the best educated cohort in our state, that is measuring it by the percent of the population that has a bachelor's degree or more, are baby boomers. And young adults in California are not keeping pace with the educational demands of our labor market.

And so, that lack of generational progress is something that we've not had before in our state. It hasn't been the case in the past. And if we don't have improvements in educational outcomes generationally, we'll see a stagnation in wages, we'll see more demand for social services than we would otherwise see. And I think more generally, we'll see a lot

of people being upset that the American Dream is not being realized for them or then, for their successive generations and children. And I think that can lead to other kinds of problems, society-wide, politically.

So the easiest thing to do is let's solve the problem at hand with the tools we have that we know will work. And that is then, in fact, increasing the share of students that go to and complete college. That means that the state will have lower unemployment rates than it would otherwise have, it will have less demand for social services, it will have higher tax revenues. All of those are good things. So there's a question, I think, when you and I talk to people about these outcomes and how it can improve our lives and the state's life, people say, "Well, why don't we do it?" And I think that's a tougher question to answer.

Eloy: So you see, post-Great Recession, big changes in the economy. Big changes in the workforce not only in California, but throughout the country. And we're feeling a lot of that tension right now. There's a lot of workers in the economy that feel like they're disconnected. And what do you think is the challenge given the Strategic Vision, giving everything that's going on and you're seeing in higher education, how do we keep up with those changes in the economy? And what do you see happening if we can't?

Hans: So I think there's two key points in someone's life when they engage in higher education. One is when they finish high school. And for most people who go to college, that's actually when they go. So if you don't go then, chances are you're not gonna go later. So that is an important population to capture. That's the transfer intending population. That's one of the key thrusts of your Vision for Success is that group.

But then there's this other second group, which is numerically larger and as you've pointed out, Eloy, pretty well represented in community colleges as well. And these are older adults, still young, but older than those high school graduates, who are coming in to the community colleges to build the skills that they need to succeed in this economy that's rapidly transforming. And that population is one that, because of the large network of community colleges we have in the state, can experience the kinds of economic gains with that post-secondary training. Often for them, it will be short of a bachelor's degree, so we're often talking about career technical education for that population, that will lead to meaningful gains in their own lives, and will keep, I think, many of them from becoming disengaged from the labor force and labor market. And we already do see, you know, when we look at labor force

participation rates among people who have only completed high school and have no further training, they're on the decline. And they're on the decline even for people who are of prime working ages. That's a cause for concern. And that's where I think, again, the community colleges rightly, and as you've identified, have a role to play.

At the end of the day, you know, the economy is gonna continue to change. And there are places in the world that are doing a good job at investing in higher education, in training more people for that changing economy. California used to be at the forefront...certainly when the Master Plan was developed. I think we are certainly trying to move back towards the forefront, but I think we have some ground to gain here.

Eloy: And in your work, I think I've seen that you really believe that the way the economy is changing, that more and more employers are gonna require that workers have some sort of college credential. Do you see that continuing into the future, or do you see that changing, declining? What do you see going forward in terms of the number of workers that are gonna be required to have some sort of college credential?

Hans: Yeah, so we've looked at California's economy, and our projection is that by 2030, almost 40% of jobs will require at least a bachelor's degree, and another very large share of jobs will require some post-secondary credential. We've estimated that California is about one million bachelor's degrees short of where we would need to be in 2030 unless we change our access, and most importantly, our success in our higher education systems, which is exactly why I'm excited about the transfer rate goals there. And we've also identified...along with other groups, it's not just us. We've looked at the need for other kinds of post-secondary credentials that perhaps another one million post-secondary credentials short of a bachelor's degree are necessary for this changing economy.

And look, it's not just about, you know, workers filling jobs of big companies. But it's also about people being able to create their own firms and the skills that you develop in...whether it's a vocational education program, or yes, even a philosophy major at a four-year college or university, those skills are often translatable into inventiveness, creativity that has long been what's fueled California's economy. And we're, of course, known throughout the world for California's innovation. And a lot of that has come from, and gone very much hand in hand, with our robust higher education system, which, of course, includes the community colleges, the University of California,

the California State Universities, and some very fine private institutions as well.

Eloy: So a lot of people have speculated what's wrong with higher education? What's going on? Why can't we produce the types and number of credentials that we need to match the kind of need that you see out there? Given all this, given what people complained as K-12 preparation or remediation once they get to college, what do you think are some of the biggest barriers that community colleges or higher education, in general, needs to wrestle with and improve based on your work?

Hans: So there are key points in the pipeline from...really, ninth grade, you can even go all the way down to Pre-K, to college and through college. And some of the critical points, especially, are in that high school preparation. And as you know, the K-12 system is engaged in very concerted efforts to improve college readiness and career readiness of their graduates. And let's hope and expect that that works well.

We do know that the share of high school graduates that are completing the A-G courses that are required for entrance to UC and CSU is at an all-time high. It's been going up for every group. So there's good news there. But still, too many students are graduating from high school who want to college but actually don't have the skills to succeed in college. Those numbers are actually lower than I think are being identified by colleges themselves. And so, I'm excited, and we are excited at PPIC about some of the reforms going on with respect to how students are assessed and placed into whether they're placed in remediation or basic skills courses versus college-level courses.

So I think those are two areas where I'd say there's a lot of gains that could be had, that high school preparation, and then that placement into college-level courses.

Eloy: How big of a problem do you see that this whole remediation issue is? How many...and what types of students are really getting stuck in this remediation quagmire?

Hans: So we've done a lot of work looking at assessment and placement, remediation and outcomes for students who are placed in remediation. And the numbers are staggering. We find that about 80% of incoming students are placed in courses that are below college-level,

known as "remedial" or "basic skills" or "developmental education," whatever you want to call it. And that relatively few of them ever end up completing college-level English or math courses, and that's the remediation subjects, of course, are in English and math. And that even fewer go on to transfer.

So we've been doing some work at PPIC...of course, the community colleges, under your leadership, are doing a lot of work thinking about how they place and assess students. And there's some encouraging new procedures being implemented there. And as you've noted, focusing especially on a student's prior academic record, which we know is the best indicator of how they'll do in college, which are their grades and courses that they took in high school.

But there are still some students who will need help in being able to succeed in college-level courses. And at PPIC, we've done some recent work looking at new ways of delivering remediation in math and statistics. And we have some exciting results that suggest that, especially, the statistics pathway leads to much larger gains in the number of students who successfully end up passing through remediation and passing a math or a statistics transfer-level college course. And then, finally, we see those gains continuing even into a higher share that end up transferring under this pathway versus the traditional math pathway. And the numbers, in terms of throughput, are large because so many students are in that system.

So it's really encouraging. Often, when you look at an intervention, you don't see the results lasting very long. Maybe, you know, you might expect to see students more likely to make it out of remediation, but then they don't succeed in college-level courses or don't make it to transfer. But in this case, we see those effects lasting, so it's pretty exciting.

Eloy: So I want to get back to the whole discussion around assessment and placement a little later, and maybe at another opportunity. But let's talk specifically about this whole math sequence. You mentioned statistics, you mentioned a lot of work around remediation, around math. In my experience, the math pathway tends to be...I think it's been described as the "killing fields" for first generation students and students of color. So many students get stuck there and cannot complete their college credential. And I know there's been some controversy over whether or not algebra is the right math pathway for everyone; I know there's a lot of concern across the country about what that means. Are

we watering down standards for certain types of students? What do you think about this whole conversation; algebra versus statistics or other quantitative reasoning course? What have you seen in your work, and what can you tell our listeners about what this means to a college education?

Hans: Yeah, to be clear so that you know my own point of view, I have a master's degree in biostatistics. I also have taken a lot of math courses; I have a PhD in demography. Both of those degrees are from the University of California Berkeley. I'm not a math expert and I'm not a statistics expert, especially in terms of educational pedagogy.

But let me say this. I think, in terms of quantitative reasoning and the kinds of tools that students will need often in many of their majors--not all, but in many of their majors--the quantitative reasoning you get in statistics is actually more valuable than you would get in Algebra II, in trigonometry. And specifically, what you learn in a statistics pathway is how to understand things like percentages, how you can understand whether a survey that's taken of voters is very accurate or not. Key concepts that are valuable in people's everyday experiences, whether they're reading the newspaper or perhaps even in their job. And so, I'm a big fan of statistics and the statistics pathway.

Having said that, I know that there are certain majors that you need an algebra pathway that will lead to calculus and even more advanced math. Certainly that's more common in a lot of the STEM fields--science, technology, engineering, and math. And we don't want to channel all students into a statistics pathway and then leave those STEM pathways not available to them. But the fact is, most students don't go into STEM pathways. And for those students, that statistics pathway, I think, is tremendously valuable.

The other thing that we have been looking at and thinking about, as we have done some work looking at this algebra versus statistics debate, is whether there are ways that you can offer statistics that provide some of those algebraic concepts that are necessary for some of those STEM majors. And it seems that there are some opportunities in that regard in some colleges that do that. And there are also bridge courses that colleges have established that allow students who have later on decided, you know, they really do want to pursue that STEM, but they were in the statistics pathway, to learn those algebraic concepts that are required for them to be able to go on to calculus and some of those other courses that are prerequisites for some of the STEM majors.

Eloy: I appreciate the background, Hans. I mean, certainly, this is an issue that our colleges have been looking closely at. There's a lot of great work around this. And personally, for me, I agree. It's about looking at the way we design our courses of studies, our major preparation, and what value do we bring to the student. How do we help them do better in life, in their career?

And so, you know, I reject the notion that we're trying to water down standards when we talk about these issues, when we look at this data. We want to better prepare students for all aspects of life and not use one type of course as just a gateway. So I hope that we continue to have healthy debate around this, and continue to look for ways to better support our students, particularly in math.

Hans, this has been such a rich discussion, and we've only cracked a little bit of this nut. I'd love to have you back to talk more about remediation, and specifically about assessment and placement and all the work that you've been doing to look into this topic. Would you mind coming back again?

Hans: I'd love to come back. These are topics that I can go on for too long on.

Eloy: Great. Well, we look forward to having you back.

You have been listening to Hans Johnson from the Public Policy Institute of California. And I'm Eloy Oakley with the California Community Colleges. Thank you for listening to another podcast from the California Community Colleges. And we will be back to you soon. Thanks for listening.

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