Realistic or Radical?
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By Paul Fain

California’s community college system is among the most idealistic in American higher education, with a deep commitment to sharing resources equally among all its 2.6 million students. That may soon change, as a state task force has argued that students who demonstrate academic progress should get the most attention, as well as financial incentives and first dibs in enrolling.

The task force's draft recommendations, released last month, are described as a “reboot” for the system. They would set higher expectations for the state’s 112 two-year colleges, which enroll one-quarter of the nation’s community college students, and for the students themselves.

If enacted, the proposals could move the system away from being fully open access.

"Is it enough to provide access to education without the policies and practices that ensure students succeed in meeting their educational goals?” the 73-page task force report asks. “The answer is simply that we can no longer be satisfied with providing students open access and limited success."

Colleges should be graded on publicly available score cards that measure completion rates and other “student success” metrics, the task force said. And students who declare their program of study early and follow an academic work plan should be given priority in registering for classes – a key advantage for a system that turned 130,000 students away last year after a $300 million budget cut.

In an ideal world, community colleges would grant equal opportunities to all students, regardless of their academic preparation, said David Rattray, a task force member and the senior vice president of education and workforce development at the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce.

"In a real world," Rattray said, "it’s not working."

California’s Legislature passed a bill last year requiring the system’s Board of Governors to create the Task Force on Student Success. The board appointed 20 members, including community college administrators, faculty members, a city mayor and business leaders.

The task force is collecting public comments on the report, and members plan to present a final version to the board and Legislature in early 2012. The board has the authority to adopt many of the changes, but some would require legislative action.
The recommendations already face criticism from both sides of the state’s philosophical divide. Faculty unions say some proposals could harm students who need time to hit their academic stride, and that community colleges are already focused on student success. And state lawmakers, who created the task force as a compromise on an initiative that would have introduced performance-based funding for community colleges, are already asking why the group puntion on that issue.

But perhaps the biggest challenge for the recommendations becoming reality is California’s miserable budget outlook. While the task force stressed that many of its suggestions will not lead to new spending, or even save money, others, like centralized and online student advising systems, will require funding.

“The document is highly aspirational,” said Jonathan Lightman, executive director of the Faculty Association of California Community Colleges, who cautioned that the state’s money woes should not be used as cover for radical change. "In the midst of a budget crisis you have to be very careful about what you do."

Eloy Oakley doesn’t agree. Oakley, president and superintendent of Long Beach City College, said the financial crunch is the "perfect time" for community colleges to refocus their priorities. He calls the report a welcome "narrowing of the mission."

For example, California’s funding formula typically allocates more money for enrollment growth, which Oakley said has long encouraged colleges to chase growth at the expense of quality. And various student enticements that are currently in place, like a tuition waiver for lower-income students, do not recognize academic progress.

"We’re rewarding the wrong types of behavior," Oakley said.

**Rationing**

California’s community colleges will factor heavily in whether the “completion agenda” being pushed by President Obama and powerful foundations, several of which helped pay for the task force’s work, has any chance of succeeding.

The state’s storied Master Plan for Higher Education guarantees that all residents who have the capacity and motivation to benefit from higher education should be able to attend community college. That guarantee hasn’t been panning out lately, according to the task force report.

“Given the scarcity of resources currently available to the colleges, the reality is, the state has failed to live up to that commitment and we as a system are rationing access to education," the task force wrote. "While we continue to admit all students [who] apply, not all admitted students are able to enroll in the courses needed to meet their educational goals."

About 47 percent of current students can’t enroll in needed classes, according to system officials. The colleges lag behind national averages on most student performance measures, spending 40 percent more in institutional funds per degree and certificate produced, according to a recently released report from Sacramento State University’s Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy. And while the system serves a strikingly diverse, lower-income population, it hasn’t made much progress on wide achievement gaps.
In the past, college leaders say the preferred strategy for coping with an economic downturn was to just wait for generous budgets to return – California is the quintessential boom and bust state. But this recession is different, observers say, and the state’s money woes are far from over. Complicating the challenge is the colleges’ rock bottom annual tuition for full-time students of $1,080, about one-third of the national average, and the state's strong commitment to low tuition rates.

As a result, the task force said its charge was to find solutions that "refocused" the system and didn’t cost much. At a state senate hearing last week, Erik Skinner, executive vice chancellor for the system, said the task force understood that it couldn’t tell lawmakers “give us a billion dollars and we’ll do a bang-up job.”

The draft recommendations seek to redirect money and other resources toward students who are more likely to earn a credential, giving preference to first-time students and continuing students who stick to an academic plan. One suggestion, for example, would prevent students who have earned more than 100 credits from keeping their enrollment priority.

“The thinking here is that it’s time to free up that slot for someone else,” said Skinner.

Those are fighting words in California. As Lightman said, many faculty members are unhappy that the task force report favors students who are more goal-oriented and academically prepared. “What about the student who takes more time with exploration,” he asked, “before they know what their talents are?”

The task force, however, argues that credential-focused students deserve priority status.

“Policies that enable students to wander around the curriculum, withdraw and repeat classes multiple times, avoid services that could steer them along a productive pathway, and accumulate an unlimited number of units are a disservice to enrolled students and to those who can’t get into the system for lack of available classes,” according to the task force.

**Performance Funding**

The report includes a proposal to modify the system’s tuition waiver, which eliminates tuition and fee charges for low-income students. Unlike state and federal aid programs, the task force notes that waiver recipients are not required to demonstrate “satisfactory academic progress” and that the waiver can be used for an unlimited number of credits. That would change under the recommendations, which include student progress goals for eligibility and a waiver cap of 110 credits.

Changing the waiver rules would save an estimated $89 million annually, according to the task force – money that could be plowed into new student support and retention strategies. And foundations might also help pay for some of the task force’s suggestions, observers said. One task force member, however, said the proposals won’t come cheap.

“I’m certain that many of the recommendations will have costs, both fiscal and human,” Jane Patton, past president of the Academic Senate for Community Colleges of California, said during the hearing last week.
The Academic Senate is still considering the report, according to a written statement. But the faculty group had fought the inclusion of performance-based funding, and its leaders are no doubt pleased that the proposal didn’t make it into the draft report. The task force was “deeply divided” on the issue of performance-based funding, according to the report, with a “vocal minority” of members pushing some form of that approach.

Resistance to performance funding is understandable, said Nancy Shulock, a task force member and director of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy, because many previous efforts have been poorly conceived and harmful to colleges. That’s too bad, she said, because California need not duplicate those mistakes.

"Give us credit for being smarter than that,” said Shulock, arguing that there are plenty of examples of effective performance funding, that properly weight colleges’ proportion of lesser-prepared students and reward intermediate outcomes. “Most states are doing it well.”

Although performance funding died on the cutting floor, the task force said its recommendation for colleges to be rated on publicly available score cards could have a similar impact, by forcing community college leaders to focus more on student performance. The score cards should be "robust accountability reporting" on student outcomes, with breakout data for ethnic groups. Colleges should be required to participate and post their scores in order to receive student support funding.

Several observers said they were impressed with the draft report’s overall assertiveness. And while the proposals have plenty of critics, task force members said they have a good chance of getting many of them enacted.

“I’m kind of amazed by the strength of some of the recommendations,” Rattray said. “We need to stand up and really drive this thing.”


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