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California's Community Colleges: Reforming Policy to Help More Students Succeed – *It Could Happen*

New report offers “an achievable agenda” for better results

SACRAMENTO – A new report lays out a roadmap for significant gains in community college student success even with current budget constraints. The report offers an achievable agenda for policy reforms that would help more students succeed and put the college system in a stronger position to justify more resources when budget conditions improve. Authored by researchers at the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy at California State University, Sacramento, the report describes how current policies prevent the colleges from making better use of known strategies for increasing student success.

The authors argue that reforms can and should begin during these tough budget times because California cannot afford the social and economic consequences of continued low rates of student success. Senator Alex Padilla reinforced these concerns in his response to the study: “We face a looming shortage of college educated workers in California. Because of the sheer volume of students it serves, the California Community College system must play a critical role in the preparation of the educated workforce our economy requires. The findings in this report are an important contribution to the dialogue of how best to meet our workforce needs.”

The reform agenda reflects the researchers’ prior three studies on student success as well as the formal input from over fifty individuals from inside and outside the community college system, including college faculty, administrators, and staff. Said Donald Averill, Chancellor of the San Bernardino Community College District, “The work of the Institute and this research team provides a road map to change. Let’s take the opportunity to make our community colleges even better.”

“Our community colleges are critical to the economic future of the state, but they face many challenges,” said Assemblyman Anthony Portantino, Chairman of the Assembly Higher Education Committee. “This report will help by encouraging us to consider ways to make the best use of available funds to help more students succeed in community college.”

The report, “It Could Happen: Unleashing the Potential of California’s Community Colleges to Help Students Succeed and California Thrive,” describes six strategies that research has shown to promote student success, but notes that current policies and practices do not support these strategies.

“The community colleges are committed to student success, and they understand the value of the six strategies,” said Nancy Shulock, director of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy. “By making changes now that can begin to increase student success without increased funding, the colleges will be in a stronger position to lay claim to new resources when they become available.”

Shulock and her colleagues identify three reasons that state finance policies prevent the colleges from better applying proven strategies:

- Existing resources are distributed in ways that encourage enrollment but not the hard work of helping students complete their courses or make progress toward their academic goals.
- Colleges have too little flexibility to use their resources to meet student needs.
- There are not enough resources for the colleges given their multiple missions and the high cost of educating underprepared students.

The report describes aspects of the colleges' organizational culture that impede efforts to apply the strategies, including priorities that compete with student success and entrenched assumptions that inhibit change. "Barriers that frustrate students and educators are held up to the light of day in a clear and precise fashion, and more importantly solutions are discussed," said Chris McCarthy, President of Napa Valley College about the new report. "This is exactly what community colleges need."

Among the recommendations included in the "achievable agenda" are to:

- change the basic funding formula to incorporate incentives for colleges to increase student progress and success
- give colleges more flexibility to use their resources to accomplish successful outcomes as fit their local circumstances
- standardize the definition of college readiness and ensure that all degree-seeking students are assessed for college readiness and directed to appropriate courses
- advise students into academic programs and restructure those programs to provide clearer pathways to credentials.

"Professor Shulock and her team have given us the first comprehensive assessment of our capacities, limitations and possibilities, focused through the lens of student success," notes John Nixon, President of Mt. San Antonio College. "Community college constituencies have avoided this honest look into the mirror for too long, and California can no longer afford to ignore the truths so well captured by the report."

The authors argue that the agenda is achievable given a growing interest in policy change both inside and outside the community college system. Business leaders are seeking educated workers; Latino and other community leaders are calling for institutions that work for California's diverse communities. These voices and others must be helpful advocates and partners to those inside the system who have indicated a willingness to work for change.

"No one understands better than the business community that we need to raise the education and skill levels of the California workforce," said David Rattray, Vice President of the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce. "This report lays the foundation for a dual strategy that both increases investments in community colleges and makes reforms to ensure that public dollars are spent effectively."

Martha Kanter, Chancellor of Foothill-DeAnza Community College District added, "While their newest study captures our challenge as 'It Could Happen,' in my opinion 'It Must Happen' and 'As Quickly As Possible!'"

The research behind this policy brief was funded by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and The James Irvine Foundation. For a full copy of the report, go to www.csus.edu/ihe.

Some Additional Comments about “*It Could Happen: Unleashing the Potential of California’s Community Colleges to Help Students Succeed and California Thrive*”

Don Averill – Chancellor of San Bernardino Community College District

“The final policy paper on improving access in the California Community Colleges, produced by the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy deserves the attention of every community college professional. Of special importance is the ‘Strategies for Increasing Student Success.’ Even considering the rich contributions to education and the economy of community college education, we are at a crossroad where we must give attention to our performance in meeting the education and workforce needs of California.”

Chris McCarthy – President of Napa Valley College

“This report casts a clear eye on the hidden issues that are experienced in every community college but rarely are openly discussed. It provides information that can lead to a transformational dialogue.”

Martha Kanter – Chancellor of Foothill-DeAnza Community College District

“The work of Dr. Shulock and her colleagues is a call to action for the community colleges in particular and higher education in general. The report describes policy and educational strategies, many of which have been attempted in the past, but without the funding and support critical for success. California's community colleges will do all that we can to enable the success of our students, but we can't do it alone; the shared responsibility Dr. Shulock discusses is the key to increasing the success rates of our community college students.”