

Editorial: Community college transparency welcome

Publisher's note: *This editorial is from the April 14, 2013 Contra Costa Times.*

When it comes to California's 112 community colleges, is the glass half-full or half-empty?

After careful study of the state's Student Success Scorecard for the community colleges, we are inclined to opt for the former.

We willingly admit that we have long seen California's community colleges as an undervalued jewel in the education system.

There was a good deal of hyperventilating from some quarters about the news that the overall completion rate for those who had entered community college in 2006 was clearly lower than the class that had entered in 2002. While we agree that is disappointing, it was expected and we caution against putting too much stock in this single finding, especially without some context.

The score card compared how well community college students reached their goals of transferring to a four-year school or earning a certificate or an associate degree within six years. We see that drop between the 2002 and 2006 groups as the "glass-is-half-empty" finding in the study.

Overall, the 2006 cohort recorded 49.2 percent of its students had earned a certificate, an associate degree or transferred to a four-year school within six years. The 2002 cohort had registered a 52.3 percent rate.

But one must consider that the 2006 group entered community

college just before the extreme crash of the nation's economy. It is critical to remember that these students saw monumental changes in community

colleges, higher education and the overall job market during the measured period.

As jobs became more scarce, four-year college costs continued to soar. Meanwhile, financial aid became more scarce and suddenly community colleges were deluged with students.

At the same time, community colleges had to absorb \$1.5 billion in budget cuts, which dramatically altered the classes and opportunities offered at those colleges.

On top of all that, the four-year schools faced their own financial challenges partly by accepting fewer transfer students.

Given this conspiracy of events, it is a wonder that the completion rate dropped only 3 percent.

Which leads us to the half-full part of the equation. The study seems to indicate that the community college system is doing a good job reaching and improving the unprepared students, which is a critical mandate. These students who were not ready for college-level work when they arrived are making it through their first year and enrolling in a third straight semester at greater rates than students who needed no remedial courses.

And while the completion rate of both black and Latino students is under 40 percent, it is on the rise. Latino students are demonstrating persistence rates of about 66 percent, which is roughly equal to their white counterparts.

This is an important measure because about 36 percent of all community college students in the state are Latino.

But, by far, the most encouraging aspect is the score card

itself. In an education system often mired in mystery, the score card is a legitimate attempt at accountability. We applaud its use and hope that administrators and students can learn much from its findings.