

# Legislature nixes lifetime unit limit at community colleges

By Melody Gutierrez, Sacramento Bee

Gov. Jerry Brown's plan to make California's community college system more efficient and increase access for students hit a road block last week as lawmakers rejected his proposal to set a lifetime limit on the number of units students can take at reduced in-state rates.

Budget panels in both houses of the Legislature rejected a provision in Brown's budget proposal that would limit community college students to 90 units, or force them to pay more than four times the current \$46-per-unit price.

The proposal was part of Brown's spending plan for the state's 112 community colleges, which included efforts to increase graduation and transfer rates by discouraging students from lingering or taking courses without an academic plan.

Reworking California's public college system has been a priority for Brown, who has, among other things, proposed expanding access by increasing online course offerings.

Lawmakers said capping units is not the way to increase access or success. Assembly Budget Chair Bob Blumenfield, D-Woodland Hills, called the unit cap proposal inappropriate and off target.

"The administration proposals simply stick it to students who have already had to contend with fewer classes and massive fee increases," Blumenfield said. "They respond to symptoms of a much bigger problem. Even if the administration could offer evidence showing a budget savings associated with these

proposals, they are bad policy choices to make today.”

Critics expressed concerns that unit caps would hurt double majors or laid-off workers who have a degree but need to return to school for a new skill set.

Last month, the Senate’s education finance subcommittee voted against capping units for University of California or California State University systems. The Assembly Budget Subcommittee on Education Finance will weigh the proposal to cap units at UC and CSU on April 24.

Department of Finance spokesman H.D. Palmer said unit caps are a way to increase completion rates and create space for new students. Palmer said less than 30 percent of degree-seeking community college students transfer or earn a degree or certificate in six years. Sixteen percent of CSU students graduate in four years, while 60 percent of UC students complete their degree in that time, he said.

While the Legislature shot down unit caps, Palmer said it’s still early in the process.

“We have a ways to go,” Palmer said. “We intend to continue to have conversations with the Legislature.”

In separate votes on the community college issue last week, Assembly and Senate subcommittees rejected Brown’s plan along party lines, with Democrats opposed and Republicans supporting unit caps.

The Legislative Analyst’s Office has recommended adopting Brown’s unit-cap policy, saying it “creates positive incentives for students and motivates institutions to improve the efficiency of their academic programs.”

In the 2011-12 school year, there were nearly 95,000 students at community colleges who had earned 90 or more degree-applicable units, which is one academic year beyond what is

needed to transfer or earn an associate degree, according to the LAO's report.

Under the unit-cap proposal, many of those students would pay nonresident rates of \$180 to \$200 a unit, compared with in-state rates of \$46 a unit.

The LAO said the unit-cap policy needed to be further developed so it included specifics such as which courses should be excluded and how to treat classes attempted but not completed. The current plan already excludes remedial courses, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate units earned in high school.

The LAO also recommended delaying the implementation for two years, instead of starting on July 1.

Opponents of the unit caps, including the community college system, said the proposal ignores a plan already in place to raise low completion rates.

That plan, which was required by lawmakers in 2010 and adopted by the college board of governors last year, will give priority enrollment to students who have developed an educational plan, taken a diagnostic assessment and have earned fewer than 100 units.

"That's a much more nuanced way of addressing it than a straight 90 unit cap," said Theresa Tena, vice president of Community College League of California.

Tena said the governor's proposal is superseding efforts already underway by the community college system.

"We'd like to see the system effort implemented to see if that gets at the same thing the administration is trying to get at," Tena said. "We think it will."