

Opinion: Questioning community colleges' mission

By Warren Swil

The California budget crisis of recent years – which mercifully seems to be lifting – has been an excuse for many fundamental changes in the way our state serves its citizens.

One of these is the California community college system – with 112 colleges serving 2.4 million students – that is in the midst of a subtle, unannounced shift from its historical twin missions of workforce training and offering affordable continuing education for lifelong learners.

In fact, various legislative actions in recent years are gradually removing the “community” from the entire college concept.



Those who simply seek an affordable class in ceramics or art history for self-improvement, and those with post-secondary degrees who need retraining, are being shunted aside as the system narrows its focus to basic skills, vocational training and preparing students for transfer to four-year schools.

Its mission, increasingly, seems to be: “get 'em in, and get 'em out.”

Emblematic of this is SB1440, the Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act, signed into law in 2010.

While its intent – to foster closer cooperation between the two-year schools and the California State University system – is noble, largely due to the budget situation, its effect is

to reduce the resources available for lifelong learners.

According to the joint website of the Community Colleges Chancellor's office and CSU, SB1440 requires that by next year, the two systems negotiate new associate in arts degree and associate in science degree transfer programs.

"Upon completion of the associate degree, the student is eligible for transfer with junior standing into the California State University system," it says.

While the focus on preparing students for transfer is laudable, it is having unintended consequences.

One of these was the September 2012 regulation approved by the California Community Colleges board of governors that established systemwide enrollment priorities "designed to ensure classes are available for students seeking job training, degree attainment or transfer to a four-year university and to reward students who make progress toward their educational goals," according to an announcement from the chancellor's office in March.

If you are just looking for a class to learn something about the history of the movies or want to burnish your computer skills, you go to the end of the line when it comes to class availability.

"In addition, students who have accumulated 100 or more units – excluding most basic skills English and math and English as a Second Language classes – by fall 2014 will lose priority enrollment," the announcement said. Tough luck if you already have a bachelor's degree.

Every student in the system will attest how difficult it already has become to get into a class, whether it is needed for graduation or completion of a certificate program or for any other reason.

Since the real estate crash and economic downturn, state funding for community colleges has been cut by \$809 million, or 12 percent, according to the chancellor's office.

Carla Rivera reported in the Los Angeles Times that, according to a report by the Public Policy Institute of California released last month, the system has endured funding cuts of \$1.5 billion since 2007.

"Enrollment in California's community colleges has plunged to a 20-year low as budget-strapped campuses have had to slash classes and instructors," she wrote.

The report from PPIC notes that between the 2007-08 and 2011-12 budget cycles, courses were cut and class sizes increased. "Academic year course offerings fell 21 percent and summer offerings fell 60 percent in these years," according to the report.

"While non-credit courses – those for remediation or enrichment – were cut dramatically, courses taken for credit toward a degree, certificate, or transfer sustained the bulk of the cuts because these classes make up 90 percent of all offerings."

If Proposition 30 had not passed in November, the system would have faced another \$338 million in cuts in the middle of the academic year, which translates into 180,000 fewer students. Since it was approved by a slim margin, colleges will now receive \$210 million in additional funding and be able to serve 20,000 more students.

The trend is clear.

The mission of one of the pillars of California's world-renowned two-year college system is being dramatically narrowed.

It seems to be abandoning its traditional role as an

institution offering affordable continuing education and enrichment to those residents who need it the most.

This would be a tragic loss. Surely we can do better.

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