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In California, Community College Graduation Rates Disappoint

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California's community college system gets students into school, but not always out

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SAN DIEGO (AP) -- For most of history, higher education has been reserved for a tiny elite.

For a glimpse of a future where college is open to all, visit California -- the place that now comes closest to that ideal.

California's community college system is the country's largest, with 109 campuses, 4,600 buildings and a staggering 2.5 million students. It's also cheap. While it's no longer free, anyone can take a class, and at about $500 per term full-time, the price is a fraction of any other state's.

There is no such thing as a typical student. There are high achievers and low ones, taking courses from accounting to welding. There are young and old, degree-seekers and hobbyists -- all commingled on some of the most diverse campuses in the country, if not the world.

Many students, for one reason or another, simply missed the onramp to college the first time around -- people like 31-year-old Bobbie Burns, juggling work and childcare and gradually collecting credits at San Diego City College in hopes of transferring to a media program at a nearby university.

"I love City," Burns said, noting that once she transfers she'll face a less-flexible schedule and higher fees. "I wish I could keep going here."

These days, states around the country are wrestling with how to provide mass scale higher education -- a challenge California anticipated decades ago.

But if California is a model in one way, it's struggling in another.

The state ranks near the top in terms of getting students in the door of higher education. But its batting average moving them out -- either with a degree or by transferring to a four-year school -- ranks near the bottom.

"In 1960 or 1970 or 1980, access was enough," said Nancy Shulock, of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy at Cal State Sacramento. "But it's not enough now."

Of course, not everyone at community college is looking for a degree, so measuring success is tough. But several recent studies, including one by Shulock, have tried to identify students who are seeking such benchmarks as a certificate, associate's degree, or a transfer to a four-year school. Those studies have found that only about a quarter of such students in California succeed within six years. For blacks and Hispanics, the rates are even lower.

Boosting completion and transfer rates is high on the agenda of California policymakers. But opinions vary considerably as to why they're so low to begin with -- and what lessons others might draw from the state's experience.

Some believe the system's basic financial model of charging students as little as possible is actually part of the problem, and needs reform. The debate comes down to this: Do you help students more by charging them less, or by raising fees and using the money to give students more support, helping them move quickly and successfully through the system?

California has always been at the forefront of making college affordable.

In the 1920s, when it ranked 11th among the states in population, it had the most students in college, according to "The California Idea and American Higher Education," a history of higher education in the state by John Aubrey Douglass, a senior research fellow at the University of California, Berkeley.

In 1907, California authorized the country's first state-sponsored junior college system as a network of feeders for the state's public universities.

Today, the state has three tiers of higher education: the University of California for the top students; the Cal State universities for the next level; and the open-access third tier that came to be called community colleges.

Community colleges students can work their way into the four-year schools, and it's a cheaper path to a bachelor's degree. Last year, more than half of CSU graduates -- and nearly one-third of UC grads -- started at a community college.

But community colleges now are asked to do much more than broaden the path to a bachelor's degree, from job retraining to remedial high school work. Systemwide, as many as 80 percent of incoming students aren't prepared for college-level courses.

"If we could control the input, the students who are coming to us, we could control their preparedness level and ability to succeed, we could easily increase our success rate," said Eloy Oakley, president of Long Beach City College. "We could do what universities do, which is cherry-pick the best students."

But Oakley -- whose student body is one-third Hispanic, one-quarter white, and about 12-percent each black and Asian -- says that would defeat the purpose of community colleges.

Lack of preparation isn't the only reason students come up short. They also have to work -- a lot -- outside out class.

"One semester, my mom helped me out and I took 23 units and got a 3.8," said Monica Robertson, speaking after a Spanish class one recent morning on San Diego City College's campus, a collection of buildings on the edge of downtown that resembles a 1960s-era high school. But every other term she has been working 40 hours a week in a car wash.

Between that and a change of majors, she's been taking classes for seven years. Though she has enough overall credits to transfer, she hasn't yet finished the specific ones she needs.

Attending full-time one semester "just teased me," she said. "I thought, 'If you didn't have to work, Monica, you could do so much so quickly.'"

California has a high cost of living, and half of independent students in the system earn $29,000 per year or less. Four in five students work, on average for 32 hours per week, according to education policy expert William Zumeta of the University of Washington. That's about twice as much as students can typically handle before their academic work suffers, other research has found.

California community college students, Zumeta says, "work ridiculous amounts for students who are at such risk of not completing."

If students can attend full-time, they are four times as likely to complete as part-timers. But only 29 percent of California students can attend full-time. That's 12 percentage points below the national community college figure.

"I reached the breaking point," said Brian Mechem, a classmate of Robertson's, who works seven days a week as a restaurant cook while pursuing a degree so he can transfer to a four-year school. "I stepped back for a couple semesters, but I've made the decision that even if it takes me 10 years, I'll stay in school."

Many lack Mechem's persistence. If these really were two-year colleges, maybe more students could beg and borrow and attend full time. But between remedial classes and waiting lists, five to seven years is more the norm. Students who are transfer-ready in three years are considered superstars.

"They may run out of desire, because they've spent time pedaling fast and going nowhere," said Marilyn Harvey, a community college graduate herself, who now advises San Diego City College students on transferring. "Or they say, 'You know what? I just need to go to work now."'

To many, student work demands are an obvious argument for keeping fees low. Enrollment rose when the state cut fees from $15 per credit to $11 during the 1990s. And enrollment fell during the most recent budget crunch when prices rose from $11 to $18. Prices eventually hit $26 before falling back this spring to $20.

"Every time you ratchet up the total cost of education, I don't see how you can do anything but (harm) people on the lower socio-economic scale," said Marshall Drummond, the outgoing chancellor of the state community college system.

But the system's own research shows that it is budget cuts, which reduce course offerings, rather than fee increases, that most affect enrollment.

And Zumeta and Shulock argue California's fees are, in fact, too low. Low prices let people in, but give them little incentive to push hard, and deprive the system of revenue to support a new generation of students with intense educational needs.

Low revenue creates a constant money crunch for counselors, small classes, tutors, child care -- all the things that student fees support, and which help students finish their degree.

"The issue is whether this is an inexpensive education or a cheap education," David Longanecker, executive director of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, said of California's system at a recent conference for education journalists. "Low price is the enemy of access."

The costs are so low that some students sign up for classes because the gym privileges are cheaper than health clubs, Shulock says. Zumeta says low fees have become a misguided "obsession." Considering books, transportation and other expenses, class fees are only about 5 percent of what it costs students to attend community colleges here. The focus should be on helping students with that other 95 percent of expenses, so they can work less.

Low prices have actually reduced the federal aid eligibility for some students, such as Burns at San Diego City, who says she qualified for a Pell Grant this year for the first time.

And Zumeta argues that, at least until recently, there hasn't been enough money for financial aid counselors to help students get the money they are entitled to, which may explain why California community college students appear to leave millions of aid dollars on the table. Despite their relative poverty, California students get less in Pell Grants and end up with more unmet overall financial need than their counterparts elsewhere.

While Zumeta and others support continuing and expanding waivers for the poorest students, they note that nearly 200,000 other students have incomes of $100,000 or more, or come from families who do.

"There are an awful lot of students in the California community college system who frankly could afford to pay more," Zumeta said.

But many who work closely with students say that argument cuts against the founding philosophy of

California's unique system -- and fails to recognize that, in the end, raising the price makes attending school harder for low-income students.

"I understand the economics, the micro and macro arguments people are trying to make," said Oakley, the Long Beach City College president. "But those people don't really know our students either."

Ruben Page, a counselor who works closely with students at Long Beach, would probably agree. He says there are plenty of things he could do with more money, but worries about how the poorest students would fare.

"When I go to high schools, my students aren't always thinking about the money, but their parents are," said Page, adding bus fare can be the determining factor in where a student enrolls. "They look at pennies."