



Completion at What Price?

By Paul Fain * April 2, 2012

Technology and cost-cutting won't fix the capacity crisis at community colleges, which is freezing out hundreds of thousands of students, warned the first report from a new faculty think tank.

The research center is affiliated with the Campaign for the Future of Higher Education, a national group of faculty leaders, which was formed last year with the support of unions, faculty senates and the Association of American Colleges and Universities. The center will attempt to inject a stronger voice from the professorate into the national debate over higher education, particularly around the campaign's seven founding principles.

With its debut report, released today, the center takes on the "completion agenda" and its heavy emphasis on workforce development, a fixation that the report said threatens academic quality and student access, as well as social mobility.

The report, dubbed "Closing the Door, Increasing the Gap: Who's not going to (community) college?" focused on California, where a state task force has successfully pushed for the system to prioritize students who appear most likely to earn a credential.

"Policy makers are narrowing the focus of community colleges to fulfilling a short-term work-force development role that prepares workers for relatively low-wage jobs rather than bachelor degree programs into which students could transfer," according to the center. "This rebooting and narrowing the community college mission to the lower rungs of that economy works against expansion of the middle class and building a strong economy that, in the President's words, is 'built to last.'"

The report said the reason community colleges are being forced to turn away students is simple: They don't have enough money because of state and federal disinvestment.

Gary Rhoades, the report's author, said he empathizes with the plight of community college leaders. They are

in a bind and generally bring good intentions to efforts like the task force-led reforms in California, he said. But all too often community colleges and their advocates cede to the supposed inevitability of budget cuts, as policy makers push for efficiency gains on campuses that are usually pipe dreams.

"The problem is insufficient public investment in these colleges," the report said, "not their failure to reduce spending and increase productivity."

Calling Out Foundations

Rhoades is the center's director. A professor of education at the University of Arizona and former general secretary at the American Association of University Professors, Rhoades brings a big name to the new think tank.

He acknowledged that the report does not provide answers for how community colleges should cope with bad budgets. Workforce development is obviously crucial, Rhoades said. And just throwing money at the sector is not a solution. But the national debate on how to fix higher education's problems needs a realistic accounting of what's to blame. "We're pretending that we can do more with less and be more efficient," he said. "This report is an attempt to call that out."

But in calling out the completion agenda, the Center for the Future of Higher Education has taken on the Obama administration and powerful foundations, which few in higher education dare to do.

Rhoades said the Lumina Foundation has pushed for faculty productivity without properly acknowledging the role of budget cuts, while the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is overly optimistic about the boost colleges can get from technology. And both

foundations unintentionally encourage cutting corners to improve graduation rates, such as through watering down academic rigor. Furthermore, Rhoades said the three-year timelines of some Lumina grants encourage short-term solutions that might not stick.

Concerns about the completion agenda are common among college presidents and even higher education associations, Rhoades said, but few feel they can publicly voice them.

“There’s a real frustration about the agenda being set by people who don’t do the work,” said Rhoades, who also stressed that the foundations do plenty of good for higher education.

The center released the report this morning, so officials from foundations, California’s community college system and outside experts were not given the chance to respond. When discussing such issues in the past, foundation leaders have said that they do care about government support for higher education, but have opted to focus on the completion agenda out of a view that vital questions about completion were not previously being given enough prominence. And California community college leaders have generally said that they are indeed worried about the negative impacts of policies they are adopting, but feel they must do something in the face of deep budget cuts and rising student demand.

Tracking Excluded Students

The report asks faculty members to collect information on how many students are being squeezed out by two-year institutions. The colleges themselves rarely publicize those numbers, which aren’t exactly flattering. And while state systems sometimes say how many students they’ve turned away -- California’s community college system estimates that it will be unable to serve 200,000 students this year alone -- Rhoades said faculty groups could flesh out the data.

For example, a nationwide number of students shut out of community colleges is hard to find, if not invisible, the report found. And few efforts have tracked which students are being excluded, with breakdowns on race and income level. It is clear, however, that lower income and minority students bear the brunt of the impact, according to the report, because those groups are increasingly seeking access to community colleges.

The center criticized proposals by the California community college task force, which were recently approved by the system’s governing board, as well as a report from a state panel that called for performance-based funding.

The task force seeks a smoother path for first-time, full-time students who are on track to a degree or credential. While controversial for a system that has long prided itself on access -- particularly among faculty unions -- system officials have said they are already rationing access, and that the reforms seek to do so in an intentional way.

And at some California community colleges, first-time students may be more likely to be lower-income or minorities than are their adult student peers, officials have said, citing examples of wealthier retirees taking recreational courses at no charge.

The faculty group’s report, however, said community colleges nationwide are enrolling more middle- and upper-middle class students while restricting access for underserved populations. That shift contributes to a troubling trend toward stratification in higher education and society more broadly, according to the report.

“The colleges are going after students who are more likely to succeed,” Rhoades said, and “who are going to be able to pay more and get less financial aid.”