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ABSTRACT

After 2 years of study, California's Commission on Innovation produced a series of recommendations to guide California's community colleges in educating a growing number of students with only modest increases in state support. Subsequently, the California Higher Education Policy Center sponsored a day-long symposium to discuss the report's main premises, including the following: (1) the unlikelihood that the state will be able to fund the colleges at their current per-unit cost in the face of an enrollment increase of 500,000 more students by the year 2005; (2) the need for colleges to do a better job of educating an increasingly diverse student population; and (3) the need for instructors and administrators to embrace technology to achieve greater effectiveness and to educate students for participation in an information-based economy. The 20 symposium attendees, including trustees, administrators, and others in higher education, generally agreed that the fiscal climate would not allow the colleges to recoup their budget shortfall of the past 3 years. Many supported the Commission's view that utilizing such technology as computers and television would enable the colleges to remain cost-efficient while preserving educational quality. Some participants voiced concern over whether the implementation of distance learning would equally serve students who need more extensive interaction with faculty and others who may thrive in a more independent learning environment. The commission's proposal that statewide work force transition centers be established to provide training and technical assistance to business and industry was received positively. Attendees concurred that the major recommendations would take years to put into place. (ECC)

THE CALIFORNIA
HIGHER EDUCATION
POLICY CENTER



Center Symposium Debates Reform
Community Colleges Look to Future

February 1994

by

Jack McCurdy

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Center Symposium Debates Reform
Community Colleges Look to Future

February 1994

By Jack McCurdy

The California Community Colleges are the first of the state's three large public higher education systems to respond to the recent dilemma in California higher education: how to educate swelling numbers of students with only modest increases in state financial support.

After two years of study, the Commission on Innovation, a panel composed primarily of business representatives and appointed by the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges, has produced a series of recommendations to guide the two-year colleges into a financially strapped, post-modern future.

As the commission noted, its charge was to "recommend how a better job could be done for more students—without relying on more funding." The community college system estimates that more than 100,000 students already are being denied access because the state will not or cannot provide funds for all the classes they need.

Many of the commission's recommendations focus on "distance learning," which emphasizes television, computers and other technologies to instruct individuals and groups of learners at non-campus sites. Only in this way, the report says, can the community colleges hope to handle the hundreds of thousands of new students who are expected to enroll in community colleges during the next decade or so.

The report emphasizes that for 75 years the two-year colleges have achieved unparalleled success as the low-cost, accessible gateway to higher education for millions of Californians. But it also



Linda Wong, John Terrey, and Lindsay Conner at the "Choosing the Future" symposium in San Jose. (Rod Scarcey photo)

argued that the community colleges must embark on a significantly new course if they are to remain an effective educational force in California.

Without technology to reshape the curriculum, the colleges . . . face a choice between reducing the quality of education offered to all students or maintaining the present level of quality but educating only half as many students.

Recently, the California Higher Education Policy Center, with the cooperation of the California Community Colleges, sponsored a day-long symposium in San Jose so that 20 community college trustees, administrators and others in higher education could discuss the report's main premises.

Those attending the symposium were asked to consider whether recent circumstances require the community colleges to depart from the practices that have proven so successful in the past—at the risk of losing sight of the colleges' historic mission. As Patrick Callan, executive director of the Policy Center, asked, is the state facing nothing more than a

Even if the two-year colleges receive "normal" funding after the state's economy recovers, it would be wasteful to return to business as usual.

cyclical downturn, or is the economy undergoing a long-term transformation that requires a more cost-effective approach to education?

The commission report, titled *Choosing the Future*, argues that the state's 107 community colleges have no choice but to "modernize" because:

- "It is highly unlikely that the state will be able to fund the colleges at their current per-unit cost in the face of an enrollment surge of 500,000 more students by the year 2005."
- "The colleges need to do a much better job of educating their increasingly diverse student bodies."
- "Teaching and management must embrace



Bob Gabriner at the policy symposium.

(Rod Searcy photo)

technology to achieve greater effectiveness and to educate students for participation in the emerging global, information-based economy."

The report delivers a much-needed "slap in the face," one college district trustee told the symposium, to get the colleges "to stop saying, 'give us more money and we'll get the job done.'"

Little hope was held out that the colleges will ever recover the money that the state has failed to appropriate over the last three years for enrollment growth and cost-of-living adjustments. And it is probably unrealistic to expect that the state can afford a half million more students at the current annual per-student cost of \$3,200, even though that figure is low by national standards. (If the changes proposed in the report are not adopted, the commission warned, another \$1.3 billion would be needed to educate and house these additional students by the year 2005.)

This bleak assessment of the community colleges' near-term fiscal fortunes was generally accepted by the symposium group. But many of those present were optimistic that new methods of operating, new effectiveness, and greater productivity could lead the way out of this financial morass.

Many expressed the opinion that the two-year colleges have reached the point where they are unable to meet the expectations of students and the public. Only through using technology such as television and computers, they said, can they hope to deliver instruction at the same or lower cost.

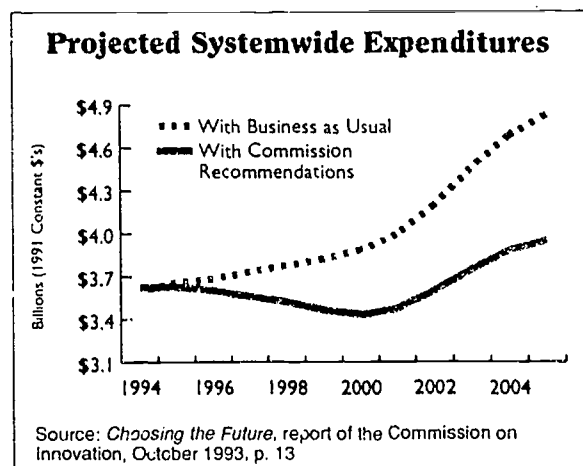
Without technology to reshape the curriculum, the colleges were said to face a choice between reducing the quality of education offered to all students or maintaining the present level of quality but educating only half as many students.

Another trustee—a businessman—warned that technology is driving change in today's world of commerce as well as in education and said the community colleges have no choice but to join the profession if they are to serve the public effectively. In fact, one college executive noted, private industries now challenge virtually everything they do when

they restructure. Community colleges, this executive said, should likewise be "asking why we are doing what we are doing."

But are the colleges giving up too easily on the effort to persuade the state to finance the system adequately? It was suggested that perhaps the colleges should aggressively seek greater state support by making the case more forcefully for the societal benefits reaped from the state's investment in their programs. Too often, it was said, economic payoffs in the form of a more educated and skillful populace go unrecognized.

But others replied that more money is almost irrelevant to the reform ideas contained in the report. Even if the two-year colleges receive "normal" funding after the state's economy recovers, it would be wasteful to return to business as usual, while failing to adopt measures aimed at producing a system that will save money and produce better educated students.



Although the overriding purpose of the commission was to find ways to use existing resources more wisely, David Mertes, chancellor of the California Community Colleges, told the symposium, eventually the colleges will need more money but they will "have to do more to ask for more."

Indeed, the commission did propose that the colleges do more, in a series of recommendations that could be considered to be a new or modified version of their mission under the state's master plan for higher education. The report calls for the colleges to



Patrick Callan and David Mertes at the policy symposium.
(Rod Searcey photo)

take on a major role in economic development by providing occupational training and technical assistance to business and industry through the creation of new "work force transition centers" throughout the state.

This recommendation was seen by symposium participants as a bold and timely idea that could put the state's community colleges at the forefront of national worker-training efforts. It corresponds to initiatives by the Clinton Administration to expand programs for school-to-work transition in schools and colleges—particularly community colleges—around the country. The result could be significant federal funding for California.

Other aspects of the commission's economic development proposals also reflect national trends, David Pierce, president of the American Association of Community Colleges, told the group. One example is the commission's call for better assessment and higher standards in job training. Another is the idea of setting up "one-stop shopping centers," which would offer job information, training and re-training for workers and technical assistance to businesses.

From the standpoint of state policy, this proposal fits well with one of the community colleges' two principal missions under the master plan—to provide vocational training for students. And it is in line with what the colleges already do well, which is to provide most of the occupational training in California.

The economic development proposals were viewed by some symposium participants as timely in another way. **One day soon** the colleges will be training a much different **work force**, one that requires new skills for a **changing** job market and one that is composed of many more **immigrants** and ethnic minority students. The **economic** development proposals, if implemented, would allow the colleges to re-examine their vocational role in light of these new demands.

To pay for its recommendations for technological advancements and other innovations, the commission suggested using about \$80 million from the colleges' operating funds, along with savings from efficiencies, private donations and revenue bonds.

Major Proposals

In addition to proposing greater use of computers, television and other technology in the California Community Colleges, the report prepared by BW Associates for the system's Commission on Innovation also made these important recommendations:

- Create a new set of degrees and certificates for the two-year colleges, based on performance standards derived from new student assessment procedures.
- Give the community colleges a new mission as major providers of training and technical assistance to business and industry through the development of "work force transition centers" across the state.
- Restructure community college governance by giving the state chancellor's office more authority in setting priorities and standards while allowing local districts to exercise more autonomy over educational programs.
- Deregulate the community colleges by having the governor and the legislature repeal most rules and regulations governing their operations.
- Introduce statewide collective bargaining with faculty members and other employee groups.

Symposium participants, however, expressed some doubts about this **strategy**. Concern was expressed that tapping into operating revenues could damage already financially strapped colleges, a point that was partly conceded when the commission said enrollments might have to be cut for a short time.

Some argued that the **technological** changes required to gain improved performance from the colleges would cost more money, not less. For instance, if effectiveness is increased, fewer students might drop out, resulting in higher overall operating costs. The question was raised whether this reward justifies higher expenditures.

But a symposium member from the telecommunications field replied that unit costs could be lowered if more students were instructed through "distance learning" techniques, thus reducing costs of campus instruction, buildings and maintenance. This will be especially true if there are more part-time students in the future, taking instruction at home or at work, as the commission report predicts.

A college executive, however, cautioned against assuming that technology will **produce savings**, saying, "I've never seen it happen." But it will produce equal or better learning results if properly used, he added.

Not everyone, however, agreed with that view. Some questioned whether such technological innovations as distance learning have been researched

Some argued that the technological changes required to gain improved performance from the colleges would cost more money, not less.

and refined enough to justify the prominence they are given in the commission report. It could be embarrassing if the colleges "bet the future on it, willy-nilly," one participant commented.

Concern was also **expressed** about how proposed learning innovations in general and the use of technology in particular might affect poor and minority students. Will **technology benefit the wide**



*Dan Weiler and Virginia Smith at the policy symposium.
(Rod Searcey photo)*

range of students in the colleges—not just the transfer-track students who might profit from independent learning opportunities, but also so-called “non-traditional” students who might need more interaction with faculty members?

In short, one person asked, will the community colleges continue to be “peoples’ colleges” if technology replaces adequate funding? Although some at the meeting were worried about this question, few doubted that the colleges would need to pursue technological solutions to the problem of educating new masses of students with limited finances.

Those at the symposium were not asked to come to a consensus on the report’s recommendations, but there was general agreement that not all of the rec-

To pay for its recommendations for technological advancements and other innovations, the commission suggested using about \$80 million from the colleges’ operating funds, along with savings from efficiencies, private donations and revenue bonds.

ommended objectives and strategies in the report will be accepted—and it likely will be many months or years before any of the reforms proposed by the commission are carried out.

Enacting the more significant reforms will require a complex strategy, one member of the group

Choosing the Future Symposium

December 8, 1993

Meeting Participants

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*Board of Governors
California Community Colleges*

Robert Barr

Falamar Community College District

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Dan Weiler

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Rebuild LA

said, because, most importantly, no new money would be made available. Instead, some of the colleges' current operating funds would be spent on innovation in hopes of achieving long-term savings. The last important set of community college reforms, he reminded the symposium, offered \$140 million as leverage to gain the support of constituent groups in the system.

But it can be done, another said, if strong leader-

ship is provided for the essential elements of the reform proposals.

"The motivation that will cause us to adopt [the idea] is the recognition that the state is changing, we need to make adjustments and what we are doing now is not working for all students," a college administrator said. "There are better ways to [educate students] and that is the driving force."

This summary is based upon *Choosing the Future*, a report released in 1993 by the Commission on Innovation, which was appointed by the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges. Single copies of this summary can be obtained from the California Higher Education Policy Center. For a quick response, FAX us at 408-287-6709; or write us at the address below. The Center is a nonprofit, independent, nonpartisan organization created to stimulate public discussion about the purposes, goals and organization of higher education in California.

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