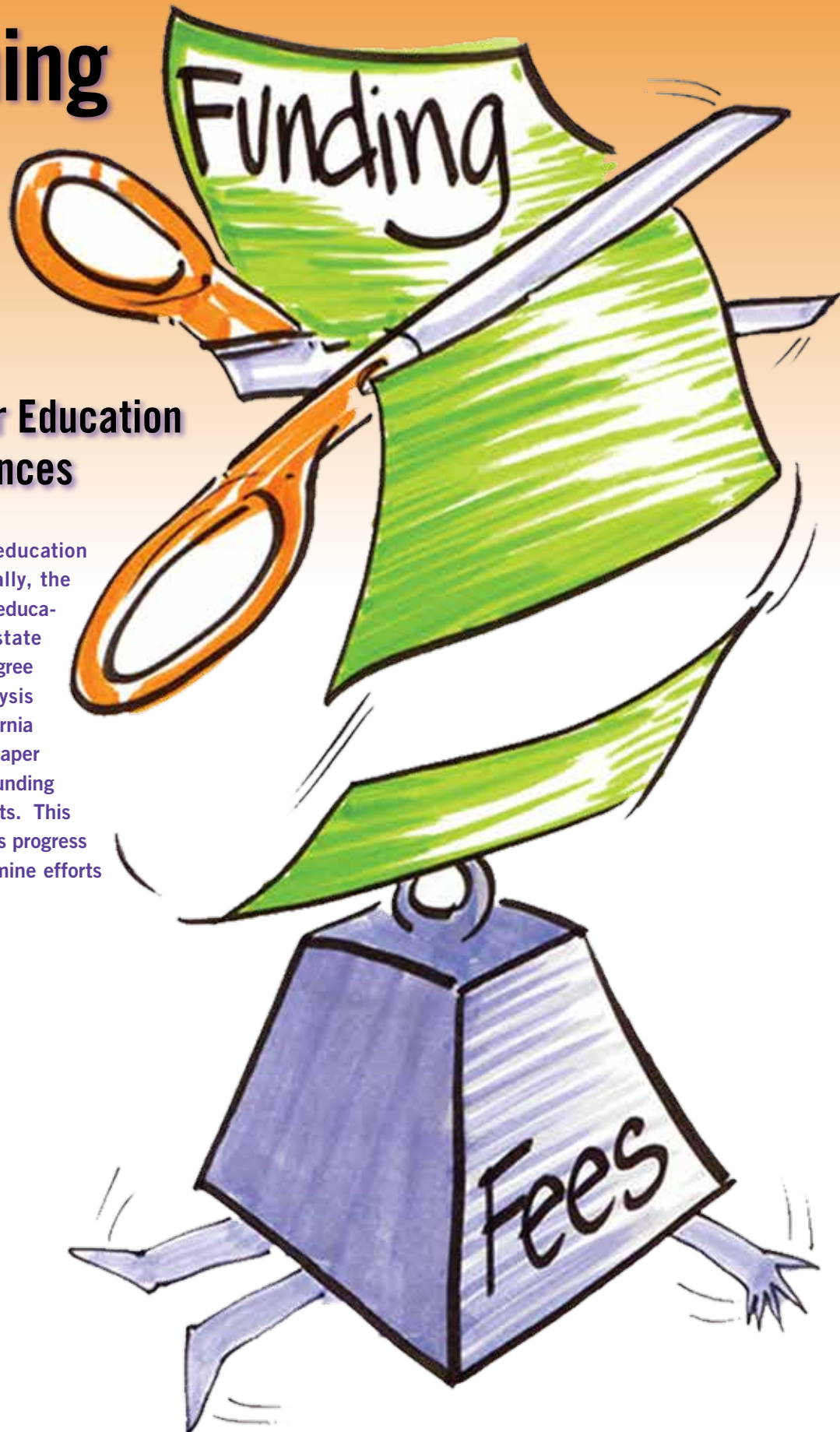


Undermining the Master Plan:

Divestment in Higher Education and Student Experiences

Abstract

Nationally, state funding to higher education has significantly decreased. Ironically, the trend of state divestment in higher education coincides with federal and state policies geared toward increasing degree completion rates. Through an analysis of qualitative data gathered at California higher education institutions, this paper highlights how cuts to educational funding create academic barriers for students. This can have implications for how students progress toward degree completion and undermine efforts to increase completion rates.



The degree completion rate in US postsecondary institutions is alarming—a large percentage of students who enter colleges and universities do not graduate. According to the US Department of Education (US Department of Education, 2009), only 57 percent of undergraduates earn their bachelor's degree in six years. The completion rate is even worse for ethnic minorities; only 41 percent of African Americans, 48 percent of Latinos and 39 percent of Native Americans complete a bachelor's degree within the same time frame.¹ This high rate of withdrawal from higher education can be highly detrimental to the US's ability to compete in a global setting, and if remaining competitive is a priority, this issue must be promptly addressed.

Accordingly, increasing the national college completion rate has been a major concern for President Obama, who has pledged to take the US from ranking 12th place to first place among countries with the most college graduates by 2020. The Health Care and

Bill 1440 which aims to ease the transfer process between California Community Colleges (CCC) and the California State University (CSU) (Sanders, 2010). Legislators hope that taking the complexities out of the transfer process will increase graduation rates for undergraduates (CCC Chancellor's Office, 2010). It is estimated that if an additional two percent of Californians earned associates' degrees and an additional one percent earned bachelors' degrees, the state economy would grow by \$20 billion (CCC Chancellor's Office, 2011). Adding to the renewed interest in improving graduation rates in California is the initiative adopted by the California State University Board of Trustees, in which they have two particular goals in mind: 1) to improve CSU-system graduation rates by eight percent by 2016 and 2) to cut in half the achievement gap for underrepresented minority students (CSU, 2012; Reed, 2010). Taking into consideration that the CSU system—the largest four-year university system in the country—enrolls over 400,000 students and graduates 92,000 students each year, President

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Education Reconciliation Act is the Obama administration's main strategy for meeting this goal, as it provides increased Pell Grant funding to students, additional funding to minority serving institutions and competitive grant funding to states (US Department of Education, 2010).

Complementary to Obama's 2020 goal is the state of California's efforts to increase college degree completion among its public institutions of higher education. The State Assembly passed State

Obama's goal cannot be reached without a significant graduation rate improvement in California (Reed, 2010).

Running counter to the Obama 2020 goal, the state of California's transfer initiative, and the CSU graduation mandate, is the nationwide economic recession that began to develop in 2007 (Quinn, 2007; Stevenson, 2007). With declines in tax revenue and the draining of budget reserves, the recession has caused the majority of states to cut spending on much needed public services (Carey,

¹ Data are from the 2001 cohort and includes all first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students at all four-year institutions.

The budgets to public education have been hard hit, leaving public institutions scrambling to find the means to serve ever-growing student populations. . . Intuitively, it is easy to understand that budget cuts to education put a strain on student resources, but rarely do we recognize the day-to-day hardships that such constraints can place on students.

2011; Leal, 2010; *The Fayetteville Observer*, 2011). The budgets to public education have been hard hit, leaving public institutions scrambling to find the means to serve ever-growing student populations (Carlton, 2009; Der Bedrosian, 2009; de Vise, 2009; Singer and Moran, 2011). Intuitively, it is easy to understand that budget cuts to education put a strain on student resources, but rarely do we recognize the day-to-day hardships that such constraints can place on students. This paper highlights those daily realities of students in the era of severe reduced funding to higher education.

Data used for this paper are drawn from the Ford Foundation-funded Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) project. The DLE is a mixed-method study using both focus group interviews and surveys at four- and two-year institutions across three states, to understand how campus climate, campus organizational structures and student identity impact student success. Although the study was not intended to examine the effects of reduced state funding on student educational experiences, this emerged as a major finding among the schools sampled in California. During focus group interviews, students from two- and four-year institutions in California shared how decreased state funding created academic challenges that made it difficult to learn and remain enrolled in school. Although these qualitative findings are not directly linked to degree-progress or degree-completion outcome data, they are significant in light of federal and state efforts to increase degree production. If reduced funding is in fact creating challenges to student learning, policy and administrative decisions must be made keeping these challenges in mind. The affects of reduced funding could in fact undermine the goal to increase degree production.

Currently, 43 states have made significant reductions to higher education spending (Johnson, 2010). California public institutions in particular have experienced particularly strong hits to their budget—the repercussions of which include no longer accepting all

qualified applicants, overcrowded classes (Carlton, 2009), cuts in enrollment (Lewin, 2008), and an increase in tuition cost for students (Mieszkowski, 2010). Unfortunately, the majority of institutions affected in California are “broad access.” Broad access institutions serve as engines of social and economic mobility by offering college access to a large number of students. Unfortunately, such institutions are more likely than their selective counterparts (those with lower admission rates) to struggle with retaining and graduating students. This is due to the less stringent academic profiles (e.g. SAT scores, high school coursework, high school GPA) they require of their admitted students. If the goal is to increase degree completion at both the national and state-level, we would do well to begin with broad access institutions. In line with the important role that broad access institutions play in increasing student degree progress, this paper analyzes data collected from student focus groups at California State Universities (CSU) and California Community Colleges (CCC).² Although community colleges do not offer bachelors’ degrees, they allow students the opportunity to transfer into a four-year institution. This transfer function makes community colleges important factors to the degree-completion process. Thus, it is important to understand how cuts to higher education funding affect the academic experiences of students from both community colleges and four-year institutions.

California Community Colleges and California State Universities

The postsecondary public education system in California was formally established in 1960 under the California Master Plan for Higher Education (Master Plan Survey Team, 1960). The Plan created specific roles for the University of California (UC), California State University and California Community College systems. The UCs are designated as the state’s primary academic research institutions and provide undergraduate, graduate and professional education. The CSUs are endowed with the mission of providing undergraduate education

² This paper will focus on these two institutional types, as they are “broad access” and do not have the same degree of admission restrictions as their University of California and counterparts.

and graduate education through the master's degree. The CCCs are charged with providing academic and vocational training to students, as well as opportunities for students to transfer into the UC and CSU systems.

The Master Plan also includes admission guarantees for citizens of California (Master Plan Survey Team, 1960). The UCs are to admit the top one-eighth of high school graduates, the CSUs the top one-third and the CCCs are to allow admission to all interested individuals. The Plan also calls for tuition-free education. Initially, students were to only be charged fees for auxiliary costs; however, with reduction of state funding to these institutions (beginning in the 1980s) fees have transitioned into tuition (UCOP, 2009).

Cuts to the Budget

The California Master Plan established a public education system designed to meet the various educational needs of the state population (Master Plan Survey Team, 1960). However, the intent

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of the Plan to provide a low cost, comprehensive and accessible education has been continually undermined through reductions in state funding. The most notable and recent reductions to higher education in California accompanied the national economic recession, which began in December 2007 with the downturn of the housing market (CNN, 2008). With the record-breaking unemployment rate, tax revenue took a steep decline, and many states faced budget deficits (Johnson et. al., 2010). Like other states in the union, California dealt with its deficit by cutting state services like education. In the 2009–2010 fiscal year, the UCs received \$813 million less in funding than in 2008–2009, the CSUs received \$625 million less and the CCCs \$812 million less (Newell, 2009). In response, universities and community colleges in California reduced student enrollment. *The New York Times* reported that in the 2009–2010 academic year, California Community Colleges enrolled 21,000 fewer students than it did the previous year, while

some of their institutions reported denying admission to about half of the new students who tried to enroll for that same academic year (Lewin, 2010). California institutions also increased student fees, reduced courses offered, instituted furlough days, and cut student services (Newell, 2009; CSU, 2010; CCC Chancellor's Office, 2011). Fortunately, in the 2010–2011 fiscal year, partial funding was reinstated to the UCs, CSUs and CCCs. The UCs and CSUs were each granted \$305 million dollars along with an additional \$51.3 million and \$60.6 million respectively for enrollment growth (California Budget Project, 2010). In a similar fashion, the CCCs received \$126 million in enrollment growth funding as well (California Budget Project, 2010).

Although the level of funding for the 2010–2011 fiscal year was an improvement, it was still below the state's 2007–2008³ (pre-recession) allocations (Taylor, 2010). This is alarming as enrollment has steadily increased each year at all levels of higher education in California (California Budget Project, 2010; Taylor, 2010). It is

also of concern that the 2010–2011 funding was supplemented by a combination of revenue generated from increased student fees and federal stimulus monies (Recovery.gov, 2011). In fact, relying on student fees to fund higher education has been a major trend in California. State support from the general fund has fallen by 14 percent from 2007–2008 to 2010–2011 (Taylor, 2010). At the same time, tuition increased at the UCs by 68 percent, at the CSUs by 76 percent and at CCCs from \$20 to \$26 per unit (Taylor, 2011). The state reliance on funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (stimulus money) softened the blow of California divestment in education; however, this money is temporary (Skelton, 2011). It is also not clear when funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act will diminish as the federal government has awarded a number of grants for several purposes at various points in time to educational entities in California (United States Government, 2011).

³ It is important to note that the funding level of 2007–2008, can be considered the last "normal" funding cycle to higher education in California. This pre-recession level of funding was adequate for enrollment and cost-of-living increases for the time (Taylor, 2011).

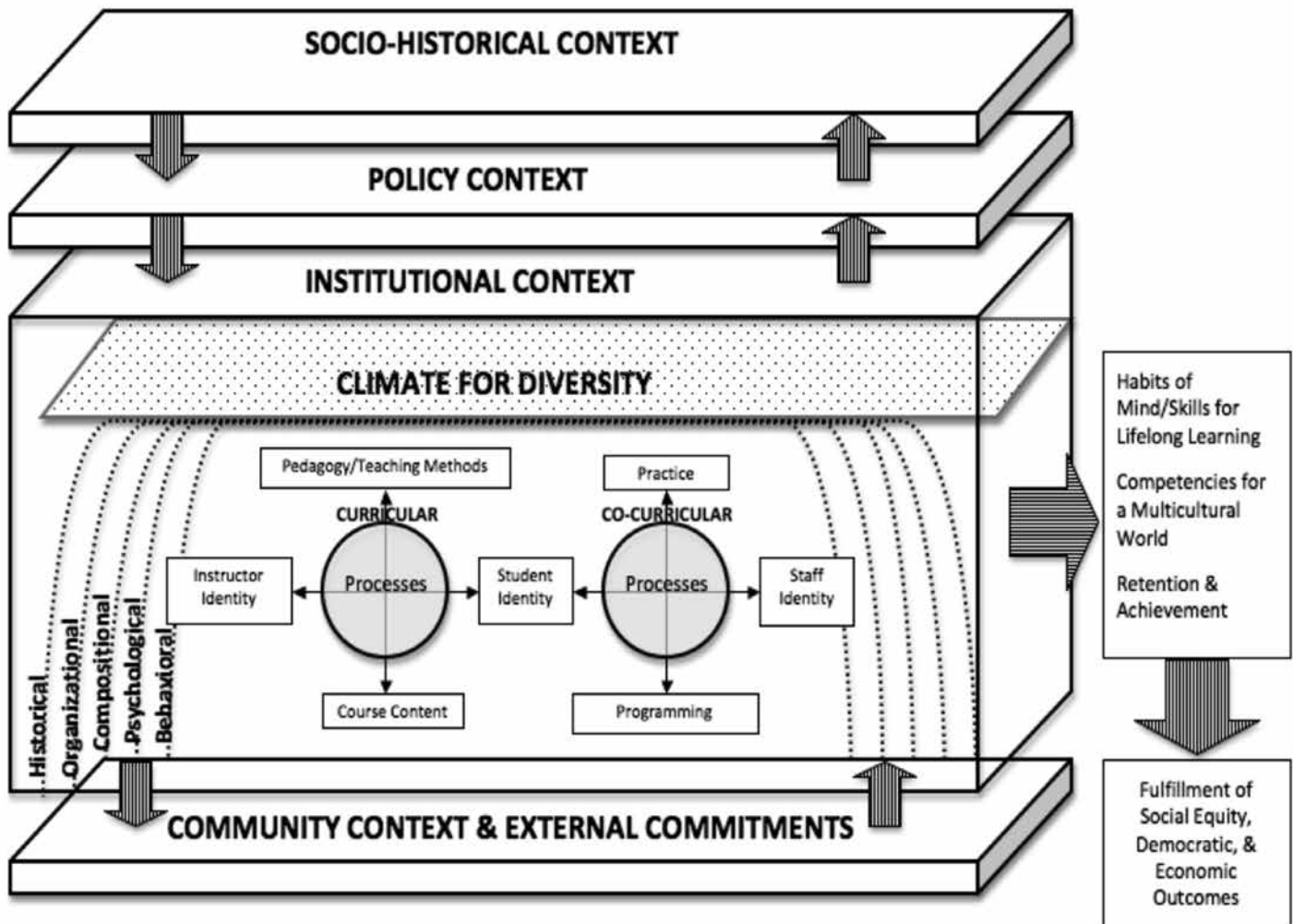
To complicate matters, the 2011–2012 fiscal budget decreased state funding to UCs and CSUs by \$500 million respectively and to the CCCs by \$400 million (LAO, 2011). In response, UCs have raised fees by 9.6 percent, CSUs by 12 percent (UC, 2011; CSU, 2011) and CCCs have increased fees, going from \$26 a unit to \$36 a unit (Taylor, 2011). With divestment in higher education remaining a trend in California, it is important to consider the impact such fiscal decisions are having on student populations. When cuts are made to higher education, the effects on the ground are not often highlighted, save for the occasional news article. It is necessary to understand the reality of the decisions made by legislators, and subsequently school administrators who allocate available funds. Having such an understanding can shape future decision-making around funding and resource allocation.

Additionally, if state and national legislators aim to increase degree production, then conditions must be favorable for the attainment of this goal. The student testimonies and experiences presented in this paper suggest that budget cuts to higher education may be creating unfavorable conditions.

Theoretical Framework

This paper takes the macro-level policy decisions of California legislatures and translates them to the on-the-ground experiences of students. Accordingly, the Multi-Contextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE; see Figure 1) is a theoretical framework that guides the framing and interpretation of the data (Hurtado, et al., 2012). The MMDLE is unique in that it considers not just micro-level influences that determine student trajectories

Figure 1. Multi-Contextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments



and experiences, but also macro-level issues that extend beyond the walls of an institution. The socio-historical and policy contexts are an example, and one that is relevant to this study. Socio-historical and policy contexts point to social and historical legacies along with policy decisions that shape conditions within colleges or universities.

In the case of California, the Master Plan for Higher Education is a historical legacy that is colliding with the economic recession. The State of California is currently trying to balance its commitment to educate the state populous, while at the same time facing decisions on whether to default on this commitment through efforts to balance the budget. This tension and the decisions to divest in higher education are currently shaping student experiences on campus by impacting how California institutions serve students every day. The MMDLE (Hurtado, et al. 2012) captures this reality and serves as the theoretical framework of this paper. As the framework notes, the socio-historical and policy contexts, along with other relevant factors, impact student success including retention and degree progress. Analyzing how students experience their journey toward degree completion in light of the state budget cuts can inform future ways to shape and inform policy without negative repercussions on student success.

Methods

As mentioned, the data for this paper are from the Ford Foundation-funded DLEproject. The project sampled seven, four-year and two-year institutions from California, Denver, Arizona, and Illinois in the 2009–2010 academic school year—a time period when higher education institutions were feeling the full-force of the recession. All of the institutions are broad access, which for the purposes of the study is defined as those with open enrollment (such as community colleges) or at least a 40 percent admission rate. The degree completion rates for the participating institutions ranged between 42 and 74 percent.⁴ All participating institutions are also public, with the exception of one. The data were gathered by

administering the DLE survey to undergraduates at each institution, as well as conducting individual interviews and focus groups with key administrators and focus groups with undergraduates. Each student focus group was organized by racial/ethnic group and was done to understand if racial/ethnic differences influenced academic experiences.

Students at all institutions in the study were recruited by campus administrators. These administrators varied in their employment capacities, but agreed to facilitate the study by recruiting students through email blasts, flyers and by word-of-mouth. The only requirement for participation was that students had to be currently enrolled on a full- or part-time basis, and self-identity as African American, Asian American, Latino, Native American, or white.

California student focus groups were conducted at two California State Universities and two California Community Colleges that participated in the DLE study. Ninety-four undergraduate students participated in a total of 16 focus groups. The average number of students per type of focus group was as follows: African American, six; white, eight; Latino, six; and Asian American, six. The student focus groups ran for approximately an hour and a half and were conducted by two members of the research team, all either graduate students or post-doctoral scholars. All focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were coded for emergent themes by two members of the research team using NVivo software (and achieved a 97 percent inter-coder agreement).

During student focus groups, students were asked a number of questions about their academic experiences. The same protocol was administered to each focus group and one question in particular elicited very interesting responses: “From your experience, what have been the biggest barriers to your academic achievement at this institution?” Of course students identified a number

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⁴ This range does not reflect community college completion rates.

of barriers including finances and family responsibilities. What is interesting is that students in California identified cuts to higher education funding and its consequences as their biggest barrier. There of course can be a number of reasons why this theme emerged for just California schools. First, the majority of the schools (four) in the DLE study are sampled from California. Additionally, the study was conducted at the height of the fiscal debate in California where cuts to funding were often featured in the media and contested during student demonstrations on college campuses. Finally, the sample of students in the California focus groups could have had economic predispositions that made them more sensitive to the budget issues. Whatever the reasons, their insights are valuable and have implications on the decision-making of practitioners and policymakers.

Cross Case Analysis

As the consequences of reduced funding emerged as a theme for California students, the research team decided to conduct a cross case analysis of the California focus group data. The goal of the cross case analysis was to ascertain whether the Californian students were experiencing the impact of reduced stated funding in similar or diverse ways.

Participants across all racial groups and institutional types overwhelmingly identified a decrease in state educational funding as a barrier to their academic achievement. They expressed that the responses of campuses to lower levels of state support inhibited their ability to be successful students... Such consequences make it challenging for students to learn and progress at both two- and four-year institutions.

For the cross case analysis, what Miles and Huberman (Miles and Huberman, 1994) coin as a “meta-matrix,” was constructed containing each institutional site, the student focus groups conducted at each site (disaggregated by race), along with all of the emergent themes and corresponding quotes related to the budget cuts and the student experience. The themes were then clustered into categories (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The categories were *decrease in support services and resources; furloughs; decreased course availability; and fee increases and the high cost of education*. These categories were related in that they all represent direct ways in which institutions have negotiated a decrease in state funding. Additionally, they were all identified by students as barriers to their academic achievement.

The meta-matrix was analyzed for patterns emerging across racial/ethnic group, but none were found. The impact of the budget does not seem to be experienced differently across race. The matrix was then condensed so that it only included institutional sites and corresponding categories (see Table 1). Table 1 reveals that *fee increases/the high cost of school*, along with *decreased course availability* are common across all institutions and institutional types sampled for the case study. However, the impact of furloughs only emerged as a theme for the two CSUs, and the impact of a decrease in support services only emerged for CCC 1.

Table 1. Cross Case Analysis by Institution and Categorical Themes

Cases	Institutional Type	Support Services	Furloughs	Fee Increase/High Cost of School	Decreased course availability
CSU 1	Four-Year		x	x	x
CSU 2	Four-Year		x	x	x
CCC 1	Two-Year	x		x	x
CCC 2	Two-Year			x	x

The emergence of the *furlough* category at only CSU sites was explained by the fact that furloughs were only instituted at UCs and CSUs, and not at community colleges in California. The UCs and CSUs issued voluntary furlough orders to deal with budget cuts for the 2009–2010 academic year. For the CSUs, faculty took two furlough days a month amounting to a 10 percent pay cut (*The Associated Press*, 2009). Staff at the CSUs took 24 furlough days resulting in a 9.23 percent pay cut (CSU, 2009).

Further analysis of the data shed some light on the category of a decrease in support services and resources only emerging at CCC 1. Focus group interviews with curricular and co-curricular administrators at CCC 1 revealed that student support services

and resources have historically not been highly prioritized in terms of funding at the institution. With less state support, CCC 1 dramatically reduced personnel and the level of services offered to students. In other words, the budget crisis dealt a heavy blow to an already weak sector of CCC 1. Perhaps this is why students at this institution uniquely highlighted decreased student services and resources as an academic barrier.

Findings

Participants across all racial groups and institutional types overwhelmingly identified a decrease in state educational funding as a barrier to their academic achievement. They expressed that the responses of campuses to lower levels of state support inhibited their ability to be successful students. Participants pointed to decreases in support services and resources, furloughs, decreased course availability, as well as fee increases and the high cost of education as adversely impacting their classroom learning and their ability to remain enrolled as students. As the student quotes in the following sections demonstrate, such consequences make it challenging for students to learn and progress at both two- and four-year institutions.

Decrease in Support Services and Resources

As previously discussed, students at CCC 1 were the only students in the sample to highlight reduced support services and resources as a barrier. One of the ways in which CCC 1 managed reduced state funding was by decreasing seemingly minute services, such as free printing and decreased library hours. However, these services were often lifelines for many students, as they allowed them the opportunity to study and complete their course work. One student illustrated this, saying:

“They cut the hours from the library as well... they're not open late enough so you can do the homework you need to do like they used to be. So that's one of the things that's [sic] hard. And also, they used to do free printing, at least five pages, in the computer lab, and now you have to pay. What happens if you don't have that money?” (CCC 1, Latino student)

For students who didn't have a space to study, the library was a necessity. In some cases, it was the only place in their lives where they had the opportunity to focus on schoolwork. Although this could be perceived by some as a small setback, it was a hardship for many students who did not have home environments conducive to studying. Moreover, as evidenced by this student, free printing was an important need. A large number of students did not have home computers or printers and depended on school computer labs. One student added, “[Printing] costs at school are [high]... My first priority is to pay rent, lights, gas. [I can't afford] supplies for school. Sometimes we can't afford [to print]” (CCC 1, white student). Without free printing, some students could not afford to print course assignments, which can negatively impact class performance. To make matters worse, programs that provided students with fee waivers for books were obliterated by decreased funding. A student shared,

“And if [you don't have a fee waiver], the books are very, very expensive... last semester [the waiver] was \$200, this semester it went down to \$100. It affects everybody. I'm gonna get my books the best way I can, to do what I have to do, but some people just can't afford it, and that's why they drop out” (CCC 1, white student).

Students who were already overwhelmed found such additional pressures to be too much. As evidenced by this quote, they even caused students to withdraw from school. Although reducing seemingly small services like library hours and fee waivers may not readily appear to pose dire constraints, they can in fact prevent students from accessing services that allow them to successfully function and remain in school.

Additionally, programs that provide tutoring services were drastically affected as well. One student shared,

“They just cut back all the tutors... I'm paying my tutor out of my own pocket now... Some people can't afford [to do that], but when we first came



Although reducing seemingly small services like library hours and fee waivers may not readily appear to pose dire constraints, they can in fact prevent students from accessing services that allow them to successfully function and remain in school.

As the quotes in this section revealed, many of the support services impacted by reduced state funding are vital to students' ability to be successful in the classroom and remain enrolled in school. This is particularly the case for low-income and traditionally underserved students.

here, it was free... Now they cut back on everything. So if the tutors [were] back, maybe people would get better grades..." (CCC 1, white student).

Another student shared,

"...[at] the tutor center, now I can only make [one] appointment [a] week. Before... [you could make] two or three [a week and get] a lot of help from the tutor... now only once a week... it's hard" (CCC 1, Asian American student). Services such as tutoring can dramatically enhance academic success (Abrams & Jernigan, 1984; Tinto, 2011). Tutoring services can help students navigate difficult course material and often prevent students from withdrawing from or failing courses. For many, tutoring services are essential for academic achievement and for progressing toward a degree.

Additionally, one student also highlighted that the reduced funding to programs like EOPS was a barrier. The student stated,

"Even though CalWorks is supposed to [help pay for] books and all that stuff [they have not been able to]... then [there's] EOPS, they help with the books, but [since] EOPS had those cuts, it's kind of difficult [to receive support from them]" (CCC 1, Latino student).

As the quotes in this section revealed, many of the support services impacted by reduced state funding are vital to students' ability to be successful in the classroom and remain enrolled in school. This is particularly the case for low-income and traditionally underserved students. By eliminating or decreasing services (both seemingly big and small), learning and progressing toward a degree becomes that much more difficult for already disadvantaged students.

Furloughs Result in Less Instruction Time

Furloughs only impacted students at the CSUs sampled in the study as they were not instituted by community colleges in California. The introduction of furloughs adds an additional concern about the quality of education being received by students and their ability to perform well in courses. One student stated,

"I think the fees going up definitely affects us but I think the worst part about it is they're raising fees but giving us all these furlough days. And if they want us to retain the information, it's really hard to retain information when you go three weeks without seeing the professor and then you have a test on seven chapters but they never lectured on it... A lot [of] people [were] irritated ...[you] get back from three weeks off and there's a test on such chapters" (CSU 2, white student).

Another student shared, "...we didn't have class for an entire month [because of furloughs] and [when class resumed] then we had a test..." (CSU 2, white student). Another student went on to say "... seriously one of my classes out of the 15 weeks of school, nine of the weeks are furlough days. And we have to cover 27 chapters..." (CSU 2, white student). These students and others were very concerned that furlough days were encroaching on their instruction time. And to make matters worse, they are being tested on information they were never taught by instructors. Furthermore, students are left to try and learn course material on their own without the support of faculty. One student expressed that faculty can only provide limited academic support due to furloughs, the student said,

"...even with the teachers, if you don't understand something [and you ask for help, they'll say] 'Oh, well, I can only help you so much because of furloughs or because of budget cuts. You need to go to [the tutoring center]'" (CSU 1, African American student).

Another student shared,

"Furloughs [have] thrown me off as well ...once [you've missed] a week of classes [due to furloughs]...you're [still] expected to have learned [the material during the time off] ... and I feel like I'm being thrown for a loop sometimes for every single class that I've had... on furlough days... I feel more confused when I come back. (CSU 2, Latino student).

One student summed up the challenges furloughs pose to learning by stating, "Some professors, it's

fair to, say have been thrown off by the furloughs. Let's face it, how do you teach more [with less instruction time]" (CSU 1, white student).

As illustrated by the quotes, it is impossible for students to grasp course material without adequate instruction time. This of course undermines the value of their education. Additionally, students may not acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to successfully enter the job market. In essence, furloughs can trigger long-term consequences that are yet to be seen and experienced.

Decreased Course Availability Prolongs Degree Progress

In addition to the use of furloughs as a means to handle budget cuts, CSUs have also engaged in decreasing the number of courses available to students by limiting the number of times they are offered. The community colleges have also employed the same strategy. One student expressed,

"... the classes I decided to take, [they're only] offered [once] this year. And [if you can't fit them in your schedule] then you have to wait until next year. And that's amazing to me...But it is a challenge. It is a challenge" (CCC 2, African American student).

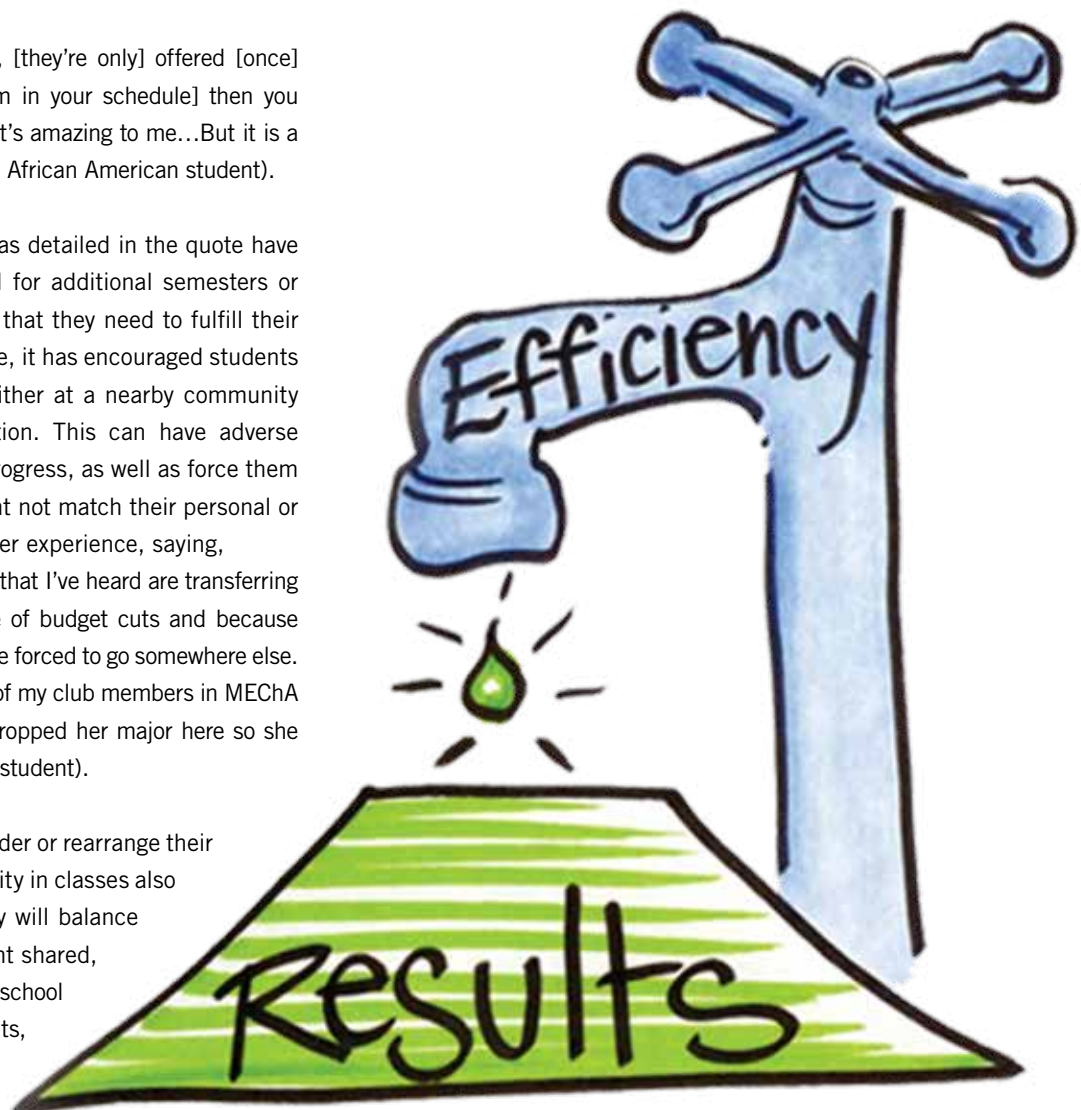
Unfortunately similar circumstances as detailed in the quote have resulted in students having to enroll for additional semesters or quarters in order to take the classes that they need to fulfill their graduation requirements. Furthermore, it has encouraged students to seek those courses elsewhere—either at a nearby community college or another four-year institution. This can have adverse consequences on students' degree progress, as well as force them to seek education in places that might not match their personal or familial needs. One student shared her experience, saying,

"The people that I have seen and or that I've heard are transferring out of [this institution] are because of budget cuts and because majors have been dropped. So they're forced to go somewhere else. They're not going willingly. Like one of my club members in MEChA has to go to Fresno because they dropped her major here so she has to go out there" (CSU 2, Latina student).

In addition to having students reconsider or rearrange their enrollment plans, this lack of availability in classes also leaves them worrying about how they will balance work and their education. One student shared,

"I'm having issues with work and school right now. Because of the budget cuts, they had a lot of classes that were

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As voiced by focus group participants, cuts to the availability of courses are hindering students' ability to progress toward their academic goals. Additionally, the limited course offerings are interfering with the work schedules of students.

two days a week, three days a week, one day a week, and now it's all being cut down... you know? And I can't seem to get my [class] schedule to work with my work schedule and for that they're just telling me 'fine, don't come in, just work on the weekends.' And I keep paying my bills with that. So I'm having serious issues with this... Because as it is right now, it's not working well for me" (CSU 2, white student).

To make matters worse, students are feeling lost and unsure of how to handle the unavailability of courses. One student shared,

"I'm gonna get my certificate in photography pretty soon, in black and white. I need one more class, one more class, and now they're not teaching the class because of the budget. So they fired, they laid off professors, so they don't have that class any more. What am I gonna do? How am I gonna get my certificate? Students, they don't want to come to school 'cause they don't know what to do. They want to come back, but they're not offering the classes they need to become a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher, it doesn't matter. So it's like, I think they should work on that, give us more classes, offer more classes that students will need..." (CCC 1, white student).

Additionally, the decrease in course offerings affects the time it takes students to earn a degree. With less course offerings, it is difficult to carry a full-load of units or earn a bachelor's degree in four years. A student expressed this by saying,

"It's so hard to figure out a schedule and... [all of the class are] impacted... they cut back on class sections and it's just really hard to [get all of the classes you need] in four years. Especially when most people, from what I've seen, they work, so it's really hard to take a full course load" (CSU 1, Asian American student).

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Additionally, the limited course offerings are interfering with the work schedules of students. This is significant as a large number of students work to support themselves and their families. And finally, limited course offerings are causing students to feel frustrated and confused-not knowing exactly what to do to help themselves. Such frustration and confusion can decrease motivation and lead students to give up on their goals all together. Having a wide selection of courses available at varying times is central to the success of students.

Fee Increases and the High Cost of Education

The final concern expressed by students at all of the institutions sampled pertained to their ability to finance their educations in the face of the rising fees and other education-related expenses. Students felt the tension between choosing to work more hours to pay for school or work less hours to keep up with course work. When students increased their work hours to cover their educational expenses, the increased responsibility of work interfered with their education; but when students opted to maintain their school load, it resulted in them working less and therefore having less money to cover educational costs. Additionally, students were also forced to take out more loans to remain in school, leaving them in debt. Needless to say, the degree progress of students is hampered by these events. Many students were quick to share their frustrations on these issues. One student shared,

"[One of the barriers I face] is tuition. [It costs] \$2,500 and something... and that's [just tuition], that not books and fees. I haven't even purchased a book since I've been here for a semester" (CSU 1, Latino student).

Another student expressed,

"I need to buy books and everything... I'm taking five classes, and I can only [afford] one book... I don't have money... so I'm just pretty much going to the library [trying to... figure out [how] to do all [my] homework and everything" (CCC 2, Asian American student).

Another shared, "I think money's a big issue. They keep raising our tuition and [the cost of] books keep going up... so it's I think money's a huge issue" (CSU

2, white student). One student added, “When I have to work more [to pay for school], it cuts down [on] my time in school” (CCC 2, Latino student).

Students talk specifically about the impact of tuition increases on their academic plans and degree progress. One participant mentioned,

“The cost of living out here is the same amount I pay in tuition... I partly take out a lot of money in loans and I have a lot of debt because of it. And I’m going off to graduate school in the fall so it’s just going to be more debt. So it’s just, I mean, education is getting to the point where it’s like ‘geez, can I really afford to do this?’ I’m like yeah, I’m getting into graduate school but can I afford to go? ...Am I going to be able to get it done before I reach my loan limit? So that’s been a big issue for me” (CSU 2, white student).

Another student said,

“I actually tried to get into the child psychopathology class but... it’s only offered by one professor at one time and [unfortunately]

the student testimonies, the cuts to higher education in California have created many challenges for students at both California State Universities and community colleges. Students are struggling with decreased resources and cuts to support services, less instruction time, lack of course availability, as well as fee increases. These challenges disrupt learning, degree progress and the ability of students to remain enrolled in school.

The MMDLE helps us situate these student testimonies in an appropriate context and gain critical insight and understanding. The model posits that sociohistorical events along with policy, shape the academic experiences of students. With the case of California, the California Master Plan is a sociohistorical force that created public higher education in the state. The Plan intends to provide a low-cost postsecondary education to a large number of California citizens (Master Plan Survey Team 1960). However, policy decisions over the years to divest in higher education, has posed challenges to the Master Plan. Students in the study are able to

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I had to work. I’ve already cut down my bills to the point where it’s like I’m only eating two meals a day. Like I can’t afford... to pay [for] three meals a day... so I had to give up taking that class... because I had to work” (CSU 2, white student).

It is clear that students are attempting to balance both work and school and are struggling to do so. In a Catch-22 of sorts, where institutions increase fees as one way of coping with budget cuts, students are left with a laundry list of sacrifices—including increased work hours, increased loans and decreased course loads. With the higher cost of tuition, coupled with the cost of living, many students have to choose between basic survival and the pursuit of education. For many, earning a degree may not remain an option.

Discussion and Conclusion

To ensure that more students earn college degrees, higher education must remain affordable. At the current rate of state divestment, many students will be pushed out the classroom. As evidenced by

access public education in California because of the Master Plan, but their access and degree progress are complicated due to the diminishing of the Plan’s original goals (as a result of reduced state funding). Thus, California is at a crossroads and the state is on the verge of either dismantling its public education system or finding a way to revive it. The desire to revive public higher education is apparent with recent state level policies designed to increase the number of college graduates (e.g. State Bill 1440 and the CSU graduation mandate). These efforts are fueled by President Obama’s goal to increase college degree completion across the nation. But with decreased state funding to higher education in California and other states in the union, how are such state and federal goals to be met?

The student focus group data reveal that reduced state funding to higher education may be creating conditions that undermine the legislative goals to increase the number of college graduates. With decreased resources and cuts to support services, less instruction

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time, lack of course availability, as well as fee increases, students may not have the resources and opportunities to successfully graduate. Policymakers must be aware of this when making fiscal decisions regarding education. Although the economic crisis in which the US faces is dire, it is counterproductive to set a goal, pass legislation to meet said goal, only to undermine it along the way.

Administrators must be aware of the complications reduced funding can create for degree progress and completion as well. Ultimately, administrators are charged with allocating funds from the state. When making these decisions it is important to consider which areas will make it more difficult for students to achieve in the classroom and graduate. Many institutions in California have degree progress and completion goals. As mentioned, the California State University system has a system-wide goal to improve graduation rates by eight percent (CSU 2012; Reed 2010). Administrators at the CSUs must be strategic when managing the limited budgets handed down by Sacramento. Their decisions also create conditions that can hinder or better support students. Moreover, administrators at California Community Colleges also must be aware that the transfer functions of their institutions can be hindered by their fiscal decisions.

The intention of this article is to demonstrate that careful consideration must be made when dealing with funding and education. The sheer understanding of the benefits of earning a degree on an individual and societal level should make the act of cutting educational funding one that is cautious and exact. It is our hope that the student testimonies in this paper make it clear that reducing educational funding does not boil down to only dollars and cents, but that there is human struggle behind every dollar withheld. With less funding someone will lose the opportunity to earn a degree and settle for less in life than they have desired. We must ask ourselves, are we willing to balance our state budgets at the cost of someone else's dreams?



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