Restore funding for higher ed

New transfer law needs to be backed by state commitment to universities

On Wednesday, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed legislation guaranteeing community college graduates admission to California State University campuses.

The Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act requires the state’s 112 community colleges starting in fall 2011 to offer an associate degree that ensures a Cal State seat. The degrees will help students avoid mistakenly taking unnecessary classes, which sometimes add a year or more to their education.

Students often take classes they later find do not meet Cal State standards; under the new law, community colleges will have to spell out for students exactly what they'll need to transfer within two years. About 55,000 more community-college students a year could transfer to the 23-campus Cal State system because of the change.

What Schwarzenegger has been unable to do, however, is deliver a budget restoring funding for California higher public education including UC Santa Cruz.

Fees — tuition — have gone up dramatically at UC campuses in recent years, with no relief in sight. Asked whether they’d roll back increases in tuition at California’s public universities and colleges, the two candidates running for governor had different answers. Democrat Jerry Brown said he’d first have to solve the state’s $19 billion deficit. Republican Meg Whitman said she plans to direct $1 billion in savings from welfare and state spending cuts toward higher education.

While the new transfer law does not apply to the UC system, what’s ironic is that UCSC already is taking a lion’s share of transfer students from Cabrillo and other community colleges — 1,250 new transfer students are enrolled this fall.

One of the purposes of community colleges has been to provide the first two years of an undergraduate education, taking the load off four-year colleges. But budget cuts have meant fewer classes are available to students, which has meant many take three or four years to get the credits necessary to transfer.

In 2008-09, Cabrillo reported 635 students transferred to a four-year college — with the numbers trending slightly down over five years. Part of the problem has been a lack of spaces for students to transfer to — as CSU campuses started taking transfers only from community colleges in their immediate area.

CSU has had to slash the number of students accepted because of budget cuts, making it an open question how the campuses will take more community college transfers.

Meanwhile, enrollment cutbacks at UC and CSU have meant more students flocking to community colleges, while the state’s 12 percent unemployment rate has also increased demand. At the same time, the community college system sustained a $520 million cut in state funding in the 2009-2010 school year. Cabrillo had to bridge a $2.3 million deficit.

Earlier this month, UC and CSU each got $106 million and community colleges got $5 million in one-time federal stimulus funding. The universities are still awaiting passage of a state budget, now three months overdue, that may or may not include restoration of some of the millions in funding cuts sustained in the last three years.

One-time federal stimulus funding, while helpful, is not the answer. The governor and legislators need to stand firm on California’s commitment to public higher education and pass a budget that restores their funding.