Community college students rarely complete degrees

By TERENCE CHEA
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Most students seeking degrees at California’s community colleges neither completed them nor transferred to a four-year university, according to a study that spells trouble for the state’s economic future.

Nearly 70 percent of degree-seeking students who entered community college in the 2003-2004 school year didn’t graduate or complete their degrees within six years, according to the report. Most of the students who didn’t complete their degrees or certificates dropped out.

The report was released this week by the nonprofit Campaign for College Opportunity, the thinktank Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy at Sacramento State University and 14 other education advocacy organizations.

The study, which tracked more than 250,000 students, found a wide disparity among racial groups in the percentage of students who complete degrees or transfers. The rate was 37 percent for white students, 35 percent for Asians, 26 percent for blacks and 22 percent of Latinos.

At Cabrillo College in Aptos, about 51 percent of students between 2002-2008 transferred to a four-year university, received a degree or certificate or acquired enough credits to be eligible to transfer within six years, according to spokeswoman Kristin Fabos.

Cabrillo has a student body of approximately 15,000.

In 2008-09, 635 Cabrillo students transferred to a four-year university.

The low rates of college completion could hurt California’s economy as other states and countries increase their levels of educational attainment, said Nancy Shulock, who heads the institute at Sacramento State.

“We’ve got to try to increase the educational attainment of California, or we’re going to lose jobs and our stature as a leading economic powerhouse,” Shulock said. “California is falling behind the rest of the states. And the rest of the states are falling behind the rest of the world in terms of educational attainment.”

The report made recommendations for boosting completion and transfer rates, including developing a better system to track student progress and financially rewarding colleges that help students meet college milestones.

California Community Colleges officials said they are committed to increasing completion rates at its 112 campuses, and that the study reinforces many of their own conclusions.

“We’re going to turn our attention to getting our students not only in the door, but moving them out with a degree,” said Terri Carbaugh, its vice chancellor of communications.

Efforts to boost graduation rates should be helped by newly signed legislation that makes it easier for community college students to transfer to California State University campuses, Carbaugh said.