Community colleges poised for change

State proposal would put focus mainly on students with transfer goals

Community colleges are facing a major change in purpose and focus. After a succession of budget cuts, something clearly has to be done so the schools can do a better job of preparing high school graduates for transfer to four-year colleges and universities. As it is, colleges like our own Cabrillo have performed admirably, often in trying financial circumstances, sending local young people off to CSU and UC campuses after successfully completing required units and classes. The downside is that, with fewer class openings available, this often takes more than two years.

Approximately 14,000 students are enrolled at Cabrillo this year, paying $36 a unit. The fees go up to $48 a unit next school year. About 31 percent of Cabrillo students (4,388 students) were considered full-time in the spring of 2011 and about 35 percent (4,513 students) this past fall.

Cabrillo and other community colleges have been trying to cope with financial uncertainties amid high demand, while trying to maintain traditional community access. That could change, however.

Community College Chancellor Jack Scott ruled out a series of recommendations to state legislators last week that would change the traditional role of two-year colleges to serving fewer students, but at a higher college-transfer level. Gov. Jerry Brown backs the plan.

If enacted, it would mean the focus for community colleges would fall primarily upon students with specific and targeted higher education or career plans.

This could mean fewer vocational, remedial and training classes for local people trying to brush up on job skills or just take a college-level class or two. So-called "community education" classes already have diminished in recent years.

Students would be required to identify a course of study, or career goals, and to make progress toward transferring. They would also have limits on how long they could stay at a community college. The governor's budget would tie state funding to meeting performance standards in transferring goal-oriented students to four-year colleges and universities.

The reality is that only about 20 percent of incoming community college students statewide complete enough units to get at least a two-year degree within six years.

Cabrillo reports that about 42 percent of incoming students had declared a goal of transferring to a four-year school in 2010-11. In addition, about 28 percent of Cabrillo students in 2010-11 (1,652 students) who completed 12 or more units ended up transferring to a four-year school. This figure was up from 24 percent (964 students) the previous year.

One promising change would allow fees to be waived for students who identify career or transfer goals, meet standards and stay within a maximum unit cap. The cap could also serve to weed out students who take classes for personal enrichment — or students who take a class or two every year, with no specific transfer or career plans.

The budget implications are clear: The state's community colleges would have fewer students, which, considering they served 2.75 million students last year, could give the governor vital savings in ending chronic deficits. The shift could also help Brown when he asks voters in November for tax hikes to help fund education.

The downside to the draft legislation (called the Student Success Act of 2012) is that the traditional role of community colleges in offering something for almost everyone could be lost. Scott and Brown will need to address these concerns and, undoubtedly, the proposals will be tweaked to reflect community needs.

But, it would seem both wise and essential to narrow the scope of what community colleges are asked to do. More with less doesn't serve California or students well.