Do Community Colleges Respond to Local Needs?

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Development of the California Community College System

California’s extensive public postsecondary education system includes the University of California (UC) system, the California State University (CSU) system, and the California Community College System (CCCS). To place our empirical analysis in context, this chapter provides a brief discussion of the unique role of community colleges in the state’s postsecondary education system. We begin by discussing the well-known 1960 California Master Plan for Higher Education; then we consider the organization and financing of California’s community colleges. In the next section we examine the apportionment of funds within the system and accountability standards. The final section draws on our earlier work to briefly describe the operation of the CCCS today (Gill and Leigh 2004).

THE 1960 MASTER PLAN

In a detailed study of the development of American community colleges, Cohen and Brawer (1996) describe California as a leader in the development of community colleges in the twentieth century and, in many ways, a catalyst for legislation allowing the establishment of community colleges in other states. As early as the 1930s, according to Cohen and Brawer, 20 percent of all community colleges and one-third of all community college students in the United States were located in California.

During the 1950s, lawmakers in California, like those in many other states, faced a number of difficult higher-education issues. These included huge increases in projected enrollment, rising costs for California taxpayers, and continuing turf battles between UC campuses and the state colleges in areas such as graduate training, research, and enrollment growth. The 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education in California
represented the culmination of an arduous process of negotiation involving UC campuses, state colleges, and the community colleges, as well as the legislature, the governor’s office, and state agencies. The outcome of these negotiations was a plan that established guidelines for the expansion and coordination of the tripartite system of higher education in California.

Key elements of the 1960 Master Plan (including subsequent amendments) include the following:

**Differentiation of missions.** The Master Plan clearly distinguished between the missions of the UC system, the state colleges (now the California State University system), and the community colleges. UC campuses were to offer BA, MA, PhD, and professional degrees. (Professional degrees were awarded in law, medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine, and architecture.) The UC was designated as the state’s primary academic research institution. The state colleges, in turn, were to offer BA and MA degrees and to have primary responsibility for teacher credentials. State colleges were permitted to grant doctorates only if degrees were awarded jointly with a UC campus or an independent institution. Faculty members at state colleges were limited to research consistent with the primary function of instruction.

Finally, community colleges had as their primary missions the provision of academic and occupational skills instruction for recent high school graduates and older students for the first two years of undergraduate education. In addition to these primary missions, community colleges were authorized to provide remedial instruction, English as a Second Language, and adult noncredit instruction. Recently, the legislature added workforce training designed to enhance the state’s economic growth and global competitiveness to the already imposing set of missions assigned community colleges.

**Universal access.** The Master Plan reaffirmed California’s longstanding commitment to the principle of universal access to higher education. This principle was implemented through low tuition and an emphasis on the transfer function. As recently as 1983, CCCS campuses charged no tuition at all. Responding to serious budget shortfalls linked to the 1982–1983 recession and the passage of Proposition 13, the CCCS began charging tuition in the fall of 1984. Tuition was set at a modest
$5 per credit and capped at $50 per semester. Today, tuition is $26 per credit and tuition and fees average about $806 annually. According to the Chancellor’s Office (2005), tuition and fees at community colleges in most other states are much higher, averaging between $1,500 and $3,500 per year.

Due to low tuition and its open-admission policy, California leads the nation in access to its community college system. A frequently used measure of access is participation, which is defined as student enrollment per 100,000 citizens between the ages of 18 and 44. Again according to the Chancellor’s Office (2005), participation in the CCCS is 9,567 students per 100,000 citizens. This is much higher than the participation in most states, which is typically between 2,000 and 6,000 students per 100,000 citizens. Kane and Rouse (1999) also point out that California is an outlier among states in terms of the proportion of college students enrolled in a public community college.

**Differentiation in admissions.** Consistent with the principle of universal access, the *Master Plan* specified different admissions pools for the UC, state colleges, and community colleges. University of California campuses are to select students from among the top 12.5 percent of high school graduating classes, while CSU campuses are to select from among the top one-third of high school graduates. Separate statutes require that both the UC and CSU systems limit their enrollments and maintain specific admissions standards. To provide transfer opportunities giving community college students access to upper-division courses, UC and CSU campuses are to maintain a ratio of lower-division to upper-division courses of 40 percent to 60 percent.

The enrollment and admissions restrictions imposed on the UC and CSU systems leave community colleges responsible for meeting the demand for postsecondary education of the remaining two-thirds of California high school graduates, as well as the adult population that would benefit from continuing education. Community college students, consequently, differ widely in terms of their academic preparation. It should be emphasized that admission to a community college is not restricted to high school graduates.

With open access and low tuition, California community colleges are more likely to enroll underrepresented groups that might not otherwise have attended college than are UC and CSU institutions.
Underrepresented student groups include individuals who are the first in their families to attend college, those working or raising a family while attending college, and those from low-income families.

In particular, community colleges serve disproportionately large shares of Latino and African American students. As shown in Table 2.1, systemwide data for 2001 indicate that about 75 percent of all white students enrolled in California public higher education institutions attended community colleges (California Postsecondary Education Commission 2006). The same statistics for Latino and African American students are 81.5 percent and 80.6 percent, respectively. On the other hand, Latinos and blacks are underrepresented in the highly selective UC system. Compared to 8.5 percent of white college students, only 4.0 percent of Latinos and 3.9 percent of blacks attended a UC institution. In sharp contrast, 16.4 percent of Asian and Filipino students attended one of the UC campuses. That is, Asian college students were nearly twice as likely as white students to be enrolled in the UC system.

Governance structure. The Master Plan established the Coordinating Council for Higher Education for coordinating all three higher education systems. The Coordinating Council was replaced in 1973 by the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC). In addition, the Master Plan reaffirmed the role of the Board of Regents of the UC, and it established a Board of Trustees to oversee the CSU campuses. Community colleges are overseen by a Board of Governors that has responsibility for appointing a systemwide chancellor whose office is located in Sacramento.

ORGANIZATION OF THE CCCS

California’s community colleges were originally part of the then K-14 school districts. Legislation passed in 1967 split off community college districts from K-12 districts. Each community college district is overseen by an elected board of trustees. As noted in Chapter 1, there are presently 72 community college districts in California. These range in size from the nine colleges in the massive Los Angeles Community
College District to numerous single-college districts, many of which are located in rural areas in the state.

Following the K-12 model, each community college district in California possesses considerable local autonomy. District boards set administrative policy for member colleges, manage resources across campuses in multicampus districts, and supervise in broad terms curriculum development and program offerings. Since faculty members and support personnel are heavily unionized, district boards also negotiate collective bargaining agreements. Each district maintains borrowing and taxing authority similar to that of K-12 school districts.

Murphy (2004, Chapter 2) provides an interesting description of how the organizational structures of community college districts differ between California and other states. At one extreme, states such as Minnesota and Georgia have highly centralized systems. Indeed, both of these states have gone as far as to integrate their community colleges into their respective states’ university systems. At the other extreme, states like Texas and Wisconsin resemble the decentralized structure found in California, where decision-making authority is delegated to officials at the local level. Murphy notes that part of the explanation for these different organizational structures is a difference in the breadth of institutional missions. In Minnesota, for example, community colleges offer a relatively narrow range of services in comparison to those provided by California community colleges.

Table 2.1  Total Enrollment in 2001 by Race or Ethnicity in the UC, CSU, and CCCS (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher education system</th>
<th>Asian/Filipino</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UC</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSU</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCCS</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>81.5</td>
<td>80.6</td>
<td>74.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: About 2.2 million students are enrolled in all three systems. This breaks down to 192,000 UC students, 387,000 CSU students, and over 1.6 million CCCS students. Included in these numbers of total students, in addition to the race or ethnicity categories shown in the table, are Native Americans, nonresident aliens, “other,” and no response.

FUNDING THE CCCS

The state’s general fund and local property taxes provide most of the funding for the California Community College System. Together, these two sources of funds accounted for over three-quarters of the resources available to the system in 2000–2002 (Murphy 2004, Chapter 2). Federal funds provided less than 4 percent of total revenue in 2000–2001, and tuition contributed only about 3 percent. California’s commitment to a low-tuition policy, as discussed above, is reflected in the fact that California is the cheapest state in the nation in which to attend a community college (National Center for Education Statistics 2002, Table 168). The next cheapest state, New Mexico, is approximately twice as costly as California.

Data for 2000–2001 indicate that total state spending expressed on a per full-time equivalent student basis was $4,560 for the CCCS (Murphy 2004, Chapter 3). In contrast, per student spending for the state’s other education systems is much higher. Funding available to the UC system was $22,634 per full-time equivalent student, while CSU campuses received $10,292 per full-time equivalent student. Even the K-12 system received 44 percent greater funding per student than community colleges. Compared to community colleges in other states, California community colleges also appear to be modestly funded. Data assembled by Murphy indicates that California ranked 45th out of 49 states in total revenue per full-time student.

APPORTIONMENT OF FUNDS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

There are considerable disparities in revenue per student across California’s 72 community college districts. While such disparities might be expected because of differences in local property tax bases, Murphy (2004, Chapter 4) explains that most of the variation is accounted for by a centralized apportionment formula. In 1988, the state legislature introduced program-based funding (PBF) to determine the allocation of resources across community college districts. Very briefly, the PBF process begins by establishing quality standards for alterna-
tive program categories and determining the cost to provide services at those levels. Then adjustments are made for enrollment growth and changes in the cost of living in determining a district’s future funding needs. Also considered in this calculation are differences in the sizes of districts and colleges. Finally, the PBF process attempts to level the playing field between wealthy and poorer districts by subtracting property taxes from each district’s target allocation.

In principle, performance-based funding is a reasonable approach toward achieving two worthwhile goals: 1) supplying colleges with sufficient resources to maintain quality programs over time, and 2) achieving a measure of accountability in the use of scarce state resources. The element of accountability arises because districts are presumed to be funded at a level that enables them to meet particular performance standards. When, even with adequate resources, colleges in a district fall short of reaching that level of performance, the state is in a position to issue sanctions for underperformance.

In practice, however, PBF fell short of achieving its stated goals. A major problem is that the state failed to provide the funding necessary to reach stated performance levels. In addition, districts were not held accountable for spending allotted funds within the categories set out in the PBF formula. The consequence was that performance-based funding contributed to an inequitable distribution of resources across districts. Moreover, PBF led to an incentive structure inconsistent with the goal of maintaining high-quality services and programs.

In 1998, the state and the CCCS reached an agreement called Partnership for Excellence (PFE), designed to improve the performance of community colleges. The five performance goals laid out in the agreement include

1) a greater number of transfers to UC and CSU campuses;
2) an increased number of degrees and certificates awarded;
3) higher rates of course completion for transfer, vocational education (voc-ed), and basic skills courses;
4) greater contribution to workforce development as measured by completion of apprenticeship, advanced voc-ed, and introductory voc-ed courses; and
5) basic skills improvement as measured by number of students
completing coursework at least one level above prior basic skills courses.

The premise of PFE was that supplemental state funds above and beyond the general state apportionment would be made available to colleges that were successfully working toward these five goals. Murphy (2004, Chapter 5) concludes that, in practice, PFE funding has been distributed to districts based on full-time equivalent student enrollment instead of their performance in meeting PFE goals. In other words, PFE funds have become part of districts’ funding base rather than being used as a mechanism for rewarding performance. On the positive side, the PFE program provides community colleges an additional source of much needed funding. In addition, the effort to measure success in meeting PFE goals resulted in a rich data base that can be used to study differences across districts and colleges in curriculums and programs (see, for example, Gill and Leigh [2004]).

THE CCCS TODAY

A lot can be learned about the way the CCCS looks and operates by examining the types of courses and programs offered by colleges and the type of credits completed by students. California community colleges, like community college systems in other states, offer a broad range of courses and programs to diverse groups of students. California is particularly interesting in this respect because the 1960 Master Plan and subsequent amendments give its community colleges a good deal of leeway in determining the mix of courses and programs they are allowed to offer. In addition, recent legislative action in California (Assembly Bill 1417) mandates that the CCCS evaluate college- and district-level performance based on standards that take into account differences in missions and the needs of local communities. As we proceed in subsequent chapters to describe community college responsiveness to local needs, it is instructive to keep in mind what it is that community colleges in California do.

In Gill and Leigh (2004), we bring together three on-line sources of quantitative data to construct 21 curriculum mix variables for each of
106 CCCS colleges. It is useful to think about these curriculum mea-
sures as they relate to three missions or goals of the system. Broadly
speaking, community colleges provide 1) courses and programs that
equip students to transfer to four-year colleges and universities (the
transfer function), 2) voc-ed training that provides occupational skills
immediately salable in the local labor market, and 3) basic skills train-
ing that provides students with skills necessary to succeed in regular
academic and voc-ed college courses.

Four broad conclusions about the look and operation of California
community colleges can be drawn from these data. First, it probably
comes as no surprise that community colleges are heavily in the busi-
ness of providing curriculums for students who wish to transfer to four-
year colleges and universities. Across colleges, on average about 73
percent of total credits earned by students are transferable, and disper-
sion across colleges in the proportion of transferable credits is small.
For instance, for most colleges in the system, at least half of the credits
completed by students are in transferable programs.

Second, it is important to note that not all transfer credits are alike.
Transfer credits can be earned by students in both traditional academic
courses and voc-ed courses. In California community colleges, about
64 percent of all voc-ed credits earned are transferable.

Third, although most credits offered by most colleges are transfer-
able, there are important differences between colleges in the transfer-
able/nontransferable mix of voc-ed credits they offer. There is also sub-
stantial variation between colleges in the level at which voc-ed courses
are taught.

Finally, basic skills programs are a small proportion of most com-
munity colleges’ curriculum offerings, at least as measured in terms
of credits. The data indicate that only 7 percent of credits completed
by students are basic skills credits. In terms of the interests of entering
freshmen, about 11 percent of FTF list acquisition of basic skills as a
primary objective. It should be remembered, however, that basic skills
services may be provided as noncredit courses.
Notes

1. In these sections we rely heavily on Murphy’s (2004) useful analysis of the financing of the California Community College System.
3. Proposition 13, passed in 1978, amended the state’s constitution by placing a cap on property tax rates, reducing them by an average of 57 percent. The initiative also included a less well-publicized provision requiring a two-thirds majority of both legislative houses for future increases in all state tax rates or amounts of revenue collected, including income tax rates.