

Merced College: Proud of its Place in the Community

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Recently, the Merced Sun-Star printed an editorial on a study that suggested some of California's "well intentioned" policies might, in fact, lead to fewer community college students reaching their educational goals.

The report pointed the finger at policies regarding accessibility, student fees, funding methods, and funding restrictions as possible detriments to student success. However, the report is flawed in that it tends to look at community colleges through the lens of four-year universities that have a much narrower mission than community colleges.

I am responding to the editorial for two important reasons. I believe it is important to assure community members, students and taxpayers of the excellent job our staff performs at Merced College. Secondly, it is important to put that study in proper perspective.

Whatever a student's stated goal, Merced College is dedicated to providing the appropriate support necessary to lead to student success. Our students are offered financial aid assistance, academic and career guidance, along with tutoring and other services, all designed to help them accomplish their goals.

Merced College is one of only 11 community colleges in California invited by the Carnegie and Hewlett Foundations, and one of nine colleges to be invited by the Irvine Foundation, to participate in cutting-edge academic success and student support projects for colleges with promising practices. In addition, Merced College faculty have been working diligently to develop Student Learning Outcomes at the course and program level for the last three years as part of the accreditation requirements that ensure high academic standards for our students.

Despite these impressive accomplishments, we continue to work hard to do even better. This year we are engaged in a college-wide initiative on Basic Skills that will focus on making more of our underprepared students ready to undertake the college level work that will put them on the path to the university of their choice or prepare them for the career of their choice.

Community colleges, under both state law and California's higher education legacy, are many things to many people. They have a multi-faceted mission and, yes, many of our students do struggle with the college experience. Many students must attend part-time, often taking longer to reach their educational goals. Perhaps this is why the state's community colleges, serving more than 2.5 million Californians, have been called "the new Ellis Island" by some. We are the portal to higher education for those students who cannot participate in the university experience right out of high school, or for those who are looking for a certificate or terminal degree that would prepare them for employment immediately upon graduation from Merced College.

It is because of these reasons that the California Community College system was created. Our community is replete with stories of those who attended Merced College and ultimately

accomplished their educational goals and life's dreams. To look at community colleges through the eyes of the university model and to suggest policies that limit access to some of these students, as the report suggests, would betray the very mission of community colleges and the confidence of the public that is so supportive of our system.

It is also important to note that the methodology used by the report's authors does not conform to that used by the California Community College Chancellor's Office to define success. In his response to the report, Mark Drummond, Chancellor of the California Community College system, states, "Our own accountability data show that over 51 percent of students who seek a degree, certificate, or transfer to a four-year institution do so, or become prepared to do so, within six years of starting at a CCC campus." It should also be noted that the California State University system reports that its own persistent part-time students have a six-year graduation rate of 41 percent and that only 5 percent of CSU students who are part-time and are not continuously enrolled graduate within six years.

Community colleges are by far the most efficient higher education system in the state. Data from the Accountability Report for Community Colleges demonstrates that the income of community college students rises dramatically, even if students take only a few classes. The UC Census Bureau reports that taking some college courses results in a 21 percent increase in income for high school graduates and a 57 percent gain for those who have not completed high school. We also are reminded of our successes when we note that 55 percent of all CSU graduates and 28 percent of all UC graduates were formally community college students. Many of these students would have been denied this opportunity if policy changes recommended by the report had been in place.

Merced College and the other 109 community colleges in California are working hard to provide access and success to all students who walk through our doors. As a graduate of Merced College, I can personally attest to the role this wonderful college played in supporting my own dreams.